

# Repositioning ‘Islamdom’ The Culture–Power Syndrome within a Transcivilizational Ecumene

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## **Abstract**

This study articulates the leitmotif of civilizational analysis (the interaction of power and culture) with regard to the relation between religion and the state within the Islamic civilization or ‘Islamdom’. In a first step, it clarifies, by reference to Marshall Hodgson, the extent to which his view of Islamdom as a transcivilizational ecumene can fit into a comparative type of civilizational analysis. The comparative approach to civilizational analysis can be enriched by reevaluating the specific Islamic pattern of mild legitimization of power through culture, and by integrating into the analysis the resulting field of tension vis-à-vis Western power and its supporting normative paradigms. In a second step, in order to better grasp the forms of power governing this field of tension, the article critically reconsiders Rémi Brague’s characterization of Western European civilization as the outcome of an expansive ‘Roman road’ that matched culture with power by investing into the charisma of corporate entities: first, the church, then the state. Against this double background, the study shows that the culture–power syndrome that is proper to Islamdom as a transcivilizational ecumene does not consecrate a separation of ‘religion’ from the body politic, but promotes the building of expansive patterns of connectedness.

## **Key words**

■ civilization ■ Islam ■ modernity ■ religion ■ state

## **Civilizational Analysis and the Question of Islam**

Civilizational analysis employs the tools of comparative historical sociology in order to critique and complexify social theory. The study of Islam in this framework reflects a specific angle, which is given by Islam’s continual repositioning within wider civilizational processes and particularly within modernity (see various contributions in Arnason et al., 2006). By taking into account Islam’s specificity in ways that partly transcend a strictly comparative approach, key concepts of

social theory might appear in a new light: no longer to be subjected to the sole scrutiny of a critique of modernity immanent to the dynamics of Western civilization, but problematized, complexified and potentially enriched via the study of an Islamic perspective on the interrelation of culture and power, which constitutes the main analytical formula of civilizational analysis. Islam's purported 'difference' might then appear rooted in the 'normality' of its ecumenic dynamism, investing culture into expansive, mildly legitimized forms of power.

In this article, I will particularly focus on two key variables of the culture–power syndrome: religion and the state. The notion of civilization itself will become the object of collateral observations, since Islam as the civilization of the middle of the Afro-Eurasian civilizational complex provides a key case for the idea of a *transcivilizational* ecumene. Marshall Hodgson called this ecumene 'Islamdom' and depicted it as a civilization *sui generis*, that inherited and creatively recombined the cultural characters and the political specificities of a vast and more ancient geo-cultural unit: the 'post-cuneiform' Irano-Semitic civilizational realm with its mostly town-based and mercantile-biased prophetic traditions (Hodgson, 1974, 1993). Arising from and keeping its main centre of gravitation within this area, Islam reassembled and gave an unprecedented impetus to the heritage of a number of civilizational components and in particular to the cosmopolitan and largely egalitarian orientation of the Irano-Semitic traditions. It gave them a new transcivilizational potential by investing this expansive orientation in the depths of the Afro-Eurasian hemisphere or 'the Old World'. Translocal solidarities were shaped alongside a pattern of denial of strong legitimacy to any parochial type of corporate identity (Hodgson, 1993: 97–125).

If seen from the viewpoint of civilization in the singular, converging with the identity of the modern West, the Muslim world – whose main political formation, viewed from modern Western Europe, was the Ottoman Empire – has for a long time been taken to suffer from the absence of a self-limiting religion and of a viable, centralized and strongly legitimized state, supported by a clear-cut corporate identity. The transcivilizational impetus of Islam evaporates if measured in terms of the parameters set by Western-centred political modernity. A more sophisticated version of this diagnosis sees a common cause of the purported double deficiency in the weakness of the will to power of the carriers of Islamic civilization, which became manifest in a limited capacity of self-critique and self-reform: a prelude to its succumbing to European hegemony since the late eighteenth century. Nonetheless, what some key authors within European social thought have unilaterally diagnosed as factors of blockage attributable to Islamic civilization, should rather be reevaluated in the context of a trajectory based on a civilizationally specific cultural construction of power. According to Hodgson, this trajectory is more 'ecumenic' (and therefore 'transcivilizationally' constructive) than the Western building of a singular and hegemonic civilization, the civilization of Western modernity. Following Hodgson's approach, we need an analysis of types of worldliness, subjectivity and their supporting cultural forms more than a rigid comparison between civilizational blocks. The concept of 'civilization' does not photograph a geo-cultural unit but denotes a process characterized by

original conceptions of the world, modalities of living in the world and approaches to constructing a common world (Arnason, 2001, 2003). Accordingly, the recurrent reluctance within Islamic civilization to sacralize corporate identities and so to strongly legitimize state formations should be assessed as a reflex of a specific civilizational orientation rather than as a cultural deficit exposing a lukewarm will to power.

