

## Western Scholars of Islam on the Issue of Modernity

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### Western standards in the study of Islam and modernity

This chapter reviews the approaches of selected Western scholars who have analysed Muslim encounters with modernity. It situates them against the background of the modern entanglements between the West and the Muslim world reconstructed in Chapter 1 of this volume. In particular, it focuses on three main standards employed by Western scholars in order to explore the issue of Islam and modernity: the general level of compatibility of Islam with an essentially and/or universally defined modernity, the comparability of Islam with Christianity from the perspective of a notion of religion largely drawn from the Western trajectory – and therefore laying a particular stress on the Protestant Reformation – and the relation of authenticity and modernity (or maybe better, as we will see, the authentication of modernity) with regard to Islam.

From the insight offered in Chapter 1 into the issue of Islam and modernity it follows that such standards invite essentialisation of both modernity and Islam and are therefore situated at a level of generalisation that cannot take into account the more nuanced perspective that has been opened up by the paradigm of multiple modernities. This shorter chapter in turn provides specific insights into recurring patterns of Western appraisal of Islam vis-à-vis modernity that were cumulatively built over time across various disciplines and schools of thought and retain some influence at a variety of levels, from scholarship to the media. Even more importantly, the focus on such standards of assessment facilitates understanding the major turn that came to full maturation between the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s through the crisis of modernisation theory and the opening of horizons of analysis of multiple modernities. By challenging those standards in parallel with a mounting critique of Orientalist scholarship, this breakthrough has opened up new avenues of debate variously intertwined with the key approach of multiple modernities. While in Chapter 1 we have detailed the circumstances that promoted, within Western scholarship, specific notions of tradition, religion and civilisation along with their twisted application to Islam, here we will deal more directly with the standards that have resulted from the scholarly endeavours finalised to explore the extent to which Islam came to some extent close – or was at least comparable with – Western

patterns of rationalisation of society and universalisation of values, but did not bring about the same type of achievements.

As put by Albert Hourani (1980: 71), the assessment of Islam has always presented a particularly critical challenge to Western scholars and thinkers because of the 'peculiar difficulty . . . in finding a category in terms of which Islam can be understood, being neither "East" nor "West", neither Christian nor unequivocally non-Christian'.

The branches of academic scholarship that happened to deal – at times almost obsessively – with the subtle issue of Islam's otherness versus closeness from a Western viewpoint saw the light during the nineteenth century in coincidence with the European colonial encroachment upon the Muslim world. They became subject to profound changes during the twentieth century, mainly as a consequence of the two world wars and of the ensuing processes of decolonisation, which produced serious breaches in the self-understanding of the formerly triumphant Western civilisation. However, it should be remembered that this trajectory was also influenced by earlier views of Islam that had been shaped and propagated by leading European thinkers who were not academic specialists of Islam but who contributed to shaping the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment intellectual developments, such as Hume, Voltaire, Goethe, Herder, Hegel and even Nietzsche, to name just a few.

A whole family of dichotomies opposed a progressive West to a stagnant world of Islam: for example, in terms of reason versus blindly following authority, science versus revelation, secularism versus religion, materialism versus spiritualism, humanism versus religiosity, immanence versus transcendentalism and market capitalism versus totalitarianism. The articulation of such dichotomies was not always and necessarily crude and devoid of nuances. Islam was certainly the villain in most cases, but sometimes also happened to become the screen upon which a Western nostalgia for a lost world of tradition and spirituality was projected.

### **The general patterns**

The history of Islamic Studies in the West shows that following the Enlightenment a need arose for a new approach to religion that would transcend the earlier prevailing theological disputes. New perspectives allowed the study of other religions as manifestations of a common humanity. Islam became part of the history of religions, and the focus was gradually shifted from theology to phenomenology. Muhammad was studied as a natural, rational human being. For sure, polemics about Islam continued well into the nineteenth century in the missionary writings and in numerous debates between Western scholars (who sometimes doubled their identity as colonial administrators) and local religious leaders. For instance, the Orientalist and high-ranking administrator in colonial

India William Muir (1819–1905) regarded Islam as a missionary religion and thus as a threat to Christian evangelism, while, in a debate with the German Islamologist and Heidelberg professor Carl H. Becker (1876–1933), the leading evangelical theologian Ernst Troeltsch (1865–1923), a friend of Max Weber, denied that Islam had substantially contributed to the development of Western universalism. Following that debate, Carl H. Becker moved from a comparative mode that had become common across a variety of disciplines during the nineteenth century towards one that focused sharply on the opposition between Islam's incarnation of Oriental despotism and Western civility (Stauth 1993: 154–8).

Such a scheme solidified a dichotomising pattern defining civilisational identity versus alterity, which Western Europe had developed in the course of its long and troubled transition from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment to twentieth-century mass democracy. A notable twist to this view was achieved with Nietzsche, just before Weber embarked on his comparative project in the sociology of religion. The controversial but deeply influential German philosopher viewed Islam as the positive term of the dichotomy for impersonating a proud, masculine principle in opposition to the life-repressing resentment embodied by Christianity and even more by the Protestant Reformation (Turner 1994: 96–9).

