
Chapter 4

The Emergence of Islam as a Case of Cultural Crystallization: Historical and Comparative Reflections

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The concept of cultural crystallization (first introduced, if I am not mistaken, by Björn Wittrock) has been used in the context of comparative historical-sociological research, most prominently in debates about the Axial Age and the civilizations that took off from it, but also in connection with the question whether comparable transformations occurred at other times and in other settings (see especially Wittrock 2005; also the discussion in Arnason/Eisenstadt/Wittrock 2005). Here I will not attempt to define it in precise and detailed terms; I will treat it as an orientative device, serving to link together several key themes. Most obviously, it refers to the formation of distinctive cultural orientations or premises, more precisely: clusters of such orientations, interconnected but often conducive to internal tensions and interpretive conflicts; innovative transformations of religious traditions are prime cases in point, but not the only ones. But the concept also implies an institutional dimension: a translation of cultural patterns into institutional frameworks, not to be understood as standing above or outside social change, but as giving specific directions to it. Finally, the interplay of cultural and institutional factors involves specific relationships and more or less effective coalitions between intellectual and political elites; at the same time, traditions in the sense of enduring frameworks for discourse, interpretation and dispute take shape.

Civilizational dimensions

So far, I have outlined the idea of cultural crystallization at its most elementary level without any particular reference to civilizational analysis. What happens when we apply it to that field? Since any discussion of the civilizational dimension must start with the point that we are dealing with large-scale-units and long-term trajectories, the first answer that suggests itself is that cultural crystallization on the civilizational level – i.e. the formation of civilizations, or the transformations radical enough for us to speak of a new civilization – enacts the model summed up above on a particularly large scale. But on closer inspection,

and if some note is taken of variations, it becomes possible to suggest differentiations that will turn out to have some bearing on Islam in comparative perspective. Two considerations of this kind seem especially relevant.

There is, first, a marked contrast between different patterns of the relationship between cultural orientations and institutional frameworks. There are cases where cultural orientations are articulated, elaborated and transformed within enduring civilizational complexes, whose institutional formations and power structures in particular evolve alongside the cultural and intellectual changes. China would seem to be the most obvious example. On the other hand, there are historical experiences of the kind Talcott Parsons had in mind when he coined the concept of ‘seedbed societies’ (which we may take to be an echo of the axial model). Here cultural orientations of a particularly innovative kind emerge in settings that do not allow full realization of their institutional potential, and the resulting cultural legacies are later appropriated by other societies on a broader scale. Parsons wanted to put both Ancient Greece and Ancient Israel into this category. It seems to fit the latter case much better: here the discrepancy between a cultural breakthrough and a restricting social and geopolitical context is at its most marked. In the short run and in the original environment, the Jewish invention (or reorientation; here I will bypass the debate as to which concept is most adequate) of monotheism found a very limited institutional expression: after the destruction of the monarchy and an interlude in exile, it became the foundation for a small hierocratic community, later exposed to cultural and political pressures from Hellenistic civilization, and to internal conflicts resulting from that; there seems to have been an enduring tension between the ongoing religious development and the power structure oscillating between theocratic and monarchic models. A more comprehensive and far-reaching institutional dynamic, generated by monotheism, could only unfold after further transformations of the religious premises in new socio-cultural settings. The Greek case is less clear-cut: here the distinctive cultural orientations were inseparable from – indeed largely identical with – a very specific institutional context, the polis and the corresponding type of city-state culture. But this civilizational complex was a particularly fragile and conflict-prone one, torn between rival and incompatible developmental paths (not just Athens and Sparta, but also Corinth and Syracuse, and perhaps other *polis* communities may be seen as representatives of such directions), and in the end, its self-destructive dynamics paved the way for absorption into more composite civilizational formations – first the perhaps mislabelled Hellenistic and then the Roman one – where cultural aspects of the Greek legacy had a much more formative impact than the strictly political ones. There is thus at least a grain of truth in Parsons’s thesis.

But if, with these two examples in mind, we take another look at the Chinese case, the contrast may seem less stark than it appeared at first sight. The most innovative and also the most conflict-ridden period in the history of Chinese civilization, the Age of the Warring States (roughly the third quarter of the last mil-

lennium BCE), saw the emergence of sharply divergent intellectual currents as well as new strategies for state-building, some of which represented a more overt break with the traditions of an existing civilizational complex than others. The current – or rather the combination of currents – that won out was a rationalized version of traditionalism, centred on a restoration of sacred rulership and a re-elaboration of the notions of intertwined cosmic and social orders that served to underpin and transfigure it. But for some time, the relationship between cultural orientations and institutional frameworks had been more uncertain and contested than at any other moment, before or after, in the history of Chinese civilization.

To sum up, it might be more useful to conceptualize this issue in terms of a continuum of varying relationships, rather than a dichotomy of polar contrasts. The distinction I have in mind is perhaps best described as one between civilizational patterns and civilizational complexes, and the historical connections between them vary in significant ways. The embodiment of civilizational patterns in civilizational complexes takes more circuitous forms and involves more long-drawn-out processes in some cases than others; conversely, some breakthroughs to new civilizational patterns occur in situations less favourable to implementation on the multiple levels of social life than others.