### Whose Divergence?

The formation of the toolkit of categories we use for making sense of the relationship between Islam and the West is incorporated in the historical narrative through which 'Western civilization' gained the upper hand against 'Islamic civilization'. The reasons why Islam has often represented a civilizational model neatly contrasting with the European historical trajectory of transformation of religion and its relation to the state cannot be reduced to an alleged inability of Muslim traditions to turn the tension inherent in the God–man relation into a socially productive and politically progressive differentiation of societal spheres. Yet the 'essentialism' of Western characterizations of Islamic civilization deserves attentive scrutiny. It is not necessarily a malign bias facilitating the instrumentalization of the knowledge of the Other and bolstering the hegemony of the Self, as critics of Orientalism often argue. Not by chance, the relation of religion to the state is often at the centre of a subtle game of comparing and differentiating, of lamenting blockages and demonstrating divergences: an intellectual exercise that does not seem to be governed by a power quest or power imbalance *per se* (reflecting the allegedly self-serving Orientalist domestication of the Other) but rather responds to the much less controllable dynamics through which the cultural definition of power within the hegemonic West has facilitated drawing civilizational borders. In this framework, essentialism helps determine a hierarchy of intensity between different manifestations of the civilizing process, particularly at the level of constructions of worldliness and subjectivity supported by a will to power. In the process, essentialism often betrays an excess of comparativism and a tendency to measure the degree of conformity with – and divergence from – a norm, which is essentially dictated by the activity itself of distinguishing the hegemonic civilization from the 'rest' of the world (Salvatore, 1997).

This is scarcely surprising. The politically overloaded character of the study of civilization with regard to religion is shown by the fact that it was part and parcel of the genesis of Western social sciences in the longer nineteenth century. Within a field characterized by a fierce competition among the various disciplines that attempted to situate the cultural sources of human sociability, religion often happened to be seen as a key sphere, whose formation was identified with the emergence itself of organized community life. In Durkheim's footsteps, the sociology of religion has too often assumed the identity of a scarcely defined 'tradition' with an overloaded notion of 'religion'. Religion as the archaic key to social integration remains 'traditional' and so confined to marginality in the modern

world, if not upgraded and metamorphosed along a socially evolutionary line. In Weber's analysis of the Protestant and 'occidental' case, the civilizationally specific, value-oriented, purposive rationality of the religious tradition morphs into the self-propelling engine of a strategic rationality clothed in the reaffirmation of value and nested in the ethic of modern professions and in the routinized charisma of bureaucracy. The institutionalization of the academic study of Islam in the guise of 'Islamic Studies' across Europe was integral to this development (Stauth, 1993). Yet the typologization of Islam as the cultural matrix of a distinctive civilization also played a role in the work of social theorists who were not specialists of Islamic Studies. In spite of the insistent reappearance of such an essentialist theorizing, leading historians of Islamic civilization and in particular of the modern Muslim empires, have observed recurrent patterns of differentiation of state power and religious authority. Civilizational analysts are playing an important role in providing theoretical depth to such fairer parameters of comparison (Arnason, 2001: 399).

Two strategies are particularly suitable to this end. A major approach reframes the issue of modernity in terms of partly competing and partly overlapping patterns of modernity, or 'multiple modernities' (Eisenstadt, 2000). A parallel path stresses the opportunity to theorize about the dynamic dimension of tradition before analyzing consolidated patterns of modernity (see Salvatore, 2007). Both strategies can provide theoretical underpinnings to Hodgson's view of Islam as a uniquely transcivilizational ecumene originally blending key components of 'Occident' and 'Orient' more than as a compact civilization like Western Europe, India or China. While the expansion of Islam across the Afro-Eurasian landmass enhanced the global interconnectedness of civilizational realms within the whole hemisphere, it also contributed to a process of re-entrenchment of subregions; i.e. the perception of a 'Muslim peril' incarnate in the expansive universalism of Islam was to aid the formation of a Western European and of an Indian identity. In the former case, the Western essentialization of Islam appears less as an Orientalist ruse of power than as the long-term outcome of the limits met by Islam's transcivilizational expansiveness through the encounter with the singular civilizational machine incarnate in the modern West.

Traditions, with their dynamism, inner contestability and mutual interaction, overlapping and sometimes merging, represent the cultural dimension of civilizations. In the context of his study of Islamdom, Hodgson developed a criticism of the trivialized notion of tradition that was common within modernization theory circles. Against one-sided views of modernization he stressed creative action and cumulative interaction as essential traits of traditions. Arnason has interpreted Hodgson's idea of tradition in ways that clarify the relation between the micro and the macro dimensions of a civilization, reflecting the mutual interaction between a tradition relying on common practice and diffuse communication and its structural underpinnings (Arnason, 2006). The sociologists' Holy Grail, i.e. the search for the 'micro-macro link' ensuring both social dynamism and cohesion, appears to gain some contours with regard to the way traditions warrant the vitality and stability of civilizations beneath the level of institutional politics,

commercial flows, and the crystallization of elites, i.e. at the level of the everyday life of the social actors, the 'commoners'. On the other hand, traditions are neither power-neutral nor blind. They inevitably provide orientation to the shaping of power patterns and legitimacy by the ruling class. The principled openness of tradition vis-à-vis power creates occasions for contesting authority. The common practitioners of a tradition might protest the extent to which power is not endorsed by legitimate authority, or authority is usurped via the sheer exercise of untamed power.