Both the reiteration and the twisting of standards of identity and alterity that link the West to Islam provide a significant nexus between the nineteenth-century scholarship on Islam and the new questions that took shape at the beginning of the twentieth century under the influence of sociology. The formulation of patterns of sameness and difference in Western views of Islam reached a climax with the work of Max Weber, which in turn led to an institutionalisation of Western values of inwardness as the crucial parameter for a universalisation of the innerworldliness of modernity (see Chapter 1 of this volume). Weber focused in a more pointed way than previous Orientalists on the dialectic between religious values and social institutions that ushers in an antinomy between despotism and patrimonialism, on the one hand, and civility and autonomy, on the other (Salvatore 1997: 97–110). However, neither the ubiquitous dichotomising dimension of the Western view of Islam nor its relation to religion was always clear in the various analyses. A basic diversity in the articulation of religion across various civilisations was often ignored. The outcome was an essentialisation of Islam as well as of Christianity, with which it was explicitly or implicitly compared (see Chapter 1 in this volume).

It is important to consider that this essentialisation was still well entrenched by the 1970s, in spite of the sometimes articulate, though mostly ambivalent, ways of approaching Islam that were the heritage of nineteenth-century studies and debates. This legacy comprised religious studies that ranged from phenomenological to critical analyses of scriptures, rituals and doctrines.

Islam was in principle also subjected to similar scrutiny. However, points of comparison were defined in terms of Christian experiences because it was perceived that 'Islam today stands just about where Christendom stood in the fifteenth century' (Stoddard 1921: 33). A leading twentieth-century Orientalist like Hamilton R. A. Gibb (1895–1971) was aware of the legacy of such comparative studies and was attracted by such similarities, as he stated quite explicitly that his view of Islam could only be the counterpart of Christian experiences (Gibb 1947: p. xi). Key concerns in this framework of comparative religion have been the distinction between the sacred and the profane and the separation of religion from politics. Rather than exploring in some depth the opacity of this distinction in Islam, it was taken for granted as a negative aspect, a deficit, and as a hindrance to modernisation, intended as a process of differentiation of social fields and their value spheres. Muhammad's life in Medina attracted scholars more than that in Mecca: jihad, conquest and the focus on state power (considered in the shape of patrimonialism, that is, of the ruler's identification of his government prerogatives with the administration of a personal patrimony) were regarded as negative fall-outs of this type of religiosity.

In his analysis Gibb emphasised a tension in Muslim religious thought between transcendentalism and immanentism. He aligned to this view a series of interpretations, among which the following are particularly relevant, also in view of the analyses that will be presented in various chapters of this book: the Qur'an, official Islamic theology and law always stress transcendentalism (see Chapter 1 in this volume); the Sufis, on the other hand, are inclined to immanentism (see Chapters 1 and 5 in this volume); the incipient rationalism of the ninth-century theologians of the Mu'tazila (see Chapter 9 in this volume), who were influenced by Greek and Hellenistic philosophy, was defeated not on the basis of logic but because of the adherence of the masses to the truths of the Qur'an. In other words, according to Gibb (1947: 19), the Muslim theology of transcendence marginalised personal devotion, while Sufism stressed a direct communication with God. Clearly, the polarisation between two forms of Islam was greatly exaggerated, and their tight dialectic, when not complementarity, was often overlooked, by applying categories deeply entrenched in the Western historic experiences that exalted the centrality of inwardness (see Chapter 1 in this volume).

### **Between Orientalist Islamologists and modernisation theorists**

We have seen that the question whether Islam is compatible with modernity arose in the specific context in which the Western scrutiny and, often, critique of Islam's deficits developed from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Western

scholars were nevertheless divided on the question whether Muslim societies can be modernised. One group maintained that 'Islam is in its very nature incapable of reform and progressive adaptation to the expansion of human knowledge' (Stoddard 1921: 33). In their view, Muslim societies could not survive in the process of global change. Others believed that Muslim societies have no choice but to modernise. However, they could do so only by adopting the Western model.

A leading representative of the first approach in the academic world of the post-Second World War era was Gustave E. von Grunebaum (1909–72). His position can be considered a continuation of the view of Islam manifested by Becker, but articulated instead from a perspective that capitalised on the Weberian teachings and in particular on their rigorously comparative approach pivoted on a keen understanding of how Western uniqueness happened to become universally normative. As a result, 'he was convinced that it was his duty to interpret Islam from the point of view of the Westerner deeply steeped in his own civilisation at its best' (Rosenthal 1973: 356). On the one hand, he celebrated the Weberian approach and its underlying rationalist spirit as 'an end confined to the most modern West' (von Grunebaum 1964: 43). On the other, for him Islam was completely at the mercy of Western-led modernisation (von der Mehden 1986: 11).