The second issue to be considered has to do with intercivilizational relations and their role in the emergence of new civilizational formations. If we accept that recent work on global history has shown interactions and exchanges of all kinds, often over long distances, to have been a much more significant factor in the destinies of human societies than earlier historians tended to assume, we must conclude that it has become implausible to think of any civilizational formation (in the sense of *Hochkultur* – I am using the concept in a sense that restricts it to history after the beginnings of civilization in the singular) in terms of complete isolation. But the role of intercivilizational contacts is very much more salient and significant in some cases than others. It seems to have been least important – at any rate least evident – in the case of pre-Columbian American civilizations (the Meso-American and Andean complexes). As for the Eurasian or Afro-Eurasian macro-region, recent scholarship has thrown light on early contacts between China and more western regions. They were clearly more significant than earlier accounts had suggested. But it still seems legitimate to describe the early trajectory of Chinese civilization as relatively isolated by comparison with other parts of Eurasia: there was, from very early on, a Mediterranean-Levantine-Iranian-South Asian zone of intensified intercivilizational contacts. At the beginning, the Mesopotamian complex – clearly more central than any other – develops together with more derivative but not merely imitative peripheral formations around it. At a much later stage, the intertwined composite civilizations of Hellenism (Assmann 2000: 277) argues, to my mind persuasively, that this is a bit of a misnomer) and the Roman Empire emerge out of a long history of intercivilizational encounters. One further implication of that development should be noted: the question of the relationship between civilizations and historical regions comes to

the fore. As civilizational unity becomes more problematic, regional unity becomes by the same token more salient.

Let us now try to situate the emergence of Islam and Islamicate civilization (I prefer this term, coined by Marshall Hodgson, to 'Islamic civilization') within this twofold frame of reference. It happened at the very core (or, more precisely, through the interaction of a core and an inner periphery) of the above-mentioned zone of intensified contacts. And as I will try to show, it represents a specific version of the relationship between civilizational patterns and civilizational complexes.

A first glance at the historical record would suggest that we are dealing with a prime case of cultural crystallization – indeed of multiple crystallizations. At the religious level, a new – and, on its own terms, definitive – version of monotheistic prophecy crystallized through demarcation from the pre-existing ones. It seems clear that the radicalized monotheistic message was intended as an alternative to the troubles and schisms that Christology had produced within the Christian Church (Fowden [1993, 2005] has stressed this point); by the same token, it drew in some ways closer to Judaism, and perhaps especially to the Judeo-Christian currents (how important that affinity was seems to be a matter of debate among scholars in the field); but notwithstanding the surviving elements of primordialism (S.N. Eisenstadt has drawn attention to this aspect), the message was not to be confined within ethnic boundaries. Second, this religious crystallization became the foundation for a new civilizational formation – whether we prefer the label 'Islamic' or 'Islamicate,' there is no denying the relatively rapid emergence of this new civilization, and its internal unity is so pronounced that it seems more apposite to speak of a civilizational synthesis than a composite civilization. Third, there is a geocultural side to the process that merits separate mention: as Hodgson noted, Islamicate civilization imposes for the first time a cultural unity on the Ancient Near East, or the 'Nile-to-Oxus region,' as he preferred to call it. The character of a whole region – the most central of the Old World – is thus re-defined. Moreover, the civilizational patterns that established this new unity also proved uniquely capable of expansion into other parts of Afro-Eurasia. Islamicate civilization became the premodern globalizing civilization par excellence. Finally, this whole crystallizing process was, on the level of the self-understanding of the new civilization, condensed into a narrative that seems best described as sacred history. This point can be conceded to the sceptics that cast doubt on the traditional accounts of Islamic origins – without accepting all the conclusions that the more radical sceptics want to draw from it. It does not follow that this narrative results from a wholesale suppression of the record and the construction of an imaginary alternative; there is no a priori answer to questions about the relationship of sacred history to historical experience.

At this point, it may be useful to digress briefly and note a few theoretical and methodological problems with the line of argument proposed by the radical revisionists. First, they like to present their approach as a result of progressive

and logical radicalization of the critical stance that goes back to Goldziher and Schacht (this is, for example, apparent in one of the most recent exercises in this genre, Nevo and Koren 2003). But this divorce of critical logic from substantive issues will not do. There is, to borrow a formulation from Said Arjomand's unpublished paper on theoretical issues in discussions about early Islam, no straight path from the 'higher criticism' pioneered by Goldziher and the 'higher deconstruction' practiced by the radical revisionists. Second (as I have already hinted), their sweeping claims about the construction and closure of sacred history bring in strong and unexamined theoretical assumptions about cultural genres and their interrelations. Third, when developing an alternative account of Islamic origins, they seem to face a dilemma: They either leave the question of the historical background to the assumed large-scale rewriting of history unanswered, or – if they try to answer it – they come up with historical scenarios of such complexity that that it becomes increasingly difficult to accept their disappearance from cultural memory (the latter would seem to apply to the Nevo-Koren version).

