
Chapter 8

Islam and the Axial Age

JOSEF VAN ESS

Karl Jaspers and his theory

Historiography is the attempt of the human mind to put order into contingency. We discover causalities in the flow of time and elevate certain events to symbolic value. If we are audacious enough we elaborate general – or, to use the new expression: global – theories. They seem to thrive especially well in societies or periods which have lost their inherited orientation. In Germany, the 1920s were full of them and again the years after 1945. Now we get them cheaper from the United States: Huntington, Fukuyama. My experience with them goes back to the late forties of the last century. But I went to school then, and I was not particularly impressed. I belonged to what was called shortly afterwards the “sceptical generation.”

These theories – and I shall specify them in due course – have, as it seems, one thing in common: they read history backwards. They are teleological, “Heilsgeschichte” in disguise. Sure, they also differ a lot, the reason being that they are always children of their time, reflecting the mood of their period. Sometimes they are pessimistic, especially after a war which was lost; their authors then tend to ruminate about some sort of “Untergang,” and the public gladly absorbs this. In such a case, the prevailing mood is one of remorse, and the main question asked is: “How could we do this to ourselves?” In Germany this was called “Kulturkritik.” At other moments, the same theories are brimmingly optimistic: “How come we are so wonderful? Why is it that the ‘modern subject’ is so singular?” This attitude is, of course, as naïve as is the former one. But to be just: it is not so much encountered with those who invent the theories but rather with those who elaborate on them later on, during the process of reception. It is a secondary phenomenon. For it may happen that theories come back after one or two generations and find themselves surrounded by a completely new mental environment. Marxism in Western Germany during the late sixties was a good example, strangely out of focus and void of any contact with the feelings of the social class it had originally been intended for. “Weberism” is perhaps another one: the phenomenon of an author who never managed to get a book out and fell from

one nervous crisis into the other¹, but then, after his death, was monopolized by a steadily growing “school” who developed his ideas into a “system” and his notes into a Scripture. Jaspers’s “Axial Age” may be a third one: conceived in 1949, but short-lived and then out of sight for at least one generation until it came back in form of conferences and specialized articles in the recent past.

In this case, however, I am not so sure. I never looked at the “Axial Age” very closely, and the Suhrkamp publication of 1987-1992 which revived its memory by-passed me completely². Younger events of the same kind, the workshop held at Jerusalem which dealt with Islam (2002)³ and a volume of assorted articles published in the periodical “Medieval Encounters” (2004)⁴, seem to keep aloof from the magic word itself as much as possible⁵. At the Essen conference (2005) Shmuel Eisenstadt told me that “Axial Age” is no longer considered to be of prime importance and has been replaced by “axial syndromes.” This terminological shift would not sadden me; any stepping down from capital letters to normal down-to-earth language makes me feel more comfortable.

This has, of course, something to do with the fact that I am an Islamicist. Islam does not fit into most of these general theories. They are all Europocentred, and even where one of their authors thinks that the Occident is about to perish (“Der Untergang des Abendlandes”) he reserves for the Orient nothing else but Aladin’s wonder-lamp (“the magic civilization”)⁶. Frequently, Islam is not taken into consideration at all, in Eric Voegelin’s *Order and History*, for instance (a book which, in Germany, is just being rediscovered)⁷, in Alexander Rüstow’s

- 1 This formulation is, I admit, somewhat flippant and, what is worse, not entirely true. According to the German academic system, Weber had had to submit two studies (“books”) in order to get his professorship: his PhD thesis and a “Habilitationsschrift.”
- 2 Eisenstadt, Shmuel N. (ed.) *Kulturen der Achsenzeit*, 1 (1987) and 2, part 1-3 (1992), Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, with articles on Islam by Lapidus, Gellner, Lazarus-Yafeh, and Levtzion. The preceding volume in English: Eisenstadt (1986) *The origins and diversity of axial age civilizations*, Albany: State University of New York Press, has different contents and contains only one contribution on Islam, a short essay written by M.A. Cook (pp. 476-483) which was not taken over into the German publication. However, Cook still appears among the authors of Schluchter 1987 (below n. 16).
- 3 Hoexter, Miriam/Eisenstadt, Shmuel N./Levtzion, Nehemia (eds.), *The Public Sphere in Muslim Societies*. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- 4 Arnason, Johann P./Wittrock, Björn (eds.) *Eurasian Transformations, Tenth to Thirteenth Century*. Medieval Encounter 10 (Special Issue), Leiden: Brill.
- 5 I had not yet the chance of looking at the last publication by Arnason, Johann/Eisenstadt, Shmuel N./Wittrock/Björn, *Axial Civilizations and World History*, Leiden, Brill 2005.
- 6 For Oswald Spengler cf. now. Radtke, Bernd (forthcoming), “Spengler und der Islam. Nachdenkliches und Persönliches.” In: *Der Islam*.
- 7 Voegelin (2000 ff. [1956 ff.]) *The Collected Works*, Baton Rouge/London: Louisiana State University Press, Vol. 14-18.

Ortsbestimmung der Gegenwart (which, interestingly, is mainly a fruit of Rüstow's Turkish exile after 1933)⁸, or in Alfred Weber's *Abschied von der bisherigen Geschichte* which, written at Heidelberg⁹, both locally and temporally comes closest to Jaspers's *Vom Ursprung und Ziel der Geschichte*¹⁰. If consciously intended such abstention is nothing objectionable at all, for history is always contemporary history, to quote Benedetto Croce¹¹, and historiography therefore nothing else but position-finding concerning the present age (*"Ortsbestimmung der Gegenwart"*). We use to understand ourselves as the product of a rectilinear development in which the "before" counts a lot whereas the "besides" is bound to be neglected. Alfred Weber therefore started with a chapter on the *"Sonderheit des Abendlandes,"* the singularity of the Occident. Even when the topic is actually pursued beyond the borders of Western civilization we rather expect to hear something about Ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia (the "forerunners" of the Greeks) than about historical phenomena of the East which were simultaneous with the West, whether Islamic or Indian, Chinese etc. Encounters were "crusades" more frequently than "dialogues."