With such an approach and within this methodological framework, von Grunebaum saw his task as a post-Weberian Islamologist as consisting of reinterpreting the ranking of the 'inner' factors in the unfolding of Islamic civilisation and in its allegedly unsuccessful encounter with modernity. Relying on the cultural sociologist Alfred L. Kroeber (1876–1960), he saw in the message of Islam a dilution of the inner impetus of Christian faith (von Grunebaum 1964: 7) – an idea that reflects Weber's poor consideration of Islam for allegedly being a trivialised manifestation of Near Eastern religious monotheism and spirituality, one projected outwardly towards immediate rewards rather than, like Christianity, inwardly towards a realm of pure values.

According to von Grunebaum, this specific deficit was magnified in the modern era by the fact that Islam did not undergo the process of self-renewal that the West had been through since after the Protestant Reformation. This stress on reformation often became a leitmotif in Western approaches to the issue of Islam and modernity. Based on the Western Christian trajectory, scholars anticipated a reformation in Islam as a requirement for renaissance. Consequently, the meaning of reform was limited to the pattern of Western Reformation, and the continuing reform efforts within Islamic traditions were not given enough weight. While clearly the Protestant Reformation had been the outcome of a larger cultural and political crisis in Western Europe (see Chapter 1 in this volume), such modern crises were considered by von Grunebaum to be highly productive of forms of social power. He viewed

reformation as anchored in a reform of the self facilitated by an increasing reflexivity and rationality, while he was probably more explicit than any other Western scholar of Islam in claiming that Islam's own crises lack a dialectical potential and hamper any chance of self-regeneration. He viewed Islam as trapped in a continuous reiteration of 'leap[s] from one absolute to another', because it lacked the critical filter of a reflexive subjectivity (von Grunebaum 1964: 45–6). From Hanbalism to the Muslim Brotherhood, any attempt at radical reform was seen as viciously hijacked by a rigid orientation to an almost mythical past, the era of Muhammad, his companions and his immediate successors. The result is that von Grunebaum denied to Islam any autonomous capacity for social change and intellectual renewal, seen as the preconditions for a successful encounter with modernity. He concluded that 'the pursuit of an ideal political life (early projected into the reality of the first forty years of the *hijra* . . .) in disregard of the actual political situation has become the permanent drama of Islam' (ibid.: 65).

Nonetheless, writing in the early 1960s, von Grunebaum was also aware of the vulnerability of his approach to Islam, suspended as it was both conceptually and historically between the triumph of Western uniqueness and the upcoming anti-colonial challenges. He conceded: 'It may well be that our comprehensive, or universalistic approach will loose its attraction . . . And, above all, the sustaining aspiration of our cultural community may change' (ibid.: 54). Yet for the time being he was aware that his work would 'imperceptibly but inevitably turn into source material from which those who come after us will recapture our aspirations' (ibid.: 97).

He was not wrong, since such views deeply influenced the study of Islam and Muslim societies in the post-Second World War era in spite of all post-colonial critiques, which were voiced in the 1960s, long before Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), by leading Arab intellectuals such as Anouar Abdel-Malek (1963) and Mohammed Arkoun (1964). In spite of such critiques, Islam continued to be mainly characterised as a traditional culture and Muslims as a traditional society. As a consequence, it was predicted that Islam would soon lose its relevance. Yet both other Islamologists of the time, such as Hamilton A. R. Gibb, and the social scientists affiliated with modernisation theory were able to introduce some distinctions into the broader picture.

Gibb recognised that a key problem was concealed by the ambiguous use of the terms Islam and modernity. Islam was used in at least three meanings, designating 'an organised body of religious doctrines', 'a system of social ethics and practices' and the 'entire body of its adherents' (Gibb 1970: 3). Often all the above three meanings were conflated in one statement. Similarly, Daniel Lerner (1958: 46), a leading modernisation theorist of the time, observed that an ambiguity about modernity arises when it is used with reference to non-Western societies because of its primarily Western rooting. To this, Gibb (1947: 69)

added that modernity is 'primarily a function of Western liberalism', proposed distinguishing between different religious traditions, and advised limiting 'the term "modernity" to those who do care, and sometimes care deeply, about their religion but who are, in various degrees, offended by the traditional dogmatism' (ibid.: 52).

As predicted by von Grunebaum, after an intermediate phase during which Orientalists were offering key inputs to modernisation theorists, the latter took over the challenge to approach the ongoing processes in the Muslim world in partly new terms. They took into account the above distinctions and inserted even the purported factors of blockage of Islam as a tradition in the context of a dynamic process of modernisation, which Muslim societies could, accordingly, not escape and to some extent could be able actively to steer through. Whereas Islamologists such as von Grunebaum were inclined to deny to Islam any chance of modernisation, especially in the sense of intellectual renaissance and political development, the new modernisation theorists often identified Islam as a 'tradition' inhibiting modernisation processes and political transformations (see Chapter 1 of this volume) rather than considering Muslim societies *per se* as unmodernisable. After all, the overall picture in the dawning post-colonial era was characterised by the dynamism of new social forces and political regimes stretching across a growing part of the Muslim world. In this context, modernisation theorists proclaimed that Islam was playing a negative or residual role as a tradition and was condemned to extinction in the ongoing, ineluctable modernisation process that, though at its infancy, was starting to unsettle the traditional balances of Muslim societies. The body of Muslim societies themselves was instead considered potentially exempt from the hampering effects of tradition.