However, we do not face a choice between traditionalism and radical revisionism. Not only is there a large body of work produced by moderate revisionists; there are also meta-critiques of the revisionist critique, reacting against what they see as unwarranted scepticism about the traditional sources, but sufficiently responsive to issues raised by the revisionists to take the debate to a new level. A good example of this genre is Fred M. Donner's study of early Islamic historiography (Donner 1998). On the basis of detailed comparison of the Quran with other early sources (especially *hadith* records), he argues that the Quran must be accepted as an early and singular text, rather than a part of a broader ex post construction of sacred history. This is obviously not the same line as that taken by one of the most respected Western translators of the Quran, who claims in a preface that "we have no reason to believe that the whole Quran contains a single verse that does not come from Muhammad" (Paret 2001 [1966]: 5). Donner's argument has to do with the relative chronology rather than the authorship of the Quran: it seems clear that the acculturation of monotheism in Arabia was a project pursued from many quarters, and it does not seem inconceivable that the canonized text incorporated borrowings from rival prophets who were at the same time portrayed as precursors or rebels. But given the nature and limits of the evidence, it is very unlikely that such questions will ever be settled, and it is more important to assess the evidence for prophetic innovation and authority prior to conquest on an imperial scale. Donner also analyzes the early Islamic transition from ahistorical piety to historical consciousness, and concludes that the overall picture is more nuanced than either traditionalists or radical revisionists would have it: On the one hand, memories and records of the crucial early decades became a battlefield for rival factions and interpretations, rather than a tabula rasa for orthodox constructs; on the other hand, agreement on key themes and central events among otherwise conflicting camps is significant enough to provide some footholds for historical inquiry. A critical history, as distinct from a

wholesale rejection of the tradition, is possible, but the results so far are piecemeal and provisional.

Another illustration of the metacritical approach is Garth Fowden's study of the ruins of Qusayr Amra, seen as a key to the court culture of the Umayyad period (Fowden 2004). Here the stated intention is to confront the literary sources with other kinds of evidence (excavations, inscriptions and monuments), and the results suggest a complex cultural synthesis in the making: "In preferring an effective rearrangement of preexisting elements, sealed by a process of appropriation to itself and denial to others, rather than some more thoroughgoing originality, early Islam was conforming to a model of transition that is common enough in cultural history. Under the Umayyads it conditioned the ideology of kingship quite as much as the biography of the prophet" (ibid.: 307). The Umayyad phase of this formative process was more open to multiple options than the pattern that took shape after 750. In a more speculative vein, Fowden conjectures that "congruities of Mediterranean and pre-Islamic Arab culture" (ibid.: 310) may have been of some importance for further acculturation in the wake of conquest.

Excursus: Weber and Eisenstadt on Islam

Drawing on all this work, it may be possible to sketch a picture of the Islamic crystallization that will amplify – and in some respects modify – the one outlined above. But before moving in that direction, let us take a look at earlier Western approaches to the field. Although Western scholars could never take the traditionalist account at absolute face value (to do so would have amounted to conversion), its indirect influence is evident in interpretations that stress the formation of Islam as a self-contained religious world-view and civilizational model in Arabia prior to the conquest of the Near East. The most extreme version of that view can be found in the work of the anthropologist most interested in the comparative analysis of civilizations, Alfred Kroeber (1952: 381): he refers to Islam as a civilization born in the head of one man, the prophet Muhammad, and goes on to suggest that something analogous might have happened if Nazi Germany had won the second world war, and Hitler thus been enabled to impose his vision of a new world order. Nobody else seems to have gone quite as far as that; but on an altogether different level, there are echoes of the traditionalist account in Max Weber's comments on Islam; and given the importance of his work for comparative civilizational analysis, a brief outline of basic assumptions may be useful.

As is well known, Weber planned but did not write a comparative study of Islam as a world religion and its impact on social life, with particular reference to its economic ethic and the preconditions for capitalist development. Recent attempts to piece together Weber's picture of Islam have shown that the problem is not simply due to an unfinished project. At a deeper level, Weber's image of Islam is internally fragmented, and this explains the absence of a comprehensive

civilizational profile comparable to his analyses of India and China. In his concluding reflections on the two latter cultural areas and their place in world history, he draws a geocultural boundary that separates India and China from what he calls the Occidental-Near Asian (*vorderasiatisch*) world. Although this enlarged version of the West has something to do with geographical and ecological settings, the most salient unifying factor is obviously the predominance of monotheistic religions that can be traced back to a common source. On this view, Islam should be included in the 'greater West' which Weber contrasts with East and South Asia. But when it comes to the comparative analysis of traditional domination and its structural variants, he describes Islamic feudalism as 'Oriental.' This shift reflects an ambiguous view of Islamic religious orientations as such. Weber's most focused analysis of early Islam begins with the claim that Muhammad's retreat from Mecca to Medina changed the whole character of his religious vision: the eschatological religiosity of "pietistic urban conventicles" mutated into a "national Arabic warrior religion" (Weber 1968, 2: 624). When the community organized around this new message embarked on expansion and conquest, it was bound to move further away from its original stance. The commitment to holy war was rooted in this-worldly aspirations to wealth, power and prestige; the other world was portrayed as a "soldier's sensual paradise" (ibid.: 625). Weber concludes that the very idea of salvation in the ethical sense is alien to this triumphant form of Islam, and that the foundations of its economic ethic are "purely feudal" (ibid.: 624).