I have to admit that the Islamic world is complicated. Max Weber was still not able to find his way through it; what he read in some hurry was not of sufficient quality, and the original sources were not accessible to him¹². When, later on, Leon Festinger took a similar initiative and started with the first volume of what was destined to become a universal history¹³ he convoked a few medievalists and islamacists to a conference at Toledo in order to get a clearer concept of how to go on¹⁴, but then he died prematurely before he could pursue his project. Only rarely did Islamic scholars pay attention to such enterprises. Carl Heinrich Becker, who had been Max Weber's colleague at Heidelberg until 1909, briefly

- 8 Rüstow, Alexander (1950 ff.) *Ortsbestimmung der Gegenwart, eine universal-geschichtliche Kulturkritik*, 1-3, Erlenbach-Zürich: Rentsch. The only hint at an Oriental experience seems to crop up in chapter 17 of volume II: "Untergang der Antike: Barbarisierung des Westens, Byzantinisierung des Ostens." Rüstow's son Dankwart became a Turkologist who taught in the United States.
- 9 Weber, Alfred (1946) *Abschied von der bisherigen Geschichte. Überwindung des Nihilismus?*, Hamburg: Claassen und Goverts. The (first) preface was signed February 1945, at a moment when the war was more or less over at Heidelberg, but when Dresden was still about to be bombed.
- 10 Jaspers (1949), Munich: Piper.
- 11 *History as the Story of Liberty* (1941), p. 19.
- 12 Cf. now the remarks bei Radtke, Bernd (2005) *Neue kritische Gänge. Zu Stand und Aufgaben der Sufikforschung*, Utrecht: M. Th. Houtsma Stichting, pp. 251 ff.
- 13 Festinger, Leon (1983) *The Human Legacy*, New York: Columbia University Press. The book is subdivided into the chapters "The Narrow Path of Evolution" and "The March to 'Civilization'."
- 14 In 1987, if I remember correctly; on the Islamic side, Ira Lapidus and myself had been invited. Festinger did not seem to care so much about Greek Antiquity.

commented upon Oswald Spengler¹⁵, and Bertold Spuler jotted down a few remarks about Arnold Toynbee¹⁶. But there was not much to come afterwards, at least not in Germany. Jörg Kraemer, in his inaugural lecture for his professorship at Erlangen, spoke about the “problem of Islamic cultural history” (1959), but left out Jaspers as well as Max Weber completely¹⁷. When Wolfgang Schluchter wanted to reopen the discussion about Weber’s ideas concerning the world of Islam¹⁸ the majority of the contributors to his volume (the most notable exception being Maxime Rodinson) had to be taken from the English-speaking world where, at that moment, Weber was studied with great enthusiasm¹⁹. German “orientalism” had then long since passed on to the agenda.

In certain respects, however, Jaspers’s *Vom Ursprung und Sinn der Geschichte* was a different case. The reception was less complex. Right from the beginning, the book presented itself in its final and accomplished form; a complete English translation appeared in 1968²⁰, and in 1984 (?) even a Persian one was produced²¹. As in the case of Max Weber (and later on in the ill-fated human rights debate), the Iranians showed a greater affinity to this universalist Western way of thinking than the Arabs²². Moreover, the book was of modest size, which is always an advantage when the reception has to cross a language barrier. It had been written by a philosopher who was neither a historian nor a sociologist and

- 15 Less negatively, by the way, as we might expect today; Becker, Carl Heinrich (1923) “Spenglers Magische Kultur. Ein Vortrag.” ZDMG 77, pp. 255-271. Weber was already dead by then.
- 16 Spuler, Bertold (1952) “Einige Gedankensplitter zu Toynbees Bild der orientalischen Geschichte.” *Der Islam* 30, pp. 214-221, in reality a review of Toynbee’s *Der Gang der Weltgeschichte* (Stuttgart 1950) which was, in German translation, a shorter version of his original work.
- 17 Kraemer (1959) *Das Problem der islamischen Kulturgeschichte*, Tübingen: Max Niemeyer. Max Weber’s brother Alfred is mentioned, but only in a few footnotes.
- 18 Schluchter, Wolfgang (1987) *Max Webers Sicht des Islams*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- 19 Though, as it turned out, not always with sufficient expertise; cf. Schluchter’s long introduction entitled “Überlegungen zu Max Webers Sicht des frühen Islams” (pp. 11-124) where, at the end, he criticizes the approaches of Rodinson, Turner, Cook, and Crone (pp. 85 ff.). Weber’s ideas had been popularized in the English-speaking world through translations which were fragmentary and not always sufficiently precise. Some of the contributors duly quote, however, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft* according to the German original.
- 20 Jaspers (1968) *The origin and goal of history*, New Haven/London: Yale University Press.
- 21 *Agház ve andjám-i tárikh*, Teheran : Intishárát-i Khwárazmí, by Muh. Hasan Lutfi who had already translated other works by Jaspers. The publication bears no date. For 1363 h. š. = 1984 AD I rely on the catalogue of Tübingen University Library. The translation itself seems to have been made before the Islamic revolution.
- 22 In the Arab world, the only hint at the “axial age” I know of is found with the Moroccan historian Abdesselam Cheddadi (2004 *Les Arabes et l’appropriation de l’histoire*, Paris: Sindbad, p. 15). Characteristically, Cheddadi has translated Marshall Hodgson’s *Venture of Islam* into French (Paris 1998).