It is important to notice that many among the leading modernisation theorists were not trained in local languages and therefore had still to rely on Orientalist bodies of knowledge and their expertise role. The Islam of Lerner was still, basically, the Islam of von Grunebaum. The difference consisted in the fact that Lerner saw social actors and factors at work that were not dependent on an all-encompassing Islamic traditional culture but could potentially resist and change it. He could, therefore, express a markedly more optimistic view than his Orientalist colleagues: 'Traditional society is passing from the Middle East because relatively few Middle Easterners still want to live by its rules' (Lerner 1958: 399). The older hermeneutics of Islam was now encapsulated in a web of dynamic social factors. The text is no longer king: social surveys are at the core of the new methods of investigation. Islam now only turns negative and residual, to the extent that it stands for discrete traditional factors preventing innovation: this hampering factor called tradition is often given a specific weight within the grid of questions asked by the social scientists to the social actors within countries considered on the way to modernisation.

Yet, within this dynamic approach, Islam is no longer viewed as a purely static tradition but as an active, yet losing party in a titanic battle with the forces of modernity, a battle that is internal to Muslim societies. Accordingly, the view of Islam as a series of gaps which was well rooted in Weber's approach was confirmed by Orientalists such as von Grunebaum and Gibb, who wrote that 'Islam presents a classical example of an entirely self-sufficient, self-enclosed and inbred culture' (Gibb 1970: 4). As shown by another leading representative of modernisation theory, Manfred Halpern (1963: 34), the new approach needed not to reject the Orientalist view but rather to turn it around by asking the following key question with regard to Islam and modernity: 'Can any closed system like Islam be made to mesh with an open and dynamically changed society, yet succeed in remaining a closed system?' The model of the Western articulation of the issue of Islam's relation to modernity shifted from diagnosis to therapy: Islam was ever more clearly the illness, but a viciously active one, while the body of Muslim societies could still be healed.

It is here that Islam, as an allegedly closed system rooted in a tradition obstructing modernisation, begins to be assessed in more nuanced ways than had been the case with von Grunebaum. According to Halpern, the Muslim as a social actor is not completely paralysed by the legacy represented by Islamic traditions. It is evident that Muslims are on the move in post-colonial society. Ergo, there must be something they inherited from the past that bestows on them 'an uncommonly flexible style for dealing with a world in motion' (*ibid.*). Yet, while Islam's negativity vis-à-vis modernity is reframed in order to allow for some dynamism, the process and its predictable outcome amount to a gradual collapse of Islam, because 'the road to modernisation for all societies involves a march without a final prophet, a final book, or even assurance of final success' (*ibid.*: 35). Relying on this approach, Halpern was convinced that modernisation, though originating in standards set by Western society and history, 'has become a native movement' (*ibid.*: 36). Islam cannot choose: it has to cope with modernity and make space for it.

Halpern predicted that neither Islamic reformism nor Islamic fundamentalism (which he dubbed 'neo-totalitarianism') would be able to survive the modernisation process. In spite of their attempts to cope with it, the Islamic forces were seen as playing a basically negative role. He considered the Muslim Brothers doomed to failure, not only 'a symptom of uprootedness', but one that 'cannot accept modern uprootedness as the precondition of modern liberation' (Halpern 1963: 138). It is also by virtue of such useless battles that Islam itself becomes increasingly irrelevant, yet this happens through movement and challenge, not via a reiteration of stale formulas. For sure, a secular leadership was now seen as triumphing and with it 'the battle . . . moved from the realm of religion into the realm of politics' (*ibid.*: 129). The presence of Islam on this political battlefield was perceived as the symptom of the pathological traits of

modernisation in Muslim lands. Yet some Islamic ideals can not only survive modernisation but can even contribute to it, if detached from the traditional system to which they originally belonged: 'the insistence on the allowed consensus is itself becoming a force of change as the pressure for conformity comes no longer from one's ancestors but from one's peers' (ibid.: 132).

Clearly, the specific trajectory of conceptualisation of religion in the West in response to the developments that instituted the state's sovereignty over the entire society and the delimitation of a specific 'religious field' significantly influenced the approaches here analysed (see Chapter 1 in this volume). Clues of processes through which Islam appeared as not fitting the normative presuppositions of the Western trajectory have often provided the occasion to see any resurgence of religion as 'an obstacle to the achievement of modernisation' and 'a hindrance to progress' (von der Mehden 1986: 6). On the other hand, as Lerner (1958: 399) explained, modernisation is not ultimately tied to Western patterns: it is global. Lerner found the same basic model reappearing everywhere, regardless of variation in culture and faith, based on the evidence that, even when some post-colonial leaders of Muslim countries denounced the West's neo-colonial political manoeuvres, their model remained modernity: originating in the West but increasingly globalising itself. 'Mecca or mechanisation', the Middle East may choose either world, but not both together (ibid.: 406). Not surprisingly, Lerner pointed to Turkey as 'the bright model of successful transition' from tradition to modernity (ibid.: 409). He approvingly quoted Gibb's admiration for the Turks because of their 'intellectual honesty' based on the fact that they 'know what it is that they want': a recognition of proactive social agency, the key to a successful modernisation (ibid.: 410).