But why should this uninhibited warrior religion be compared (as Weber does in the last section of his *Sociology of Religion*) to the world religions that centre on ethical visions of salvation? Conquest alone would not be enough for Islam to constitute a world religion in the emphatic Weberian sense. Weber hints at an answer when he refers to elements of ethical religiosity in early Islam, but adds that they were overshadowed by the dominant warrior ethos (ibid.: 474). The marginalized ethical message seems more or less identical with the eschatological religiosity that Muhammad abandoned when he left Mecca. This may be taken to show that Weber did not simply equate Islam with a warrior religion; it is less clear whether he saw the ethical potential as relevant to later developments, or identified any specific socio-cultural forces a representative of its spirit. Sufism does not qualify for that role: it was, in Weber's opinion, of Indian origin and entered the Islamic world through Persia. It did not bring Islamic societies any closer to the distinctive urban religiosity of Judaism and Christianity; "for Islam, the city had only political importance" (ibid.: 626) – but as a centre of patrimonial rule, not as a site of collective autonomy. The implications are clear: for Weber, urban religiosity never became a serious rival to the dominant warrior version of Islam. In view of this background, Weber's approach to Islamic feudalism is easier to understand. There is in fact – if we follow Weber's description – nothing distinctively Islamic about this institutional complex. Its only significant connection with religious traditions is historical: the early and irreversible

empowerment of a military elite through a warrior religion. Military rulers and their governing associates respond to the omnipresent and self-perpetuating problems of patrimonial power structures – the intertwined dilemmas of centralization and decentralization – in distinctive ways. More precisely, mercenary armies and tax farming are the cornerstones of the particular kind of feudalism that develops under these conditions. It differs markedly from the complex “cosmos of rights and duties” (ibid., 3: 1070) characteristic of Occidental feudalism. Together with the structural features of Islamic law (an uncontested predominance of sacred law, obstructing rationalization of the secular component as such), the political structures based on this Oriental feudalism were – as Weber saw it – the most salient obstacles to capitalist development.

Weber’s observations on later Islamic states – from Seljuks to Ottomans – have been analyzed in detail, and there is no need for further comments. For present purposes, a brief glance at his much less explicit view of the earliest period may be more useful. In terms of the framework outlined above, this period represents the phase of crystallization. It might seem gratuitous to dwell on obsolete ideas, conclusively rejected by later scholarship. Weber was dependent on sources available at the time, and probably less familiar with the most advanced research than in the fields of Indian and Chinese studies. But his errors are instructive: they provide a particularly striking counterpoint to perspectives emerging from current debates. To begin with the question of religion and expansion, Weber does not deny that religious energies were mobilized for the purpose of conquest, but he insists on their complete subordination to the usual worldly goals of warfare (to use the language of his own formulation, this would be an extreme case of material interests absorbing ideal ones), and to make this view more plausible, the pre-conquest politicization that took place in Medina is construed as a break with eschatological origins. In short, salvationist visions do not enter into Weber’s account of the early Islamic conquests. As for the results of the conquests, it comes as no surprise that he does not deal with the specific imperial formations of early Islam. This is in line with the general neglect of empires as such in his sociology of domination: they vanish into the patrimonial night where all cows are black. His comments on the two early imperial dynasties are more interesting. The Umayyads appear as representative of a feudal aristocracy that acapitalized on the conquests, and the only ethical motive mentioned in connection with the Arab resistance to them is the “asceticism of the warriors’ camp” (ibid., 2: 627 – translation amended: the quoted text mistranslates *Kriegslager* as “military caste”). The power struggles that accompanied the rise and fall of a dynasty were thus – on Weber’s view – essentially due to internal differentiation of the warrior elite that had spearheaded the conquests. Neither the problem of reconciling a universal religion with ethnic privileges, nor the dynamic of adaptation to pre-existing cultural patterns in the conquered territories seem to count as explanatory factors. But when it comes to the Abbasids, external influences are as overwhelming as they are absent from references to the Umayyads.

For Weber, the Abbasid revolution is nothing less than a transplantation of “the caesaropapist principles of the Zoroastrian Sasanids [...] into Islam in the name of a return to the sacred tradition.” (ibid., 2: 819) In retrospect, we can see the two extremes as pointers to a problem that Weber did not raise: the role of inter-civilizational encounters in the phase of crystallization.