who looked at world-history as something which “makes sense” and can be grasped in a kind of “morphology,” to use Spengler’s expression. Jaspers shared this outlook with Alfred Weber, his colleague at Heidelberg who understood his “Farewell to history as it used to be” (*Abschied von der bisherigen Geschichte*) as an attempt at overcoming nihilism. What stuck to the reader’s mind was, however, not this optimistic approach as such but the claim that the entire development could be focussed into one particular historical moment, as a “breakthrough” which happened during an Axial Age some centuries before Christ²³. To be precise: What was new here was merely the chronological horizon and the term whereas the idea itself, namely the concept that the history of mankind could be – and had in fact been – changed by one singular event at one particular moment, had always been in existence; it was the crucial point of Christian *Heilsgeschichte*. The specific difference added by Jaspers was that now, according to his chronology, which was the chronology of modernity as it were, the breakthrough was not achieved thanks to the birth of Christ but by Greek tragedy and Old Testament prophecy. Occidental theology had been replaced by German humanism, the kind of humanism offered in the Prussian “humanistische Gymnasium” of the nineteenth century. This is why Islam could not fit. The “Axial Age” could be smoothened so far as to accommodate the Buddha and, with some good will, Zoroaster, even Echnaton and Moses, but never Muhammad. Islam seemed to remain the “heresy” it had always been.

Nobody cared. Jaspers was not particularly religious and consciously avoided religious language; when he talked about the homeland of the Prophets he did not say “the Holy Land” or “Israel” but said “Palestine” instead. As to those who read his book in Germany we may assume that they had had enough of *Heilsgeschichte*, at least in the form favored by the previous political regime; after the enormous loss of cultural heritage, ideally as well as materially, due to the last war, they did not mind seeing the pivot of history being shifted away from where it had been before. The only people who did not feel at ease were the Islamicists. They were not able to join the discussion unless their colleagues decided to change the outlook and the terminology, from “Axial Age” to “axial syndromes” or from “Achsenzeit” in the singular to “Sattelzeiten” in the plural²⁴.

23 “Breakthrough” is a term of this period; Alfred Weber used it a lot. I assume that in anglophone sociology it was originally borrowed from German “Durchbruch.” It is true that in both languages the word is older, but only with regard to military jargon; there it dates back to the First World War (first attested usage in English according to *The Oxford English Dictionary*, sec. ed. 1989, II 517: Daily Express 5. Nov. 1918). The metaphorical usage in the sense of a scientific breakthrough seems not to have appeared, in English, before 1958, and then with regard to the production of H-bombs (ib.).

24 The term “Sattelzeit” is sometimes used by German historians, but I do not know whether there is any discussion going on between them and the “Achsenzeit”-

These are not mere verbal differences. More than ever, the terms are loaded with value judgements. Emotionalization was almost inevitable once the Axial Age was supposed to mark the birth of the modern subject. It is true that this “modern subject” is a rather mysterious being which seems to defy any definition, but what matters is that it is identical with ourselves. Liberty was chosen as its main characteristic; Jaspers conceived the human type who emerged during the Axial Age as the individual who emancipated itself from the tyrannies of the past and developed a hitherto unknown sense of singularity, lonely as yet and therefore tragic in his confrontation with the old structures but nevertheless able to serve as the nucleus of a new elite which became the standard-bearer of a better way of dealing with social and political reality. This was a rather optimistic view of things, but we should not overlook the fact that Jaspers, writing as he was in the aftermath of the Second World War, presented it in a somewhat broken form. His book is full of critical observations about the modern world, a world of machines and guns, of “Technik” as one used to say in Germany at that time, an expression used by Heidegger as well and in the same negative sense. “Technik” did not sound as vague as it does nowadays; what everybody understood by it was not the computer but the atomic bomb and, in connection with it, the impersonality of modern warfare, a gruesome and brutal impersonality which reached its peak at Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Jaspers therefore explicitly denied that his own present time could be considered a second axial age or the fulfillment of the former one²⁵; his own world, he thought, was devoid of humanity (“arm an Menschlichkeit”). Strikingly enough, he did not elaborate on democracy as one of the phenomena of the axial age; we may assume that he knew his classical sources too well in order to believe that the democratic experiment at Athens could serve as a paradigm apt for imitation. And he had, of course, been witness to the Weimar democracy ending up, with the consent of almost the entire population, in a dictatorship. Alfred Weber, too, though saying fare-well to “history as it used to be” put a question-mark behind his message of overcoming Nietzsche’s nihilism. Jaspers does not have much to say about Islam, but it is obvious that when remaining silent about it he does *not* do so because he thinks that the “West” is superior or less dangerous.

When our own generation is confronted with something like the “Axial Age” the reaction is different. Value discussions have had a fulminatory revival in inter-civilizational dispute, and we are even willing to wage war because of values – or, to put it more cautiously, the Western values are left over when all other reasons for going to war have faded away or are no longer fashionable. If, in our days, we exclude Islam from the breakthrough which happened during the Axial

school. Cf. Brunner, O./Conze, W./Koselleck, R. (1972-1997) *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, 1-8, Stuttgart: Klett, Vol. I xv and III 885, n. 427.

25 Jaspers (1949), p. 127.

Age deep in the past we produce a political statement; the Muslims, as it seems then, have missed the evolution to the “modern subject.” If the Western mind emerged from Greek philosophy and Israelite prophecy this sounds as if it had stopped at the banks of the Jordan river. Such a conclusion would, of course, be mere ideology and a misunderstanding for which Jaspers and those who follow his ideas in contemporary scholarship are not responsible. The problem is one of reception as I said. Jaspers himself was quite aware of the polarizing effect which his concept, if applied without caution, could possibly produce. In his view, however, the danger still came from a different angle, for at his time people were not afraid of Islam but of Asia. “Asia” was the term favored in the political discussion of his days; it had been introduced by Ernst Troeltsch who considered the Islamic world as a part of the “vorderasiatische Kulturkreis,” an entity which, according to his philosophy, had nothing in common with Europe and did not allow for any cultural synthesis²⁶. Jaspers therefore warns his reader not to turn Asia into a “metaphysical principle.” Nevertheless he admits that there may be something like the “eternal Asiatic” (“das ewig Asiatische”): despotism, fatalism, and absence of any feeling for history (“Geschichtslosigkeit”)²⁷ – a somewhat careless statement which when applied to the Islamic civilization or to China comes close to sheer nonsense.