The reasons why Muslim societies were quick to adopt modern technologies and institutions of governance but, in spite of Lerner's predictions, often continued to stress the preservation of tradition were not fully explored. Gibb (1970: 6) agreed that 'the fact of this persistence of the traditional Middle Eastern social institutions, as preserved and colored by the principles and forms of Islam, is often overlooked'. But according to him this was due to the fact that Islam's 'traditional formulations necessarily include certain elements of reasoning which are based on intellectual concepts no longer accepted', while 'for the majority of Muslims the old frames of reference have remained completely adequate' (ibid.: 3-4). Clearly, at the passage from Orientalist Islamologists such as von Grunebaum and Gibb to modernisation theorists such as Lerner and Halpern, the reduction of tradition to a stage of (under)development was still a hindrance to elaborating a notion of tradition as a framework facilitating social agency.

A realisation of the changes and adjustments that a tradition makes continuously in order to stress a semblance of permanence was still to come and could take shape only after the collapse of modernisation theory (see Chapter 1 in this volume). Yet other social scientists, such as the anthropologist Clifford Geertz

(1926–2006), recognised the positive role that religion can play as ‘one of the major mechanisms by means of which particular local cultures have projected themselves onto a larger world screen throughout the course of history’ (Geertz 2001: 2). Developing this approach from the 1960s till the end of the twentieth century, Geertz illustrated it with examples from diverse Muslim societies across the world, from Morocco to Indonesia, which have continuously reconstructed their local identities and, still, remained part of a larger global Muslim community by means of religious attachments.

### **From the assessment of Islamic modernism to the dispute about Islamic modernity**

Muslim theologies of modernity could have been adduced as examples of a positive role of tradition and religion in social development and intellectual progress (see Chapter 9 in this volume). Yet a more reductive label came to cover such endeavours in the perception of Western scholars of Islam: ‘Islamic modernism’ happened to be used to characterise various intellectual attempts, mostly of a reformist type, to develop a viable framework of thought for Islam in the modern era, in what amounts to an attempt proactively to cope with Western modernity. Within Western scholarship the concept itself of ‘Islamic modernism’ took on a derogatory shade under the imputation of a likely, if not fatal, failure of the attempt, for all the background reasons related to Islam’s nature as a tradition examined above.

Western scholars had serious problems in acknowledging the specificities of Islamic modern intellectual thought. Modernism in Muslim societies was analysed as a general category only through the lens of the more general view that modernity originated outside the social purview of Muslims, and Islam could not cope with it. Only more recently, in the framework of new debates on the hypothesis of an endogenous genesis of modernity in the Muslim world, has Islamic modernism come to be seen as *sui generis* rather than belonging to a general, necessarily Western-centred, category. We will explore both the assessment of Islamic modernism and the dispute on Islamic modernity, while trying to show their nexus.

As a general category, the concept of ‘modernism’ with regard to nineteenth- and twentieth-century Islamic thought denotes an attempt to free the religion of Islam from the shackles of a too rigid orthodoxy, and to accomplish reforms that will render it adaptable to modern life and its complex demands (Adams 1933: 177). According to Gibb, modernism is predominantly a movement of thought among ‘educated laymen’. Yet according to him the Islamic modernist differs from the conservative, on a theological level, only in building up a Muslim apologetics along somewhat superficial lines, finalised to reach an educated public (Gibb 1947: 48). Accordingly, Islamic modernism lacks the discipline

of controlled thinking and loses itself in subjective endeavours to overcome the present state of weakness of Islam by referring to modern categories of thought and action without penetrating and absorbing their fundamental values and norms. Based on this interpretation, the weakness of the modernist approach is evident in a continuous strain between the outward argument and the inner train of reasoning.

Alternative interpretations are provided in Chapters 7, 8, 9 and 10 in this volume. The goal here is to point out the way some nuances were introduced in the debate and how in spite of them the general category of 'Islamic modernism' with its negative connotation held through. A key distinction between Egyptian and Indian modernism was recognised quite early by Charles Adams. Referring to the older Orientalist Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921), he claimed that Egyptian modernism was primarily a cultural movement aiming to adjust Islam to the conditions of modern European civilisation (Adams 1933: 102–3), which would seem to justify, at least on a first reading, Gibb's negative judgement. It was Gibb himself (1947: 53) who observed that Indian modernism instead aimed 'to re-examine the foundations of belief'. He regarded in particular Sayyid Ahmad Khan's emphasis on the necessity of theology to conform to nature and reject miracles as a genuine form of rationalism (see Chapters 9 and 10 in this volume). Notwithstanding this key observation, Gibb found Indian modernism more politically oriented than the manifestations of modernism in the Arab world and therefore saw them as still trapped in the same type of circular and sterile, merely adaptive argument (*ibid.*: 58).

Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2000) agreed with Gibb about the fact that political compulsion facilitated the acceptance of some core modern ideas like nationalism. He stated that 'the modern Muslim world has accepted and espoused with fervor those aspects of nationalism that are relevant or contributory to the historical rehabilitation of Islamic society, and compatible with Islam's central precepts' (Smith 1957: 85). However, as Gibb (1947: 58) remarked, 'the modernists are unable to place facts in compelling and clear perspectives, because they have not yet formulated to themselves a coherent social ideal adapted to the needs of Muslims generally'. They were thought to be trapped within the logic of Qur'an's exegesis and therefore hampered in developing critical thinking and a scientific approach to history. Gibb explained this allegedly grave stalemate by evidencing the crucial role that Muslim theologians had played in reshaping Islamic thought. He defined the goal of theology as 'to state the truths of religion (which are, so far, only intuitively known) in terms of the highest intellectual concepts of the time' (*ibid.*: 18). The main difference between the Muslim world and the West in the exercise of this role is that the ulama, whom he considered the authentic Muslim theologians, never absorbed the secular and modern categories of Western thought. Consequently, while Western theologians were reformulating religious doctrines in parallel with

the unfolding processes of modernisation and secularisation, Muslim theology led itself to logical extremism and eventually became divorced from the faith and practices of the masses. While average Muslims managed to stay afloat by keeping somewhere in the middle of the road, Islamic modernists were not fully able to break out of this impasse (ibid.: 47).

Following Gibb, Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1957: 85) was bitterly critical of the apologetic nature of modernist writings, which according to him was at the root of the frustration of Western scholars in their attempt to appreciate the originality of modern Islam and which also damaged the capacity of Muslims seriously to cope with the multifaceted dimension of religion within modern contexts. According to him, this defensive approach diverted the attention of contemporary Muslim thinkers from their 'original task', namely, pursuing the truth and solving problems (ibid.: 87). Such derogatory views of Islamic modernism as marred by an apologetic attitude cannot be taken at face value. The question is: What is being defended? And to whom is this apology addressed? While Smith has no doubt that the bulk of the modernist literature that he deems apologetic is addressed to the West, it is far from clear why Muslim modernists would be so apologetic, when such apology is considered entirely irrelevant by their Western counterpart. A modernist thinker probably finds it more purposeful to argue with a conservative who does not believe that Islam is compatible with modernity. By referring to the elements of the Islamic traditions that are mutually agreeable, he can make a point to the orthodox. As far as the defence of Islam against Christian challenges and Western criticism is concerned, it is undertaken by both conservative and modernist thinkers and it is not necessarily defensive, since it is mostly corrective and explicative. Apology to the West is instead meaningless, because the West does not regard modernist thinkers as the spokespersons for Islam. Islamic modernist literature is, in fact, part of an ongoing discourse between different Muslim groups. The conservatives are defending their traditions against the Christian missionaries, the secularists, the doubting Westernised Muslims, the reformers and the modernists. They are bitterly opposed to Islamic modernists like Sayyid Ahmad Khan who, according to them, have deviated from Islam under Western influence. Any apologetic attitude on the part of the modernists is similarly in the first place directed towards Muslim conservatives, as well as towards Westernised Muslims. Addressing the conservative, the Islamic modernist is defending the authenticity of his interpretation of Islam, and to the Westernised Muslim he is justifying his view that that modernity is achievable while remaining Muslim.

Gibb's discussion of Islamic modernism concerns precisely this point. He acknowledges that the outward target of Muslim apologetes is Christianity rather than the West as a whole, while in fact they wish to address those Muslims who are doubtful about the benefits of modernity (Gibb 1947: 53). On the other hand, the conservative theologians from among the ulama ranks are well aware

that they are defending something essential, but they do not know what exactly they are defending it against. According to Gibb, they know the object of their defence only through the distorting glasses of modernist apologetics. The real problem for Gibb is that the purported apologists of Islam do not know what Islam really is. Evidently, authenticity and, more precisely, the authentication of true Islam are particularly dear to Orientalists, and some of them think that the issue cannot be left to Muslim thinkers alone. Starting from this consideration, Gibb undertakes a quite imaginative reconstruction, along liberal lines, of what he passionately believes to be the original teachings of Islam. This argument, however, quite soon becomes circular: the ulama do not see any problem with the Islamic traditions and therefore do not respond to challenges of modernity; therefore, the true representatives of Islam are not responding to modernity; those who are responding to modern challenges are apologetic while they do not know about the original teachings of Islam; hence their response is not Islamic: the result in both cases is that Islam cannot accommodate modernity.