Most crucially, the main theoretical issue underlying civilizational analysis, the thematization of the relation of culture and power, is often explicitly framed within discursive traditions, though it is more often latent in their symbolic premises. Civilizations primarily differ as to the way this relation is articulated. Cultural traditions are not to be analyzed *per se* but in conjunction to power, i.e. as the forging ground of those notions of legitimacy through which power becomes socially pervasive (Arnason, 2003: 104). Shmuel N. Eisenstadt has recently reaffirmed the enduringly high suitability of Weber's malleable understanding of the relations between culture and power for a comparative approach valuing civilization-specific combinations and trajectories (Eisenstadt, 2006). Religion is therein not an autonomous sphere, but rather a meta-institutional source for channelling human power and an arena where patterns of authority are constructed and contested.

Yet in the long-term formation of a Western civilization, the ongoing, civilization-building tension between culture and power produced the winning formula for promoting a singular type of internalized and civilized power. Here is it where the approaches of Elias on the civilizing process and of Foucault on the building of modern subjectivities and disciplines seem to converge in reinforcing the Weberian argument on the uniqueness of the West. We need here to discuss a specific intervention unveiling some key traits of the exceptional character of the cultural construction of power within the Western European civilization in a way that can illuminate, by reflex, Islam's 'normality' as the transcivilizational ecumene that provided a deeper level of connectedness to the dynamics of the Afro-Eurasian civilizational realm. Matching by contrast Hodgson's view of Islamdom as a kind of transcivilizational ecumene endowed with a synthetic vocation and facing the much more self-contained civilizations of the Old World (China, India), Rémi Brague has highlighted the process of formation of an increasingly conscious European identity that developed 'eccentrically' with regard to its two 'axial' sources, represented by Greek philosophy and Hebrew prophecy. The originality of Brague's argument consists in his emphasis on the 'Roman road' as the cultural pathway to the long-term construction of a European identity. It offers us insights that can counterbalance the bias of Weber's culturalist focus on the 'Protestant ethic' as a key engine of Western modernity (though one not limited to 'the spirit of capitalism') via an equally accentuated culturalist interpretation.

Though one cannot underwrite an excess of culturalism within civilizational analysis, unlike other comparable views Brague's contribution is particularly

interesting since it is not based on a preventive cultural devaluation of the significance of Islamic civilization. Its inherent culturalism is mitigated and made more interesting for civilizational analysts by a view of cultural transformations that brings to light the deep entanglement of culture with the production of ever more sophisticated forms of power. As a result, the difference between the Western and Islamic civilizations comes down to a divergence in the type of syndrome through which culture is translated into power and legitimizes it. The focus is on the differential capacity of culture to refine the forms of social power and justify a civilizational hegemony (Brague, [1992] 2002).

In his attempt to penetrate the originality of the Roman road of Western Europe, Brague pays attention to the methods that its carriers employed for dealing with civilizational sources, instead of predefining a set of cultural values or institutional frameworks to be considered part of a basically univocal 'heritage' (like, e.g. 'autonomy', 'responsibility', or even 'democracy'). In Brague's view, the cultural logic of the construction of Latin Christendom in the post-Roman world depended on the adoption of a consciously eccentric positioning towards its purported sources, i.e. Greek philosophy and Hebrew prophecy: an approach inherited from the quite *sui generis* character of Roman civilization. The meaning of eccentricity, according to Brague, consists in the fact that key cultural sources were eagerly reappropriated by Latin Christendom via an original method of cultural elaboration, notwithstanding the fact that such sources were perceived, from the viewpoint of Western Europe, as remote and to some extent alien. The object of Brague's analysis is the dynamic of reconstruction of a political 'centre' from the margins of a civilizational area: in this case, the distance is measured not only from 'Athens', but also from 'Jerusalem', one major centre of the Irano-Semitic region. As a result, it is not the world of Islam that is divergent from the norm that is incarnate in the civilizational standards carried by Western Europe, but it is Europe that diverges from the much more linear Islamic path, which reflects a more harmonious and less troubled – albeit original – combination of the Hebrew heritage with the Greek legacy, eagerly absorbed by Muslim philosophers and other scholars.

Accordingly, the 'Latin' (in the medieval sense of 'post-Roman') nucleus of Europe has been formed not through a cumulative build-up of a civilizational legacy, but via a process that both reflected and sublimated a geo-cultural distance from its axial sources. In this sense, it is less the 'secondary' character of Roman and post-Roman (finally 'European') civilization that matters in Brague's argument, than the cultural machine set in motion by a sense of alienation from the primary sources. After all, according to Brague, Greece was also secondary enough with regard to the ancient civilizations of the Eastern Mediterranean, primarily Egypt, yet it carved out a new home for its emergent values and set clear boundaries vis-à-vis the world outside. The 'Roman road' deploys instead an expansive potential that cuts through ever new boundaries, while it also entrenches the new gains within a strong, albeit 'developmental' type of identity. Nor was this a dynamic of pure conquest. Post-Roman, Latin Rome, the Rome of the popes, developed a new type of expansiveness: both cultural and political,

dogmatic and organizational, stable and exposed to continual challenges. This expansiveness shaped the growth of Europe well into the Late Middle Ages and early modernity thanks to a refinement of the notion of the church as a corporate entity able to incorporate, in various ways, new peoples and territories, both East and West (in the 'New World'). Latin Europe, never the direct heir of any specific cultural tradition and located in the once marginal Far West of the Afro-Eurasian macro-civilizational area, deepened a specifically Roman methodological vocation consisting in transmitting, processing and bringing overlapping and even contrasting identities to a new though conflicted: this is, in essence, Brague's view of the 'Roman road' of Western Europe.