Breakthroughs and ruptures. The case of Islam

What can be done in such a situation? Potential misunderstandings are no reason for giving up a theory. But they may instigate us to differentiate. What do we mean when we say that Islam is late? One millenium is certainly not a mere trifle. However, Islam is “late” only as long as we think of it as a religion; if we take “Islam” as a civilization the question is not so easy to decide. Islamic religion has a clear beginning; conversely, Islamic civilization, we may be sure, did not start from a point zero. No civilization does. The new religion brought a rupture whereas the civilization may have derived its strength from its continuity with the past. Jaspers was cautious enough not to think in terms of religion alone, but rather of human self-awareness. However, he focussed on Europe; he assumed a continuity between the axial age and modernity. In doing so he omitted the Middle Ages; in agreement with German Protestant tradition he jumped right away from Jesus to Luther. Therefore he forgot to ask the question whether the Christian Middle Ages represented a rupture; in his view the modern subject simply seemed to have disappeared for a while. A “breakthrough,” however, craves for continuity; the word would be out of place if the phenomenon which “breaks

26 Kraemer (1959; cf. above n. 15), pp. 15 f.

27 Jaspers (1949), p. 96.

through” sinks into the ground again. Could it be then that there was less rupture in the Islamic world than in Medieval Europe?

There was a lot of continuity between Hellenism and Islam, in Umayyad Syria as well as in Abbasid Iraq. Generally speaking, the Islamic world remained close to Antiquity insofar as it was a civilization of lay people whereas the Occident, for some centuries, became a primarily clerical culture. It is true that in Damascus or Baghdad, too, there was always a number of scholars who dealt with religious questions, especially the divine law. But even they continued to live “in this world” whereas in Europe the scholars lived in monasteries – at least until the universities were founded, universities which, in a certain way, had existed in Islam long before²⁸. The Arabs created the only universal empire of Late Antiquity after Alexander and Rome whereas the Germanic onslaught trickled away and merely resulted in the foundation of unstable and usually short-lived governments. It is true that Islam as a religion brought a rupture, but there was enough continuity alongside with it. Even if we define “civilization” in the narrow sense as we tend to do nowadays, as technical comfort, the relationship with Antiquity is evident. One of the symbols of the Islamic town was the public bath, like in ancient Rome; there were dozens of them in medieval Baghdad²⁹ whereas in Europe, up to fairly recent times, they remained an exception. Rupture and continuity are not mutually exclusive. Seen under this aspect Islamic civilization looks like the elder brother of the “West.” Only when the younger brother had overcome his seclusion did he find the strength to engender the “modern subject.”

It is not difficult to find further indications of this continuity. There is, of course, philosophy. European scholarship has always dwelt upon this item; even people who did not care much for Islam did not mind admitting that we owe the knowledge of Aristotle to the Arabs. But in the meantime the perspective has changed. For a long time, Western scholars were primarily interested in reconstructing texts which had been lost in Greek. That means: In a way, they always thought in terms of continuity, but this continuity was, in their view, nothing particularly positive. The question they asked was: Where was it that the human mind opened up, and who had a certain idea first? German classicists wrote fa-

28 Cf. especially the research done by George Makdisi: (1981) *The Rise of Colleges. Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* and (1990) *The Rise of Humanism in Classical Islam and the Christian West, with special reference to scholasticism*, both Edinburgh University Press, books which remain valuable because of the material collected in them even if their overall thesis (the dependence of the West on Islam in these matters) remains controversial or is simply ignored.

29 Grotzfeld, Heinz (1970) *Das Bad im islamischen Mittelalter. Eine kulturgeschichtliche Studie*, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz. In general cf. *Encyclopaedia of Islam* III 139 ff. s. v. “Hammam” (J. Sourdel-Thomine).

mous books entitled “Vom Mythos zum Logos”³⁰ or “Die Entdeckung des Geistes”³¹. The idea of the “axial age” owed its existence to this same question. Only now do we recognize that, in Arabic philosophy, we are not simply dealing with the transmission of a heritage and a mere “translation movement” but with an overall and original adaptation of scholarly material which, one way or the other, had always been available and then was changed or improved in the process. The “Theology of Aristotle” is a case in point, or the text which, later on, in Latin, was called “Liber de Causis.” The best examples, however, stem from outside philosophy proper: from astrology, from medicine, from alchemy, i.e. from those sciences where people were expected to make predictions or diagnoses and where, for mere practical reasons, the ancient errors had to be rectified. This was a kind of knowledge which was of immediate use, and the errors which were detected were best corrected right away in the process of copying, i.e. in the manuscript where the information was found: certain calculations in Ptolemy, for instance, or medical recipes, horoscopes etc. Gerhard Endreß and Remke Kruk, in the title of a recent publication (1997), therefore speak of “the ancient tradition in Islamic Hellenism,” and what they mean by “Islamic Hellenism” is Abbasid Iraq in the second and third century Hijra³².