The derogatory characterisation of Islamic modernism by leading Orientalists as apologetic is a symptom of the fact that the issue of authenticity is more of a dilemma for the West than it is for Islam. The question about who speaks on behalf of Islam is very crucial to Western scholars. For most of them, the legitimate speakers are undoubtedly the conservative ulama. Modernisation theorists often helped the Orientalists in stating that contemporary Muslim intellectuals who do not belong to the ulama ranks and Islamic modernists cannot play that authentically Islamic role because they are 'shaped in the Western thought and valuation' (Lerner 1958: 408). Yet they are not fully Western either: 'Their categories of thought are those of the modern West. But their modes of feeling are more equivocal, more accessible to solicitation from different sides' (ibid.). This is why they are finally responsible for 'voluminous outpouring of Islamic apologetics' (ibid.: 409). Not surprisingly, Lerner invokes the authority of leading Orientalists like Smith in remarking that 'the intellectual's intellect [is] quite sold out to the blind emotional fury of nostalgic mob' and von Grunebaum for foreseeing that, the more the process is pushed forward, the more the Muslim intellectual 'will be forced to build a "modern" house on fictitious traditionalist foundations' (ibid.).

Even by crossing the conceptual and methodological threshold separating Orientalist Islamologists from modernisation theorists, it is still difficult for Western scholarship to explain how the house of modernity can be built on other than Western foundations. To these scholars the Islamic modernists' ambivalence towards the West was deeply problematic. This bias and the argumentative aporias it produced prevents Western scholars from appreciating the contribution of Islamic modernism to the issue of the encounter between Islam and modernity. How can one admire and oppose the West at the same time? Islamic modernists do not find it impossible, because they do not regard either Islam or modernity as so comprehensive as Western scholars mostly do.

Notwithstanding this widespread criticism, some scholars have found Islamic modernism and their arguments agreeable. Referring to the Mu'tazila and writing right after the First World War (around the time when Weber finalised his comparative sociology of religion), the political scientist and popular author Theodore Lothrop Stoddard had earlier underscored that 'Islam had been never quite destitute of liberal minds' (Stoddard 1921: 36) and that 'the reforming spirit has already produced profound changes throughout Islam' (ibid.: 44). According to him, Islam was not simply coping with the West but was on its way to develop 'a new synthesis' (ibid.: 90).

Not surprisingly, a comprehensive appreciation of Islamic modern thought that reformulates and attempts to substantiate this more positive assessment took shape only after the demise of modernisation theory. It was launched via key scholarly interventions by younger Islamologists and historians of Islam. Their new approach has changed the terms of the debate quite radically. The object of analysis is no longer simply the capacity of Muslim intellectuals to cope innovatively with Western modernity by selectively drawing on Muslim traditions, but the more fundamental hypothesis that patterns of intellectual modernity, tied to specific structural developments within capitalist production and markets, developed within the Muslim world prior to any confrontation with an encroaching Western modernity. The strands of Islamic modernism originating in the nineteenth century should accordingly not be considered the mere reflex of a sudden imperative to respond to the West (whether in an apologetic or in more original and synthetic terms) but the outcome of a longer process, which was deeply affected by the increasing political and cultural impact of the West on the Muslim world in the colonial era but was set in motion much earlier by at least partly endogenous developments.

Predictably, the two scholars who developed an argument about the endogenous seeds of modernity within the Muslim world, Peter Gran and Reinhard Schulze, chose to tackle the weakest point of the Orientalist argument about the decline of the Muslim world in the modern era prior to the advance of the West on Muslim lands. They challenged head-on the 'Napoleon theorem', that is, the idea that the issue of modernity was brought to the heart of the Muslim world by Napoleon's occupation of Egypt and parts of the Near East at the end of the eighteenth century. The main point of convergence between their works is the intention to demonstrate the existence of lively and innovative, bourgeois-like intellectual cultures, mostly tied to some Sufi brotherhoods. According to them such intellectual cultures emerged and flourished in key areas of the Ottoman Empire during the eighteenth century, prior to the hard colonial impact of the West. They reflected commercial and capitalist interests and revealed a new, genuinely modern emphasis on social autonomy and responsibility (Gran 1979, 1998; Schulze 1990, 1996).

It is not surprising that the challenge launched by Gran and Schulze elicited

sharp responses by contemporary representatives of more established forms of Orientalist scholarship. From the pages of scholarly journals devoted to the study of the Middle East and the Muslim world two Dutch-based scholars, Fred De Jong (1982) and Bernd Radtke (1994), responded to Gran and Schulze and attempted to deconstruct their argument by showing that they had read their own pre-constituted ideas of Islamic modernity into eighteenth-century texts that were nothing other than a rehash of older themes. Not surprisingly, in both cases Gran and Schulze responded to this criticism by basically stressing that the analysis of texts can be meaningful only if situated in the context of wider socio-political processes of transformation, so that even older arguments and keywords can acquire new significations in new contexts. From this point of view the Islamic eighteenth century, far from being the stagnant counterpart to a flourishing European Enlightenment, might still have been far from expressing an 'Islamic Enlightenment', yet it manifested important innovative dynamics that deserve the attention of Islamologists and historians of Islam, who might otherwise, by exclusively looking at texts, remain trapped in their biased and simplified notions of what is tradition and what is modernity. Most seriously, by insisting in neglecting the socio-political context they might lose any significant capacity to keep pace with more general debates about the dynamics of tradition and the singularity and plurality of modernity (see Chapter 1 of this volume).