This approach puts us at a safe distance from the type of culturalist essentialism consisting in identifying given traditions with discrete symbolic materials, while it also encourages us to focus on the procedures and methods of systematization, desystematization, revision and innovation internal to the traditions here at stake. According to Brague, the main vectors of this process in Western Europe have been Roman law and Roman Catholicism, two traditions that have generated original institutional configurations facilitating the affirmation of a distinctively European identity – both within the porous boundaries of the Far Western peninsula of the Eurasian continent which appropriated the mythical name of 'Europe', and *vis-à-vis* the non-European world external to it, primarily the vast landmass of Eurasia situated to its East, or 'Orient'. The two discursive traditions facilitating the formation of an original European civilization, Roman Law and Roman Catholicism, provided European elites with a method for selectively drawing on a variety of civilizational sources and magnifying their organizational resources. In the process, ideas of individual agency were yoked to the sovereignty of corporate bodies: first, the church, then the state. Both the legal and the religious tradition converged in producing a European identity even when related to each other via a principled and hardly bridgeable tension between 'spiritual' and 'temporal' notions of power: the terrain of their convergence was a uniform pattern of formation of a collective will to power, which ongoing legitimization conflicts fomented rather than eroded. The underlying, strongly dualistic institutional configuration based on the relation between church and state was inherited and subjected to ever more trenchant normative reconstructions within the modern political order usually associated with the Peace of Westphalia (1648).

Brague explicitly relates the uniqueness of this type of culture–power syndrome to its counterpart within Islamic civilization, whose cultural machine appears to be, in comparison to Europe, more 'normal', and hardly fuelled by an eccentric positioning *vis-à-vis* its sources. In contrast to the European syndrome of culture–power facilitated by axial eccentricity, the Islamic civilization deepened the idea of a divine delegation of power to the 'commoner' mediated by egalitarian patterns, a process that was also favoured by an extreme symbolic dilution of the attributes of terrestrial power (Salvatore, 2007: 99–241). This motif was already central to the preaching and teaching of key axial characters like Isaiah and Socrates but remained underappreciated in further developments till the emergence of Islam, which Robert Bellah considered paradigmatic of a collective

capacity to condense the social bond into its unmediated, proto-secular kernel and so to de-sacralize every form of power (Bellah, 1970: 146–70). Islam effected a synthetic re-pristination of those features of axial sources that promoted a human orientation to the ‘common good’ and diffused them across a broad ecumene cutting through Europe, North Africa, the Near and Middle East and other regions situated further East and South-East, through the depths of the Eurasian landmass. The Word as manifested in the Qur’an becomes a moment of liberation by virtue of its clarifying capacity and normative power, more than by setting in motion an eschatological dynamic. In the new faith, the path to internalizing the dictates of divine law, the *shari‘a*, needed a modicum of mediation mostly facilitated by an orientation to the life of the Prophet Muhammad, whose exemplary conduct combined a wide range of signs of excellence within various spheres of human action. The bulk of the new regulations was carried by the ‘traditions’ of the Prophet and his companions (*hadith*). As remarked by Talal Asad:

The Arabic word *hadith* . . . captures nicely the double sense of temporality usually separated in English: on the one hand it denotes anything that is new or modern, and on the other hand a tradition that makes the past – and future – reencountered in the present. For *hadith* means discourse in the general, secular sense as well as the remembered discourse of the Prophet and his Companions that is actualized in the disciplined body/mind of the faithful Muslim – and thus becomes the tradition, the *sunna*. (Asad, 2003: 224)

### The Ambivalent Relation between State and Religion

Such key traits are not constructed by Brague as an essential cultural divergence, but are explained in terms of different styles of cultural production and human communication (Brague, [1992] 2000). Within the axial dynamics magnified by Islam, sheer power is a mediator of cultural meaning, while the ‘Roman road’ constructs a power–meaning–power matrix, whereby meaning is produced for the sake of maximizing but also sublimating power (Salvatore, 1997). Yet we should rebalance Brague’s over-streamlined argument by looking at how a divergence in the patterns of relating culture to power became irreversible precisely in the period when the chances of a post-axial convergence between Islamdom and Latin Christendom based on their common legacies seemed to be enhanced by an hemisphere-wide civilizational movement. Björn Wittrock has called the period of spiritual ferment and new institutional crystallizations across the Euro-Afro-Eurasian civilizational area that occurred at a moment of maturity of Islamdom, around the turn of the first millennium CE, and reached its climax in the middle of the thirteenth century, ‘ecumenical renaissance’ (Wittrock, 2001). Some scholars have attributed an increasing significance to the upheavals of this age within Western Christendom, in some cases considering them no less important than the sixteenth-century Renaissance and Reformation, conventionally identified with the beginnings of European modernity (Arnason, 2003).