S.N. Eisenstadt’s interpretation of Islam (Eisenstadt 1987), although very condensed, is more systematic than Weber’s, and the following discussion will not attempt to cover all its aspects. The main question to be considered is whether Eisenstadt’s critique of Weber leads to more adequate perspectives on the phase of crystallization. Eisenstadt begins with two critical observations on Weber’s civilizational analysis in general and his understanding of Islam in particular; in both cases, basic conceptual problems are aggravated by inherent difficulties in theorizing Islam, as well as by shortcomings of Weber’s approach to that particular field. First, a levelling conception of premodern societies (most evident in general definitions of traditional action and traditional domination) prevents Weber from grasping the meaning of and impact of the radical cultural transformations which Eisenstadt first defined with reference to the Axial Age, and later in terms of axiality as a type of cultural framework for social life. To cut a long story short, the axial turn occurs in varying contexts at different moments, but the common pattern is a new way of distinguishing between higher and lower orders of reality and translating such distinctions into visions of social order. This is the background to the formation of world religions, and Islam may be seen as a late case of axial transformation, superimposed on the results of several earlier ones (Greek, Judaic, Christian and Iranian). The axial perspective would thus be pre-eminently relevant to Islamic history; but as we have seen, Weber’s view of the conquests that created an Islamic world was very far removed from such considerations. Second, Eisenstadt criticizes Weber for failing to distinguish between religion as one complex of social meanings and practices, and religion as an articulation of cultural premises for a whole civilizational pattern (to use a more Durkheimian language, this point has to do with the difference between institutional and meta-institutional aspects of religion). Although the criticism applies to the whole project of comparative sociology of world religions, Eisenstadt stresses its particular importance for understanding Islam. As he argues, a comparison of the classical phase of expansion with some later ones will highlight the difference: in the first case, a dominant civilizational pattern was imposed on a whole region (which in due course became the Islamic heartland), before mass conversion to Islam marginalized other religions, whereas – for example – the diffusion of Islam in Southeast Asia was more a matter of religious beliefs and practices spreading without transforming the whole civilizational pattern, and often taking syncretic forms through adaptation to indigenous traditions. This argument is convincing, and one might add that Eisenstadt’s point has an obvious bearing on some more specific aspects of the classical phase. Neither the historically marginal but intrinsically interesting attempts of

philosophers to develop alternative readings of revealed truths, nor the more massive Ismaili challenge to established Islam (briefly discussed below), can be properly understood without reference to the civilizational dimensions of religion.

But there was yet another side to the phase of crystallization. The civilizational impact of an expanding religion was, at this stage, inseparable from imperial power. The imperial formations of early Islam – those ruled by the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties – were essential to the crystallizing process: their role exemplifies the more general point that the civilizational potential of religious traditions and transformations is most effectively realized in conjunction with political structures. However, Eisenstadt does not pursue this part of the question. After hinting at a general affinity between axial cultural premises and imperial forms of power, he goes on to note that only “very few Islamic regimes – the Abbasids, the Fatimids, less so the Safavids, but most of all the Ottomans – developed imperial characteristics; and even so, they remained imperial regimes of the traditional kind” (ibid.: 344). This somewhat puzzling formulation calls for comment. In light of Eisenstadt’s objections to Weber, the term ‘traditional’ should probably be taken to denote the archaic patterns that precede axial changes, and thus to suggest an enduring tendency of Islamic empires to lag behind their cultural-religious self-definitions. But apart from the omission of the Umayyads, the list obscures the fact that the empires in question related to the religious and civilizational context in different ways. The Abbasids were directly and decisively involved in the formative phase of a civilizational complex, and the Fatimids belong – as will be seen – to a later chapter of the same story, whereas the Safavids and the Ottomans rose to power in a very different historical environment.

Beyond traditionalism and revisionism

To continue the argument signalled above, it seems that analyses of the more constructively revisionist kind, combined with other work, have now made it possible to distinguish between the intra- and extra-Arabian phases of crystallization. To begin with the first phase, it seems clear that Patricia Crone’s re-evaluation of the role of long-distance trade – and the corresponding impact of commercialization on Arabian society – has been widely accepted (cf. Crone 1987; this was a much more disciplined kind of revisionism than Crone and Cook 1977). To downgrade that factor is, by the same token, to shift attention to the intertwining of political and religious ones. The intra-Arabian emergence of Islam was clearly a case of state formation, but of a peculiarly self-cancelling kind: it involved the mobilization of nomad warriors for expansion and conquest, but did not result in durable state structures within the peninsula. It took place in a broader geopolitical context: against the background of inter-imperial rivalry

(Roman vs. Iranian) that in the 6th century CE had affected the peninsula more deeply than before, and in response to a conjuncture that had left the two imperial centres more vulnerable to counter-challenge from the periphery than before. To stress these political aspects is not to reduce the religious factor to an epiphenomenon of state formation. The whole record suggests that the religious mutation had a history and a dynamic of its own, but any reconstruction of details is problematic. A cautious revisionist concludes that “we can only accept as an established fact that a prophet, among others, preached Abrahamic monotheism in an Arabic milieu, in a social context marked by fragmentation, weak integration, and against organic polytheism” (Décobert 1991: 42). ‘Organic polytheism’ is a somewhat puzzling expression, and should not be taken as a reference to a pristine archaic religious culture (among other things, G.W. Bowersock 1990 draws attention to Hellenistic influences reflected in restructurings of Arabian polytheism). The culminating phase of the monotheistic turn also linked up with earlier moves in the same direction, and echoes of rivalries persisting on the eve of expansion are preserved in the record of false claimants to prophecy after Muhammad’s death.

But perhaps the most interesting – and most recently recognized – aspect of the intra-Arabian crystallization is the role played by the South Arabian civilization, centred in today’s Yemen. Jan Retsö has discussed this question in various recent writings (2003, 2005); the following remarks draw on his work. It is only in the most recent decades that we have become aware of the dimensions and the distinctive character of this civilization. In relation to the older centres of the Near East, it belonged to the category of peripheral formations, and it was a relative latecomer (it developed in the main after the crisis of the late Bronze Age); but it was more remote than the other peripheries, and therefore had a more independent political history; furthermore, it was in closer contact with the Northeast African periphery of Egyptian civilization, and this became especially important after the Christianization of Northeast Africa. Enough is now known about the record of state formation in South Arabia to conclude that the last stages (the Himyarite kingdom in particular) represent an imperial turn; but this path was then blocked and the South Arabian region thrown into turmoil by the repercussions of the Roman-Iranian conflict. Alongside the development of states with imperial aspirations, a monotheistic trend in South Arabian religion became more pronounced; although borrowings from (even conversion to) Judaism were obviously important, there does seem to have been an indigenous side to this development. Last but not least (Retsö places particularly heavy emphasis on this point), there are significant traces of a Yemeni eschatological tradition.