We should, however, not forget that, as a consequence of the expansion of the Islamic empire, the transmission did not only go via Syria or Ptolemaic and Christian Egypt but also via ancient Iran, taking up the heritage of the Sasanids. Philosophy and the sciences could emerge from the East as well – like the watermelons or the citrus trees which migrated all the way from India to Spain in the Umayyad period³³. The most famous astrologer of the time, Abu Ma’shar, the Albumasar of the Latin tradition, had come to Baghdad from Balkh, i.e. ancient Bactria. Already one century before Islam, during the reign of Khosrau Anoshirwan, a few Greek philosophers, among them Simplicios, the famous pagan commentator of Aristotle, had sought refuge at the Sasanid court which, at that time, was situated in Iraq, at Ctesiphon. Justinian, the Christian Byzantine emperor, had made their life unpleasant in Athens. Up to the time of Biruni and Avicenna the most remarkable achievements in science and philosophy were made in the Eastern part of the Islamic world.

During Late Antiquity, Upper Mesopotamia (the area around Nisibis, Edessa etc.) had been the border-line – and, for a considerable time, the no man’s land –

30 Nestle, Wilhelm (1940) *Vom Mythos zum Logos. Die Selbstentfaltung des griechischen Denkens von Homer bis auf die Sophistik und Sokrates*; Stuttgart: Kröner.

31 Snell, Bruno (1946) *Die Entdeckung des Geistes. Studien zur Entstehung des europäischen Denkens bei den Griechen*; Hamburg: Claassen und Goverts.

32 *The ancient tradition in Christian and Islamic Hellenism*. Leiden: Research School CNWS.

33 Andrew M. Watson (1983) *Agricultural innovation in the early Islamic world*, Cambridge University Press, p. 8 ff. and 42 ff.

between the two superpowers Rome and Iran. This was now a matter of the past; Iran had become the bridge to India. Evidence for this may be found not only in the Indian origin of our “Arabic” numeral system but also in astrology and in medicine. David Pingree was perhaps the scholar whose work was most influential in this respect. But we find examples for the phenomenon even in a field where we would expect them least: in literature. The Greek novel “Metiochos and Parthenope” the original of which is lost reappears in ‘Unsuri’s Persian epic *Wámiq u ‘Adhrá*’ which is partially preserved. All the names in the Persian version are still Greek, with exception of ‘*Adhrá*’ which is Arabic but at the same time a “calque” of *Parthenope* since both words are derived from the same meaning: virginity³⁴. The plot, if looked at with sympathy, seems to give us a presentiment of the “modern subject,” for the heroes of these ancient Persian love stories behave like those we know from Hollywood films. Jaspers would perhaps not have been pleased, but we are less fastidious in this respect, I bet.

One might object that, in contrast to the Persians, the Arabs were less openly receptive of Antiquity in the sphere of belles lettres; as is well-known they never developed any interest in Greek theatre or in Homer’s *Iliad*. But on the other hand their way of producing books, especially in the academic sphere, strongly resembled Hellenistic practice, at least in the beginning. Gregor Schoeler has shown³⁵ that in early Islam we have to differentiate between two sorts of writings: literary texts on the one hand which were destined for a larger public and had a definite and polished, unalterable form, and less elaborate products on the other which resulted from lecture courses, i.e. through direct contact between teacher and disciple, as a kind of aide-mémoire. The terms used by the Greeks in this respect were συγγραμματα and υπομνημα respectively. Plato’s dialogues are συγγραμματα, Aristotle’s treatises were only υπομνηματα since they were not put together into a final corpus until much later, “Literatur der Schule für die Schule” as Werner Jaeger once called it. The same still applies, by the way, to Hegel’s philosophical works; they are merely “Nachschriften,” notes taken by the students. Right from the beginning, book-production was a very conservative cultural phenomenon which could easily be handed on from one civilization to the other.

So much for continuity. The items I mentioned support a working-hypothesis current among Ancient historians in the English-speaking world, at least for the moment: the assumption of a so-called “long” Late Antiquity which includes the Umayyad period, as opposite to decline theories of the Gibbon type. This is, of

34 Richard Davis (2002), *Greek and Persian Romances*, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* XI 339 ff. s. v. “Greece” where this is only one of several examples.

35 First in German (in several articles which were published in the periodical “Der Islam” between 1985 and 1992), but now also in French, in book form: Schoeler (2002) *Ecrire et transmettre dans les débuts de l’islam*; Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

course, mainly a matter of periodization. But periodization is usually not as innocent as it looks. Andrew Watson's book about "Agricultural Innovation in the Early Islamic World" stirred up a discussion about whether the Umayyads could really have been able of such an achievement, for provided they had been mere uncultivated bedouins they would not have contributed to "innovations" with regard to the ancient world, and least so in a field as quintessentially "cultural" as agriculture where the Latin term *cultura* had been derived from. I am not yet sure whether protests of this kind may be regarded nowadays as mere rearguard actions. But at least the term "Late Antiquity" as such is old; it was brought up by the Austrian art historian Alois Riegl (1858-1905)³⁶ and then taken over by the French scholar Henri-Irénée Marrou and others. Today Garth Fowden, Irfan Shahid, Oleg Grabar and others pursue this approach³⁷. Could it be then that the Islamic "rupture" in which we tend to believe more than ever in these days loses some of its obviousness if looked at more closely? Is religion alone a category sufficient for a historiographical model? We have to admit that, in the case of Islam, religion, because of its triumphant emergence, was soon associated with a second factor which symbolized rupture in a very tangible way: Arabic language. Islam had succeeded in creating an empire, and the language of the new revelation, the *lisan 'arabi mubin* of the Quran (sura 16: 103), quickly served as a tool for Arab administration. We should, however, not exaggerate. In the Orient, language was for a long time – up to the twentieth century, as a matter of fact – not a criterion as dominant as it had become for modern European nation-building, and religion, even when presenting itself as a product of strikingly new prophecy, could not live without exegesis and theology. Theology, however, was again a field where rupture quickly mixed with continuity. The result could amount to an astonishing originality.