During the era of the ecumenical renaissance Islamdom incorporated key civilizational components of Persian and Turkic origin. The strong impulse to



colonize culturally, rather than politically, the Afro-Eurasian macro-civilizational realm reached its peak during this epoch, which Hodgson characterized as the early Islamic 'middle period', but which Orientalists before (but also after) him have mainly depicted as a phase of political decadence and lack of cultural creativity. The period also witnessed the unfolding of the heterodox challenges of Shi'i groups and potentates vis-à-vis the Sunni orthodoxy. This dynamic will be carried over into the modern era with the rivalry between the Sunni Ottoman empire and Safavid Iran, that became the new stronghold of Shi'a power. Yet even if less markedly than in the Safavid case, the Ottoman state was itself the product of the orthodox incorporation of a combined military and mystical movement that came to maturation during the last phase of the era of the ecumenic renaissance and expanded during the late Islamic middle period (Rahimi, 2004). In spite of its geo-political expansion across Eurasia, both Islam's Abrahamic root and its selective and largely creative appropriation of the Greek philosophical heritage contributed to keep one major centre of Islamic cultural gravitation, throughout the era of the ecumenical renaissance and after, on the Mediterranean side. As a result, a heightened competition with the rising Latin Christendom was ignited at multiple political and cultural levels, which cannot be reduced to the military confrontation associated with the so-called crusades. Most notably, the Western part of the Muslim world happened to be almost fully controlled by the Ottomans in the sixteenth century and the rising Ottoman empire became both the main political challenger and the principal source of representations of Islam's cultural traits and political ambitions in the West.

The Islamic trajectory during the ecumenical renaissance displayed some factors of change that initially also affected the transformations in Western Europe, in particular with regard to the paradigm of distinction and reconciliation between the religious and political spheres. Yet the seeming commonalities concealed an accentuation of divergent paces in the cultural reproduction of social power. The main convergence was represented by the rise of mystically oriented movements drawing on the imagination and needs of the commoners, including city dwellers. These movements, though potentially heterodox, were for the most part integrated into the orthodox mainstream and influenced its institutional configuration both within Latin Christianity and Sunni Islam, with enduring consequences lasting till our days. They were equally significant, in both civilizational realms, in their work directed to enhancing the importance of the commoners and promoting their desire for a renewal of norms of life conduct within wider socio-economic transformations spurred by thriving urban economies and cross-regional trade (cf. Arjomand, 2004; Rahimi, 2006).

Within Latin Christendom, the new monastic movements and a resurgence of urban life occupied the central stage from the eleventh century onwards and reached a climax in the thirteenth century. The problem of strengthening moral authority required the capacity to construct and communicate the common good within increasingly complex social worlds. Models of ascetic life conduct based on discipline and piety were transposed and adapted to the world of an expanding laity (Brown, 1984: 33–4). A comparable role was played within Islam by Sufism. Through subsequent waves not only of military conquest but also of religious

conversion (in most cases temporally disconnected), during the period when Islamdom took the form of a simultaneously Mediterranean and Asian ecumene, Sufism became ubiquitous thanks to a fresh wave of diffusion and institutionalization of mystical paths as practised in the brotherhoods (*turuq*, sing. *tariqa*, meaning 'the way'). The advantage of organized Sufism's orientation to a practice of piety, compared to the scholarship of theologians and philosophers, consisted in the fact that Sufis relied on collective rituals that spurned intersubjective connectedness and facilitated ties of solidarity.

On the other hand, the organizational forms of Sufism responded to the continually resurfacing demand for charismatic mediation. During the Islamic middle periods, Muslim society was a society of networks more than states, although the idea of a governance to be legitimized in Islamic terms was as crucial as ever. In other words, governance and its legitimacy were to a large extent divorced from state power. The Sufi flexible and semi-formal model of organization and connectedness, of balancing competition, cooperation, and hierarchy suited the political characteristics of the era. The egalitarian potential of Irano-Semitic civilization reached its zenith during an epoch that saw the eclipse of the legitimacy of state sovereignty in Islamic terms, which Persianate court culture had long cultivated and instilled in different types of regime. This was also the high point of the social power of the *ulama*, of their autonomous culture providing cohesion to intricate yet well-ordered social arrangements, kept together by an articulate yet shared Islamic idiom.

Against the common perception of an unsolvable conflict between *ulama* institutions and Sufi networks, one should recall that most *ulama* were also Sufis. More than a conflict, there was a productive tension, which induced many *ulama* to cultivate the Sufi disciplines of the *tariqa* alongside the disciplines of the college (*madrassa*). The two subcultures shared a capacity to reproduce overlapping and flexible organizational patterns that favoured the building of networks over long distances. Even more consequentially than the new monastic movements of the ecumenical renaissance within Latin Christendom, the consolidation of Sufism took from the beginning the form of a socio-religious movement of the commoners. This basic similarity is matched by clear differences from the European experience, most notably with regard to the organizational form of the movements, in terms of their understandings of the requisite disciplines (both individual and collective) and not least at the level of the overall institutional environment. The new monastic orders in Europe penetrated civic life from outside the urban communities, while the Sufi orders often overlapped with urban associations and especially the craftsmen guilds, by virtue of the ties of trust that were buttressed by the authority of the masters of the brotherhoods (Salvatore, 2007: 133–71).