If we accept that this legacy was incorporated into emergent Islam, that is bound to affect our view of the whole problematic. At this point, the intra-Arabian crystallization begins to look like a much more complex process: it could perhaps – in the context of the whole Near Eastern region – be described as an integration of three peripheries: the civilizational domain of South Arabia, the

townships of Northern and Western Arabia, and the more nomadic (perhaps re-nomadized) periphery that covered much of the peninsula. Obviously, the identity that emerged from this process drew on older sources, but the background is difficult to trace. According to Retsö (this is perhaps the most controversial part of his argument), an original non-ethnic or trans-ethnic Arab identity, linked to specialized groups with military and religious tasks and seen as the guardians of a language endowed with sacral and poetic properties (distinct from everyday speech), was adapted to the new purposes of the Islamic community. Further discussion of this thesis must be left to specialists. But from an outsider's point of view, it has at least the merit that it helps to account for what Goitein (1966: 7) calls the "miraculous linguistic process by which the Arab nation came into being."

Our understanding of the post-conquest crystallization – on a much enlarged regional scale – will depend on the view taken of the preparatory phase inside Arabia. For one thing – as Décobert (1991: 51-52) notes –, if we admit that there was, from the move to Medina onwards, a power structure with a fusion of political and religious authority at the top, it follows that the expansion must be seen as a conquest directed from a centre, rather than a "barbarian" invasion. Furthermore, the pre-existence of this institutional structure means that here is, if not a fully-fledged civilizational model, at least a core (a politico-religious one) around which such a model can be constructed. This rules out the view of Islam as wholly made up of borrowings from conquered cultures.

Décobert (*ibid.*: 47) sums up the approach pioneered by Goldziher and Schacht (and which he thinks the radical revisionists have abandoned) as an attempt to "suivre les traces de l'élaboration islamique à partir d'un substrat arabe primitive, de superstrats (romains, chrétiens, judaïques ...) et d'adstrats (hellénistiques, rabbiniques ...) étrangers." The term 'primitive' is obviously not being used in the invidious sense: it does not rule out the development of the original religious-political nexus mentioned above. As for the distinction between 'superstrats' and 'adstrats,' it is not clarified, but I would assume the former to refer to cultural orientations of a more fundamental kind, the latter to more specific (and perhaps variable, from one part of the conquered region to others) ingredients of the Islamicate synthesis. But the most surprising aspect of this formulation, with its heavy emphasis on Roman-Hellenistic-Judaic sources (three interpenetrating traditions) is the absence of the other imperial-civilizational domain: the Iranian one. As it happened, political conquest was more complete where – at the outset – religious and civilizational affinities were more limited (the Byzantine civilizational centre survived, the Iranian one did not); but in the long run, this also led to a more comprehensive incorporation of political traditions.

Post-conquest crystallization

There are no self-evident chronological markers for the phase of crystallization; the choice of dates depends on overall visions (pre-comprehension, to use the proper hermeneutical language) of the whole process, as well as on specific assumptions about the course and meaning of events. As Donner (1998: 1) notes in his discussion of early Islamic historiography, traditional views – widely shared by Western historians – tended to focus on the half-century between 610 and 660. From an intra-Islamic point of view, the prime importance of this period is beyond dispute: it encompasses Muhammad's preaching of a new religion and the subsequent rise of an empire dominated by his followers, but also the internal conflicts that shaped Islamic cultural memory and defined the basic terms of later disputes between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. If the main emphasis is on the formation of a new religion and on its foundational experience of discord, historians coming from outside the Islamic community can take a similar view, especially if they accept (as Donner does, on the basis of careful consideration of the evidence) an early date for the Quranic text. When the focus shifts to the emergence of a whole civilizational pattern and the precondition for its global expansion, the chronological framework must also be modified. Marshall Hodgson's reasons for dating the formative phase from the end of the 7th to the middle of the 10th century are discussed in another paper in this volume; here I shall briefly summarize some arguments in favour of a different periodization. They emerge from new approaches and unfolding debates in recent scholarship.