I choose merely one example: atomism, something which, as "modern subjects," we would not expect in theology at all but which, in early Islamic thought, turned out to be the prevailing model, and not only in theology at that. We are still not entirely sure whether Islam had learnt about atomism from Greece or from India (mainly because there is nobody in today's scholarly world who is equally competent in the three languages and civilizations concerned). But for the moment the balance is tipped in favour of Greece. The influence was not exerted through books but through a subterranean intellectual tradition, a "transmission diffuse" as Paul Thillet would call it. Therefore the point of departure was not

36 Riegl, Alois (1901) *Die spätrömische Kunstindustrie nach den Funden in Österreich-Ungarn*: Vienna: Österreichische Staatsdruckerei, but also already in Riegl (1889) *Die ägyptischen Textilfunde im K. K. Österreichischen Museum*; Vienna: K.K. Österreichisches Museum für Kunst und Industrie.

37 Cf. generally Clover, F.M./Humphreys, R.S. (1989) "Toward a Definition of Late Antiquity." In Clover/Humphreys (eds.) *Tradition and Innovation in Late Antiquity*: Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 3-19.

Democritus who, chronologically speaking, was much too far away, but Epicurus with his theory of *elákhista* (or *minima*, to use Lucretius's term). What happened to Epicurean philosophy in the Orient during the centuries after his death is shrouded in darkness. The Christian Churchfathers did not particularly like him, and when his ideas came up again in Islam they looked rather rudimentary and disjointed; not even his name was any longer connected with them. What remained of the original system was a theory of movement, i.e. locomotion in an atomic, discrete space, and, in addition to that, perhaps the explanation of speech as a chain of isolated, "atomic" sounds which are represented by the letters of the alphabet. Islamic theology, however, when adopting these elements, mixed them with something which had never been associated with them before, namely the idea of a God who, as the creator of everything, keeps nature in his hands. Not that God uses the atoms as pre-existing parts which are available to Him like a *materia prima*, for then He would depend on them. He rather creates the things by His Word, the imperative "Be" as was said in the Quran. But when they have thus come into existence they consist of atoms so that He is free to dissolve them again, simply by taking out the link between the atoms; we call this "death," annihilation etc. And He can add this link again, in order to re-create the same entities a second time; we call this "resurrection." Atomism had become a means of explaining God's omnipotence. Epicurus would not have dreamt of that, and no Christian Churchfather had ever had such an idea. The Islamic theologians had managed to put Epicurus from his feet on his head, as it were.

What I have said so far about the cultural transfer concerned is certainly not the last word in this affair; too much work has still to be done with regard to the "dark centuries" which separate Islam from the heyday of Hellenistic thought³⁸. But it shows at least that religious speculation did not necessarily pursue a completely different track by the mere fact of new prophecy; only people who think in terms of true and false can believe this. What Islam offered to its community was a new "constitution," a Law which regulated the life of the believers and thus furnished "right guidance." Even in this respect, though, i.e. on the social level, there was more continuity than we tend to assume. Let me take, as a final example, the so-called *millet*-system which we know from the Ottoman Empire, i.e. the restricted juridical independence of the Christian and the Jewish communities which harks back to the first centuries of Islam. We are normally told that it is in the Quran, but as a matter of fact it was worked out by the *fuqaha*, 'the jurists. They were obviously confronted with a social reality which they had not

38 For a preliminary summary cf. the chapter on atomism in van Ess, Josef (1997) *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra*, Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, Vol. IV, pp. 459-477; also van Ess (2002) *60 Years After. Shlomo Pines's Beiträge and Half a Century of Research on Atomism in Islamic Theology*, Jerusalem. The Israeli Academy of Sciences and Humanities, Proceedings VIII/2.

created themselves but were simply asked to codify. This reality preceded the Quran; it seems to have originated in Sasanid Iran, during the last two centuries before Islam, the period when the Jews collected the so-called “Babylonian” Talmud and when the Nestorian Church built up its ecclesiastical law, a kind of law, as a matter of fact, which in spite of being “ecclesiastical” exceeded the affairs of the clergy and included everyday life in the community. What we notice here really deserves being called an “innovation;” there is no trace of it in the Hellenistic heritage. On the contrary: The Nestorians were forerunners, not followers, and forerunners insofar as they had to find their own way to “Daseinsbewältigung,” separated as they were from the Byzantine, Greek-speaking High Church. To use Michael Morony’s words, we are dealing with “the part of a general social transformation taking place in southwestern Asia from the fourth to the ninth century (CE)” which, as such, became “the single most important distinction between Muslim and Hellenistic society” (1984: 277 ff.)³⁹.

The Axial Age and other explanatory models – a free market

Would inclusion into an Antiquity of *longue durée* elevate Islam then onto the civilizational highway which led from the Axial Age to modernity? Possibly, though only *con amore*. But if we ask the other way round: Is it necessary for a positive understanding of Islam to assume something like an Axial Age? I am less sure of how to answer. Not so much because I have my doubts about the “modern subject.” Jaspers had them already, and Alfred Weber even more so. When reading the introduction to Weber’s (Alfred, not Max!) “Farewell to History” we get the impression of being confronted with a forecast of globalization. Alfred Weber saw the freedom of the modern subject threatened by the power of anonymous institutions, and what we feel ourselves nowadays seems to differ from this only insofar as, from the late forties onward, German intellectuals were afraid of the “masses.” Ortega y Gasset had set the key (1930), and Elias Canetti was to elaborate on the topic later on (1960) in “Masse und Macht.” It is true that Alfred Weber rather focussed on Nietzsche and the disastrous influence of his *Übermensch*; he does not quote Ortega, and he may have realized that it is difficult to speak of the masses in an age of democracy. But the new spirit has not guarded us from barbarity, neither in the century which has just passed nor in the one which is now in its first years; we can watch war again, and not only that, but also torture and impersonal brutality of all sorts. This may simply be the ongoing reality of history “as it used to be.” Nevertheless: If we indulge in speaking of

39 Morony, Michel G. (1984) *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, Princeton: University Press.

“breakthroughs,” should we not speak of relapses as well? To make things clear: Of relapses which occur in our own civilization, not in those of the others for which we are responsible only in a somewhat derivative sense. And if we admit that U-turns are possible on the royal road to civilization, should we not persuade then ourselves to weigh the pros and cons of differing historiographical models which claim the same universality as does the Axial Age?