The unsettling of the axial balance between the mundane and ultramundane orders within Latin Christendom was in the final analysis the chief factor of divergence from the Islamic trajectory. In Western Europe, some radical movements started in the High Middle Ages to reimagine the worldly realm of the *saeculum* as God's Kingdom, a potential paradise on earth. Most radically, Joachim of Fiore depicted the temporal realm of the new era as the full accomplishment of the

'spirit'. Redeveloping the original Pauline imagination, the spiritual and the temporal domains were neatly separated, only to be reconnected in surprisingly new ways by the vanguard of the faithful, the 'people of God' (Voegelin, 1994). Evidently the paradigm of the 'Roman road' is an insufficient explanation of the rise of a modern, Western, secular will to power if it does not take into account the radically antinomian challenges allowed and even nourished within its framework. A recent historical novel fictionally conveys the idea that even the most radical manifestations of such a challenge within early modernity (like the tragic events of the Peasants' war of Thomas Müntzer of 1525 and even more the anabaptist and proto-communist 'Kingdom of Zion' of Münster in 1534–35) cannot be fully understood outside of the framework of an increasingly sophisticated Roman Catholic governance of the antinomian tensions that were magnified by the Protestant challenge and its inherent fragmentation (Blissett, [1999] 2004).

The trajectory of European modernity shows that the upgrading of the power of the commoner in the determination of the common good is at the beginning a bottom-up process, often springing from the margins of the socio-political body. Yet in a second moment the movement is hijacked by the capacity of the modern state to impose a disciplining frame on the autonomous subjects. The rise of political modernity, far from being a pure rationalization process, presupposed a metamorphosis of the myths that had supported the development of Latin Christendom during the Middle Ages. In contrast to the mostly linear narrative of Brague's 'Roman road', the consolidation of the power of the modern state took the form of an inverted church, via a process through which the pastoral role of disciplining subjects and directing their souls was put to the service of an increasingly secular order. In this sense, it is true that the significance of the 'Roman road' precedes the impetus of the 'Protestant ethic', yet the eccentric process of cultural reconstruction occurring within the former was by no means based on a removal of primordial factors of identity but rather premised on their symbolic sublimation. This is evident in the sophisticated doctrines that had tried, since the High Middle Ages and based on concepts drawn from Roman law, to construct the second body of the king, the body-politic, as the abstract incarnation of sovereignty (Kantorowicz, 1957). We might amend Brague's argument and hypothesize that only within such radical transformations (whose immediate roots go back to the latest phase of the hemisphere-wide ecumenical renaissance) did Western Europe become a civilization in its own right and indeed a civilization *sui generis*. In this sense the proto-typical modernity of Western Europe did not replace a traditional civilization but twisted its axially eccentric search for a cohesive and dynamic formula of organization able to magnify the power potential of radical challenges and sedate their destructiveness. The keys to this crystallization were the emerging mechanisms of integral institutionalization of the commoners (later, citizens) into the corporate body of the Leviathan. In contrast to this process, the Sufi *turuq* absorbed and reintegrated into mildly formalized dynamics of social organization the radical and heterodox challenges. 'Routinization' happens in both cases, but with widely diverging results in terms of the organized forms of social power.

Islamdom's dynamic of challenge and reabsorption occurred within an ever more sophisticated grid of traditions, where the normativity of *shari'a* and the cultivated disciplines of Persianate court culture or *adab* were seldom perceived as incompatible by the cultural elites. In contrast to such dynamics, the paradox of the process within Latin Christendom consisted of the fact that the most radical challenges drained the discursive resources of the traditions of Latin Christendom without suppressing their symbolic substrata. The remobilization of such immaterial resources fed into emerging power formations directly or indirectly tied to the modern state. In particular, the radicalization of the social and political transformations initiated during the ecumenic renaissance led the religious reformers of the early modern era to stress the autonomy of the innerwordly components of traditions. As a result, these movements were empowered to challenge institutional authorities on the basis of pure reasons of the 'spirit', something that not even the most heterodox movements within Islamdom (like e.g. the movement that brought about the formation of the Safavid dynasty in Iran in the early sixteenth century, at the dawn of the modern era) were ready to do. The most striking example of a radical challenge was the Puritan revolution in England. Not by chance this is the first revolution to be considered as fully modern: not in spite of, but because of its calling for a Kingdom of God on earth. Only in this way could the axially balanced tension between immanence and transcendence be definitively broken. The way was open for their ultimate fusion via programmes making immanent and in this sense secular the ultimate horizons of salvation (Voegelin, 1998: 217–68).

The Puritan revolution first instituted a potentially unlimited sovereignty of the commoners via the state. Yet the paradoxical outcome of the process was a growing pressure to redefine the proper realm of religion, which was achieved through the final consecration of the *cuius regio eius religio* with the Peace of Westphalia of 1648. This principle drastically reduced the instability generated by religiously motivated conflict by sanctioning the religion of the ruler in each and every state as the only legitimate one. The now compressed religious realm also needed governance from within, and this goal was largely achieved by rendering religion a matter of personal belief and sovereignty of the self within the 'inner forum'. This polarized upshot of the dialectic of *regio* and *religio* diverged from the more moderate interaction between their Islamic counterparts, *dawla* and *din*.