As noted above, we can speak of an initial intra-Arabic prelude to crystallization, much more structured than Hodgson's picture of a long transition would indicate. On the cultural side, the intra-Arabian legacy now seems more important than earlier accounts had suggested – not least because of growing insight into the achievements and original characteristics of South Arabian civilization. On the political side, a 6th-century geopolitical upheaval, due to changing relations and power balances between the imperial states that surrounded the peninsula, was followed by new initiatives in state formation, of which the Islamic proto-state in Medina proved to be the most decisive. It is unlikely to have been the only one of its kind, but the Islamic tradition preserved only a very selective record of the earliest beginnings. Following Donner's analysis, several aspects of the Medinese polity may be distinguished. It invented a new form of sacral rulership, vested in a prophet; in fact, this was probably the most total fusion of religious and political authority that had yet been achieved anywhere. But the consolidation of this new and inherently expansive centre also entailed state-building strategies of a more conventional kind. Donner lists three crucial aspects of the process: "a more systematic approach to taxation than had hitherto prevailed in northern Arabia," (1981: 69), the "extension of a centralized legal authority over those areas controlled by Muhammad and the *umma*," (ibid.: 72) and "agents [...] appointed by Muhammad to oversee various tribal groups that had submitted

to Islamic rule" (ibid.: 73). Incipient processes of state formation are always confronted with and at the same time dependent on tribal structures; the overdramatized image of statehood as involving an abrupt and total break with tribal institutions is misleading, but specific features and dynamics of the relationship vary widely. The early Islamic state imposed a particularly self-contained and demanding model of political community, defined as a community of believers submitting to an exclusive and universal god (if we want to describe this innovation in terms of the axial model, it represents a more direct and thoroughgoing infusion of the transcendent into the mundane than any other socio-cultural pattern of that kind). But this radically de-particularizing model was also capable of harnessing tribal identities and loyalties to its own purposes. How the two levels of collective identity interacted is still a matter of debate; it is, at any rate, clear that the conquering Islamic armies combined tribal and supra-tribal principles of organization in very efficient ways. On the other hand, the conditional accommodation of tribal values was to affect the subsequent history of the Islamic polity and community in a manner not envisaged at the beginning: through disputes over the succession to the prophet.

The reconquest of Arabia after the rebellions and secessions following Muhammad's death marked a new stage. By reaffirming control over the peninsula at the very moment when an exceptionally difficult succession problem had to be solved, the emerging Islamic centre took a decisive step towards durable statehood. At the same time, the logic of its strategy led to further expansion. A unified peninsular state could not but interfere with the politically and territorially fluid power structures on the margins of neighbouring empires, all the more so since escalating warfare had destroyed the traditional mechanisms of control on the Byzantine as well as the Persian side. The forcibly reintegrated nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes (a disproportionately important minority of the population) were most easily kept in line through mobilization for conquest. The new religious revelation lent meaning and legitimacy to visions of indefinite expansion, and the combination of emphatic universalism with enhanced ethnic particularism was a massive motivating force before it became a source of tensions and oppositional movements. In short, an open-ended imperial project was the most natural option for the post-prophetic Islamic state. Because of the strong and original religious component of the conquering movement, as well as the complexity of cultural and political traditions indigenous to the conquered regions, the whole process resulted in the crystallization of new patterns on a civilizational scale.

Scholarly work on the comparative analysis of civilizations has shown that the religious-political nexus ('le théologico-politique,' as some French authors have called it) is a particularly rewarding starting-point for strategies of comparison. This seems to be eminently true of Islamicate civilization, where the exceptionally complex and contested issue of defining relations between religious and political authority became central to a broader configuration of formative trends.

The historical context of these developments is best understood in light of the problem of succession to prophetic rule. In Weberian terms, this was a case of transition from charismatic to traditional rulership, but complicated by several more specific factors. The charismatic centre was of quite unusual dimensions: a critical approach to the details of Muhammad's biography does not necessarily cast doubt on the view of the Islamic state as a very close union of religious and political power. Those who succeeded to supreme authority had to claim legitimacy through conformity with the prophetic message, but aspirations to maintain the same level of authority were bound to encounter resistance from the defenders of prophetic closure. The charismatic origin continued to command obedience in a profoundly altered situation, and to forbid imitation while tempting both rulers and rebels to test the limits thus imposed. These dilemmas became more acute in conjunction with the rapid shift to imperial domination of a whole region and expansion beyond its borders. Moreover, the new imperial state inherited territories, multi-ethnic societies and traditions from two older empires with whose legacies it had to come to terms. For a power structure based on a delicate and dynamic balance between settled and nomadic groups integrated through expansion, this swift transition to empire was a particularly challenging task. As Donner notes (*ibid.*: 273-278), the Arabian-Islamic state proved less viable than the larger formation which it had built up, and the political integration of Arabia went out of sight for a very long time to come. The empire eventually succumbed to a more long-drawn-out process of fragmentation, but a surviving shadow version of the caliphate retained some symbolic weight, and later empire-builders could still unify important parts of the Islamic world. The Islamicate civilizational framework outlived its original political basis and maintained its continuity across political ruptures and reversals.

In short, the Islamic invention – the Medinese paradigm of comprehensive sacral authority – faced problems of maintenance, extension and elaboration, and the solutions to them had ramifications that affected all domains of socio-cultural life. The following comments will centre on three successive aspects of the crystallizing phase: the early caliphate, including the first Islamic dynasty (1); the 8th-century upheaval traditionally known as the Abbasid revolution (2); and the Ismaili movement, which may be seen as a failed but far from inconsequential counter-paradigm taking shape in opposition to the Abbasid settlement (3). This is a very selective approach, but the thematic foci are chosen with a view to their key significance in a broader context.