There are not many of them nowadays, and I am not in the position to pass a sentence anyway. Goitein once called Islam the “Intermediate Civilization,” a civilization which had a value of its own because “for the first time in history (it) formed a strong cultural link between all parts of the ancient world”⁴⁰. That is to say: Islam engendered a civilization of its own by taking up the heritage of the ancient world. But Goitein pronounced his statement only for the period of “classical” Islam which ended at a certain moment, just as the Christian civilization found its definite shape in the European and Byzantine Middle Ages and “ended” with enlightenment. In both cases the specific moment of the end would be difficult to fix, but we would have to assume that what we see happening in the Islamic world nowadays has its roots in modernity rather than in the “Middle Ages.” Such a periodization would perhaps spare us some problematic value-judgments. Unfortunately, it would also burden us with new chronological problems. But this is our lot as historians.

Or, just in order to continue in this vein: Hans Küng recently published his volume on Islam⁴¹, the last one of a trilogy⁴² which explains the growth of the three Near-Eastern prophetic religions as a sequence of parallel steps following the “paradigm”-concept of Thomas Kuhn⁴³. Küng’s model is unabashedly theological, and its parallelisms are invitations to dialogue. Dialogue was not foreseen in Jaspers’s book; his concept still had a slightly authoritarian ring, and be it only by taking the Occident as the exemplary model. Afterwards the intellectual climate changed, at least for a certain period; there was not only a dialogue of religions, but even of civilizations. Islam took part in it, especially with Iran under Mohammad Khatami’s presidency. Franco Cardini showed in his “Europe and Islam. The History of a Misunderstanding” to what extent Western historiography was affected by this approach⁴⁴. Küng for his part has no place for the Axial Age. Nevertheless he, too, starts with a symbol far back in the past, a figure

40 Goitein, Shlomo Dov (1963) “Between Hellenism and Renaissance. Islam, the Intermediate Civilization.” *Islamic Studies* (Karachi) 2, pp. 217-233, see p. 218 f. and 222. Reprinted in Goitein (1966) *Studies in Islamic History and Institutions*, Leiden: Brill, pp. 54-70.

41 Küng, Hans (2004) *Der Islam. Geschichte, Gegenwart, Zukunft*, München: Piper.

42 Cf. Küng (1991) *Das Judentum* and Küng (1994) *Das Christentum. Wesen und Geschichte*, both München: Piper.

43 Kuhn, Thomas S. (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University Press.

44 Cardini, Franco (1999) *Europa e Islam. Storia di un Malinteso*. Rome-Bari: Laterza.

which preceded the Axial Age by centuries: Abraham. We are thus confronted with a different foundation myth. Abraham had nothing to do with the “modern subject;” on the other hand he could be regarded as the “father” of the three monotheistic religions. He could, of course, play this symbolic role all the more easily since we know even less about him than about the Axial Age. But this is not the point. “Father” means here: the person whom all three religions equally venerate, the point of orientation where they would meet when they were to retrace their footprints into the past. Küng became acquainted with this idea when he attended the second Vatican Council; the concept had been developed by an Orientalist, Louis Massignon, and Father Georges Anawati, another Orientalist and an Egyptian at that, took care of its being inserted into the Declaration about the Muslims. When Massignon, a French Catholic, chose Abraham as a key symbol he had the Quran in mind rather than the Old Testament, and Islam was integrated into an extended vision of salvation history where it ceased to be the outsider who was one millenium late. Certainly, Küng’s work has not met with unanimous assent, and Thomas S. Kuhn’s “change of paradigm” is, as far as I can see, no longer received with a heartily welcome either, at least not in the field it was originally intended for, i.e. history of science. But for a fruitful discussion, and as a contrast to Jaspers’s crypto-Protestant model, Küng’s approach is worth some reflection.

And let us not forget, for a change, the Muslims themselves. What would they say if they were allowed (and ready) to have a word in these deliberations? They would, of course, have as many different views as we have. But let us try to think in the vein of the traditional Islamic “Geschichtsbild” and then imagine what would happen if they were to universalize it the way we are used to. They would probably interpret Muhammad’s historical appearance as a “break-through,” a radical change of perception accompanied by a strong “pathos of negation,” to use Nietzsche’s expression. Seen against the background of Eastern Christianity Islam would then be a kind of reformation, the first reformation which hit Christianity. For according to the image which Muhammad had of himself, he had not brought something entirely new but rather come with an old message in order to purge Christianity and Judaism from their aberrations. He believed that whoever had preceded him as a prophet had established his own covenant with God and that these covenants had successively been broken by those to whom they had been addressed. “Covenant” is a concept taken from the Old Testament; the Christians had made it malleable by assuming an Old and a New Covenant, and now the Quran claimed the same concept for a third Prophet’s message⁴⁵. This idea, which was not without some inherent logic,

45 Cf. sura 57:8 and the parallels mentioned in Paret, Rudi (1971) *Der Koran. Kommentar und Konkordanz*, Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, p. 470; C.E. Bosworth in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, sec. ed. VII 187 f. s. v. *Mithak*; G. Böwering in: *Encyclopedia of the Qur’an* I 464 ff. s. v. *Covenant*. For the connection with hebr. *berit* cf. Wansbrough, John (1977) *Quranic Studies*, Oxford University Press, pp. 8 ff.

would even survive a change of terminology, for even when Christian theologians of our days prefer talking about a “First” and a “Second” Covenant instead of an Old and a New one (or a First and a Second Testament) it would be still possible to ask: If God really made two wills, why not three? Under this premiss and in the context of salvation history, the almost total disappearance of Christianity in the areas occupied by Islam could then be interpreted as a providential act. As a matter of fact it would not be far-fetched to assume that Christianity had lost a great deal of its spiritual vigour in the Orient when Islam set on its triumphant advance. The bitter struggle about coining the correct formula for incarnation and trinity had visibly split the community, and many a convert to Islam may have left his old religion because he had ceased experiencing Christianity as anything else but a conglomerate of at least three different churches. Christian theology had ended up in a deadlock and in constant strife; the Quran was quite aware of this danger⁴⁶. This may have also been the reason why in Islam the speculative theologians never played the role they had played in Byzantium during the centuries after Constantine.