The process of modern state-formation within the Islamic civilizational framework is in the case of both the Ottoman and Safavid empires positively related to the crystallization of autonomous though articulate networks such as those linking Sufi brotherhoods to warriors' coalitions: both dynasties emerged at the head of two such flexible bodies (Rahimi, 2004). The outcome of the basically anarchical developments of the Islamic middle periods, whose earlier half coincided with the transcivilizational breakthroughs of the ecumenical renaissance, allowed for a considerable state-building potential. As synthetically put by Hodgson, at the threshold of the modern era, 'Islam promised itself, not without reason, that it would soon be absorbing the whole world' (Hodgson, 1993: 24). In this perspective, the famous question asked by Bernard Lewis *What Went*

*Wrong?* (i.e. with Islam vis-à-vis Western modernity, after such promising beginnings) is not completely illegitimate, but suffers from being formulated in bluntly essentialist and quite unsociological terms. Hodgson, who was only six years younger than Lewis but passed away prematurely in 1968, also famously wrote: 'In the sixteenth century of our era, a visitor from Mars might well have supposed that the human world was on the verge of becoming Muslim' (1993: 97). Following Hodgson, one should rather and more concretely ask whether the (at the time hegemonic) Islamic proto-modernity enshrined in the power and culture of the three modern 'gunpowder empires' (the Ottoman, the Safavid and the Mughal) was inadequate response to the ideal of societal autonomy, communitarian connectedness and civilizational interconnectedness that had been deployed within the Islamic ecumene during the middle periods, and why it could not match the development of a Westphalian type of modern sovereignty in Western Europe.

Looking to the early modern configuration of Muslim power, it seems pointless to reiterate the motive of a blockage that prevented Islamic civilization from developing modern forms of statehood, on the basis of the state's prerogative to set the rules governing, at least externally and publicly, a specifically religious field. The question that is most interesting to ask from a contemporary perspective concerns the aborted yet latent potential of a modern type of religious cosmopolitanism that inspired the civilizational dynamic of the middle periods and that might find a more congenial social basis and communicative environment in a post-Westphalian world. The three modern Muslim empires achieved considerable results in terms of the accumulation of fairly centralized political power, and also based their power on specific patterns of differentiation between the state and religion. Yet such crystallizations could only partially realize the creative impetus of the middle periods, when a cosmopolitan high culture thrived alongside a dense social autonomy balancing horizontal cooperation and solidarity with hierarchy and command: a pattern that facilitated Islam's absorption into the practices and cultures of lower strata and the absorption of new communities and territories into Islamdom.

For sure, in spite of the accumulation of new studies proving the dynamism of the Ottoman empire in the modern era, this mighty rival of the European states of the Westphalian era lacks, in comparison with them, a fully autonomous legitimization and a radical centralization of power. We miss in particular the institution of a strongly ideological nexus between corporate centralization and a determination of individual rights framed in the context of that form of power, i.e. first of all, via the state's guarantee of contractual autonomy and a corresponding mechanism to protect and promote individual property. While the most modern among the Muslim states of the early modern era relentlessly pursued a centralization of power and was even able to increase its power through an astute management of centrifugal processes (Barkey, 2008), it did not acquire the kind of ideologically pinpointed, self-legitimizing political sovereignty that the European states attained by appropriating, metamorphosing and inverting some of the sacral features of the church as a corporate body.

This assessment might throw some additional light on the merits and limits of Brague's idea of the 'Roman road'. In many ways the Ottoman Empire saw itself as both incorporating and overcoming the legacy of the Eastern Roman Empire. The Romanian historian Nicolae Iorga liked to talk about an 'Ottoman Rome', namely Istanbul as the last hypostasis of Rome: a reconstructed Muslim Rome that especially in its final stages of existence engaged in a fierce competition with the self-proclaimed 'Third Rome' of the Russian czars, more than with the Western European powers (Iorga, 1935). The geo-political competition and military rivalry between Istanbul and the czars concealed resemblances and possibly patterns of mutual influence in the modes of construction of a monarchical aura. It was no chance that the sultan moved to give juridical legitimacy and ideological force to the old caliphal title in 1774 on the occasion of a peace treaty with Russia. The reinvention of a tradition of caliphal continuity was expedient in the efforts to balance out the religious authority that the czar claimed over the Christian Orthodox populations of the Ottoman Empire. The outcome came close to claiming an 'Islamic sovereignty' and a right to represent the 'Islamic people' (Schulze, [1994] 2000: 14–21). This development contrasts with the sharp discontinuity that characterized in the West of Europe, via the build-up of Roman Catholicism, the transformation of the Rome of the emperors into the Rome of the popes, a process during which Roman law was reinterpreted in order to fit into the ethnic, originally 'barbarian' and then feudal dimension of medieval Europe. The rediscovery of the ideological potential of the title of caliph by the Ottoman sultan occurred in the context of retreat vis-à-vis an expanding Russian empire, and cannot be equated with an attempt to legitimize a fully-fledged, though belated Muslim Leviathan.