## Conclusion

The significance of Gran's and Schulze's challenge consists less in who is right and who is wrong in reading and interpreting certain texts than in its ushering in of a new stage in the debate among Western scholars about the issue of Islam and modernity. The trajectory of the way this issue was dealt with from the nineteenth-century institutionalisation of Western scholarship of Islam until the 1970s was far from stagnant, yet it revolved, at times obsessively, around the key theme of Islam's inherent deficits in coping with a modernity considered to be, at least initially, an exclusively Western phenomenon. From the late 1970s until our days, a major shift prefigured the possibility of interpreting the issue of Islam and modernity less as an oxymoron that requires adaptations and responses than as a theme in its own right, which is inherent in the history of Islam and in its strained relations with the West, both before and after the onset of modern colonialism.

## Summary of chapter

There are recurring themes and standards in the dealing with the issue of Islam and modernity by Western thinkers and scholars, from the nineteenth century till our days. Most prominent among them are the limited compatibility of Islam with modernity, the

comparability of Islam with Christianity and in particular with the trajectory of the Protestant Reformation, and the relation of authenticity and modernity with regard to Islam and specifically to its legitimate cultural elites.

A particularly significant momentum in the articulation of these standards is provided by the passage from Orientalist interpretations of Islam to the analysis of Muslim societies by modernisation theorists between the 1950s and the 1970s. Among the most prominent Orientalists of the time, Gustave E. von Grunebaum and Hamilton R. A. Gibb were the most outspoken in articulating a diagnosis of Islam's relation to modernity. Within the field of modernisation theory, the analyses of Daniel Lerner and Manfred Halpern were particularly interesting for adopting Orientalist views of Islam vis-à-vis modernity and transforming them according to the expectations commanded by their theoretical approach. Where the Orientalists were convinced of the fact that Islam as a comprehensive, backward-looking traditional culture constituted an obstacle for Muslims' efforts to cope with modernity, the modernisation theorists turned the argument around and proposed that Islam inspired social forces engaged in a fierce battle with an emerging secular leadership. Within this dynamic picture, Islam itself appeared as more ambivalently positioned towards modernity than shown by earlier analysis: while modernisation theorists predicted the demise of Islamist forces, they also hypothesised that some elements of Islamic traditions could enliven the forces of change.

Another important field for exploring Western scholars' view of Islam with regard to modernity is the assessment of Islamic modernism. They dubbed as Islamic modernists those Muslim leaders and thinkers who advocated modern changes within an Islamic framework. Western Orientalists considered the Islamic modernists neither modern enough, for their themes were allegedly drawn from the Western experience of modernity, nor as representing the authentic Islam, which was, according to them, the preserve of conservative ulama.

The terms of the debate changed when a new wave of scholarship in the late 1970s started radically to reframe the issue of Islam's relation to modernity and showed key elements of innovative social activities and thought within the Muslim societies of the eighteenth century, prior to their impact with the forces of Western colonial modernity. This thesis was aimed to disarticulate at its fundamentals the argument of both Orientalists and modernisation theorists according to which modernity comes to Islam only from the West. While this interpretation remains controversial to our days, it has contributed to opening up the analysis of Islam and modernity by critically reconsidering all older standards and themes and so bringing it closer to the framework of multiple modernities analysed in Chapter 1.

## Questions

1. To what extent was the Western scholarship on Islam's relations to modernity influenced by more general currents of Western thought?
2. How did it change from the nineteenth to the twentieth century? What was the specific role played by Weber's comparative sociology of religion?
3. To what extent were the Orientalists of the post-First World War era the heirs of earlier Orientalist scholarship, and to what extent were they influenced by Weberian themes?
4. Did modernisation theory provide more dynamism to Western approaches to Islam and modernity?

5. Why does the Western Orientalist judgement of Islamic modernism constitute a particularly useful field for understanding the historic limitations of Western notions of Islam's capacity to cope with modernity? Why was the argument of Western Orientalists on Islamic modernism's alleged apologetic attitude circular?
6. Why was the focus of some new scholars on the Islamic eighteenth century since the late 1970s a particularly viable means to attempt to subvert entrenched Orientalist standards and themes concerning Islam's relation to modernity?
7. On whose ground were these attempts critiqued by Orientalist scholars? How did the new scholars answer back?
8. Do you think that the history of the Western scholarship of Islam on the issue of modernity shows an excessive attention to textual traditions to the detriment of socio-political context, or rather an oscillation between privileging the text and the context?

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