This is only a thought experiment. But we cannot deny that Christianity, apart from the rather reduced Byzantine territory where it survived until 1453, became a phenomenon of the Roman West. In Europe Islam never presented itself as a reform movement but simply as a heresy. Yet when Western Christians had to define their historical locus they were in a rather awkward position. Squeezed in between Judaism and Islam they had to pretend, against Judaism, that they represented a more developed stage of religion, as people of a new “covenant,” whereas against Islam they were forced to claim that whatever was new in the sphere of religion was wrong. Theologically speaking they had to put much emphasis on faith as such, for when asked for their ultimate criterion of truth they could not but point to a miracle: resurrection. Compared to this, a prophetic message was a simpler thing; prophecy could always be justified by its mere contents, as a rational necessity, whereas resurrection could not. Resurrection had originally been the expedient of the “Urgemeinde” to get away from the sad fact that Jesus had died on the cross, but when their belief survived just for this reason they had to stick to it for ever. In order to further explain it they had to insist, in one way or the other, on the divine nature of Christ, and the concept of incarnation then led them to the dogma of trinity. This sequence of ideas was as inevitable as it was irrational. Islam laid bare the axiomatic character of the procedure and could therefore claim having brought clarity again, “knowledge” (*‘ilm*) according to the vocabulary of the Quran, as opposite to mere “opinion” (*ẓann*) which had characterized the period of ignorance (*al-jahiliyya*). As a matter of fact, Muslims never speculated about the tension between knowledge and belief;

46 Sura 11:118 f. or 42:8; cf. Y. Friedmann in: EQur I 538 f. s. v. *Dissension* (also S.H. Griffith, ib. I 312 ff. s. v. *Christians*).

this topic remained a privilege of medieval Christian thought. Admittedly miracles were in the long run accepted in Islam, too, but they did not become as indispensable as in Christianity. Thus Christianity, though suffering badly in the East, could survive in the West, in Europe, where the new religion spread among a young and rather unexperienced population for whom miracles were not a metaphysical problem. The Muslims, on the contrary, stood in a long and uninterrupted tradition of sophistication, at least in the urban areas of their empire which already during Late Antiquity had been the intellectually prominent part of the Roman world.

Would this tell us anything about the “modern subject”? The modern subject emerged when, due to the onslaught of enlightenment, the European Christians gave up their belief in miracles. But this “breakthrough” equally affected the foundations of Christian dogmatics. In order to make up for this defeat the “West” turned towards ethics, a move which the Christians shared, in the nineteenth century, with European Judaism. Ethics lent itself to be presented on a rational basis; in our days human rights are the best example. When reacting against this change of paradigm the Muslims never lost the impression that the so-called enlightenment they were now supposed to learn from the West was already found in the Quran. The discussions which ensued from this were, and are, full of misunderstandings and therefore not void of tension and aggression. And ethics can, of course, never be the same as religion.

Are “Gedankenexperimente” of this kind⁴⁷ legitimate or even useful? Perhaps insofar as they help us to discover that historical models, wherever they come from, are based on “Vor-Urteile,” pre-judices in the Heideggerian sense. We should not take them too seriously; they may turn out to be mere chimeras. Nor should we, however, demonize them. All models are primarily a game of our intellect, axiomatic, but not dangerous unless they ossify into an ideology. They widen our horizon and tend to engender valuable detailed studies, but it may happen that the more we know about them the less we trust them. What is important is that they are indispensable for any research, they are the pattern according to which we select or interpret what we consider to be the “facts.” We are then not necessarily simply giving a meaning to something meaningless (“Sinngebung des Sinnlosen”) as Theodor Lessing put it shortly after the First World War when people like Troeltsch (1865-1923) or Spengler (1880-1936) were still alive⁴⁸. Talking about the sense of history, its “origin and aim,” rather contributes to the discovery of our civilizational identity. We should only retain a critical distance:

47 Like “breakthrough,” the term “thought experiment” seems to be of German origin. In an English context it was still used in its German form in 1958 (cf. *The Oxford English Dictionary* ²VI 417 s. v.). There is, though, a first attested usage of the English parallel (“thought experiment”) already in 1945 (ib. XVII 985).

48 Lessing, Theodor (1919) *Geschichte als Sinngebung des Sinnlosen oder Die Geburt der Geschichte aus dem Mythos*. Revised edition ⁴1927 Leipzig: Reclam.

Any civilizational identity is neither static nor universal, and the freedom of the “modern subject” should not be used to impose own axioms on others but rather stimulate us, in a self-referential way, to continuously check what, in all sincerity, we still have to offer to the world. “Historical significance is one of the most difficult concepts to treat or to measure”⁴⁹, and breakthroughs are perhaps not for ever. Axial syndromes are probably easier to verify than the Axial Age.

49 Morony, Michael G. (1989) “Teleology and the Significance of Change.” In F.M. Clover/R.S. Humphreys (eds.) *Tradition and Innovation in Late Antiquity*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 21-26; cf. p. 25.