### Conclusion: Islam as a Key Carrier of Transnational Dynamics

If we agreed with Weber's view of ancient conceptions of citizenship rooted in the idea and institution of *Verbrüderung* (confraternity) – a type of social group whose internal solidarity was warranted by a metaphor of horizontal consanguinity – as the sociological matrix of the modern state, the West and Islamdom would seem to be equally equipped to produce and maintain modern statehood. The divergence lies then in the peculiarity of the Western power machine as highlighted by Brague's idea of an eccentric exceptionalism, which prevented a reconstruction of tradition within a substantial continuity of the civilizing process and placed instead a strong premium on innovations based on radical implosions, sharp discontinuities and trenchant reconstructions. In contrast to this development, the Ottoman counterpart to the second, abstract, political body of the king or body-politic in Europe remained like a penumbra and was not able to materialize a vivid aura. The representatives of core Muslim traditions and in particular the administrative branch of the *ilmîyye* constituted by religious scholars or *ulama* (often converging with the hard core bureaucracy of the *kalemîyyeh*, whose legitimacy was framed in terms of Persianate court culture) only managed to cast on

the sultan (or sultan-caliph) a pale shadow of charisma. Accordingly, the monarch was viewed as occupying the pinnacle more than incarnating the 'circle of justice' that was consecrated by Persianate ruling culture and supported by Ottoman articulations of Islamic normativity or *shari'a* (see Mardin, 2006).

Such an instance of a simultaneous differentiation and relinking of religion and the state within a modern setting shows the extent to which the Ottoman Empire was the outcome of a specific culture–power syndrome that makes perfect sense (and appears quite 'normal') in the context of hemisphere-wide dynamics. One could even compare the Turco-Persian bureaucratic culture based on the idea of a 'circle of justice' with the Chinese one oriented to a 'mandate of heaven', in spite of clear differences in the recruitment system of administrative personnel. Against such a background of Eurasian comparability, if not similarity, the Western path stands out due to its capacity to activate a pre-axial symbolism of social cohesion under radically mutated conditions for pursuing and legitimizing power. This is evident in the long-term process of turning sacred kingship into a conception of modern absolute power supported by a separate, abstract body: a quasi-heterodox, polity-centred reconfiguration of the body of Christ, and therefore the continuation of the church with other means (see Arnason, 2003: 253).

Compared with the eccentric exceptionalism of Europe, the Ottoman Empire and the post-Ottoman states represent not so much defective imitations but rather an unfulfilled dream of competitive continuity. In this sense, the counterpart to the radically imploded tradition of the West that matches an aggressive reconstruction of modern power machineries with a reconstructed symbolic apparatus is a moderately imploded tradition of Islam that can still elaborate on motives of continuity and find a comforting penumbra in them. A frequently invoked counterexample is the project of Mustafa Kemal and other Turkish reformers which consisted in building a national 'community of virtue' with no direct links with the core institutions consecrated by Muslim traditions. It should not be forgotten, however, that the National Assembly of the Turkish Republic tried to keep alive a shadow of caliphal authority by proclaiming in the law that suppressed it in 1924 that the idea of the caliphate had to be considered as substantially incorporated in the concept of republican government. The grandchildren of the late-Ottoman strand of Islamic revivalism survived the trauma and provided within the republic an alternative 're-intellectualization' of Islam in vernacular forms that fed into the process of reform of Muslim politics and led to the successful grounding of the presently ruling AK party (Mardin, 2006).

We can now better appreciate Rémi Brague's key argument depicting the Western European singularity as the outcome of an eccentric elaboration on axial sources more than as a self-perpetuation of a combined legacy of Hebrew symbols and Hellenic values. The phantom of 'Western exceptionalism' cannot be completely absorbed by the comparative perspective of civilizational analysis. At the same time, it would be difficult to deny that the attempts to reconcile civilization in the singular with the anti-colonial impetus of non-Western traditions have exhausted their momentum. This momentum relied on a reappropriation of Westphalian formulas for regulating the nexus between state power and the

religious field and for supporting the secular authority of the developmental state. The exhaustion of this momentum retrieves the potential of transcivilizational processes to erode the hegemony of civilization in the singular. This potential is often latent but sometimes manifest in several contemporary expressions of an Islamic political idiom from the Maghreb to South-East Asia. It is also apparent through an expanding geography of actually or potentially 'failed states': from Palestine and perhaps Lebanon, through Somalia and perhaps Sudan, to Afghanistan and perhaps Pakistan. This phenomenon might fit into a trajectory of exit from Westphalian straitjackets, though, at the moment, entropy prevails over order. It remains that, more than reflecting a singularization of the civilizing process, the long-term formation of Islamdom is tied to ongoing transcivilizational dynamics that might as much polarize as they can connect socio-political forces across the Afro-Eurasian landmass. Deepening the implications of an 'Islamic perspective' can contribute not only to a better understanding of the continual repositioning of Islamdom, but also throw more light on the ambivalent nexus between the singularizing impetus of the civilizing process and an increasingly global (and therefore transcivilizationally open) deployment of modernity.

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