1. It is now a commonplace among historians of Islam that the image of the four 'rightly guided' caliphs – from 632 to 661 – is a pious construct of much later origin, designed to smooth over succession disputes as well as controversies about the very meaning of the caliphate. In a sense, Western scholarship tended until recently to accept a secularized version of the same view: a broadly shared and continuous model of rulership after prophecy was taken for granted. More recent critical approaches to early Islamic history have undermined this assump-

tion. There are, however, no signs of scholarly consensus on a new interpretation; reappraisals of the historical evidence have led to widely divergent conclusions. A comparison of the two most seminal works on the subject, by Crone and Hinds (1986) and by Wilfred Madelung (1997), may help to clarify the main points at issue. Crone and Hinds begin with a discussion of the caliphal title. Its ambiguity (it can mean both deputy and successor) made it adaptable to changing aims and circumstances, but could by the same token serve to disguise the meaning of such adjustments. Crone and Hinds show – this would seem to be the most uncontroversial part of their argument – that early and continuous use of the title *khalifat allah*, which can only mean ‘deputy of God,’ is well attested at least from Uthman onwards. They then go on to draw far-reaching conclusions. The original version of the caliphate, with its strong component of religious authority, now seems closer to *Shi`ite* conceptions of authority than to Sunni ones, and the former might in that sense have a better claim to represent an orthodox current. Far from having shifted to a more traditional form of kingship, the Umayyads continued to claim the emphatically religious and distinctively Islamic legitimacy inherent in the idea of ‘God’s caliph;’ this enabled them to assert jurisdiction over doctrinal as well as legal matters. The first Abbasids strove to maintain the same status, but in the longer run, they failed. As Crone and Hinds see it, both the historical shift towards a downgrading of caliphal authority in the religious sphere and the historiographical misrepresentation of the early caliphate reflect the growing strength of the ‘ulama, whose ability to translate religious expertise into social power thus resulted in a definitive curtailment of the political centre.

According to Crone and Hinds, the early caliphate represented a uniquely radical form of theocracy (this Weberian term is used without any further discussion of its conceptual underpinnings). There are no obvious links to earlier models: both the Byzantine and the Sasanian paradigms of kingship have been described as caesaropapist, but neither of them unified political, legal and religious authority to the same degree as the Islamic alternative. Speculations about Samaritan origins are, as the authors admit, wholly gratuitous. Although Crone and Hinds do not explicitly say so, their line of argument would suggest that the theocratic project of the conquerors was designed to surpass the less consistent institutional principles of the two empires with which they were confronted, and it is tempting to take this hypothesis one step further. An attempt to transcend existing models of sacral rulership might be seen as a logical continuation of the prophecy that had announced the most perfect form of monotheism and begun to harness it to the accumulation of political power. This Arabian innovation preceded expansion into the Fertile Crescent, and acknowledgement of this historical priority should perhaps be seen as the limit beyond which revisionism goes off the rails. More importantly, the reference to Islamic origins highlights another side of the transition to empire, not taken into account by Crone and Hinds but in my opinion easily linked to Madelung’s much more detailed reconstruction of the early caliphate and its vicissitudes. The earliest conquests beyond Arabia entailed

on the one hand a retreat from the Medinese model, both because of the absence of the prophet and due to the new problems posed by imperial rule and ongoing military expansion; on the other hand, the same process demanded both the construction of an imperial self-image to counter those of the adversaries, and an effort to appropriate the imperial legacies on both sides of the Mesopotamian divide. In this context, it is a plausible assumption that the institution of the caliphate evolved through attempts to maintain a strong religio-political centre, disputed redefinitions of its role, and conflicts between forces that articulated and legitimized their strategies in relation to this central issue. Such perspectives fit in with Madelung's narrative: he stresses the unsettled character of the early caliphate, the improvised succession arrangements, and the polarizing dynamic of elite rivalries. Ali's brief and contested rule (656-661) is described as a counter-caliphate, a reaction against the ascendancy of the Meccan aristocracy and its Quraysh core under Uthman. In that capacity, it was a logical choice for later constructions of heterodox genealogies, however anachronistic it may be to project fully-fledged sectarian demarcations back into Islam's first century.

To sum up, the case for putting more religious authority back into our image of the early caliphate seems compatible with a more discontinuous and multilinear story than the one proposed by Crone and Hinds. And if the institution that joined the religious to the political sphere was shaped by interpretive and practical conflicts, it was by the same token exposed to challenges from those who aimed at closer approximation to the ideal of prophetic rule (or, to put it another way, at minimizing the distance between God's messenger and God's deputy). That kind of opposition became most potent when the theocratic theme was combined with a stronger emphasis on the universalist message of the revelation and when the religious concerns were linked to socio-political protest against exclusion and privilege. Such a constellation was clearly at hand when the Umayyad regime entered its terminal phase towards the middle of the 8th century.

2. As we have seen, some interpretations have stressed the continuity of historical patterns across the dynastic divide between Umayyads and Abbasids. In each case, the analysis of trends and events reflects specific views of the period as a whole. For Hodgson, long-term continuity is due to the irresistible logic of absolutism and its imperial apogee; for Crone and Hinds, the early Abbasid caliphate represents an ambitious but ultimately unsuccessful effort to maintain the early Islamic model of rulership. Constructions of continuity have, however, not been the most typical way to make sense of the events in question. The rise of the Abbasids has frequently been seen as a revolution. Among non-Western examples of political transformation, it stands out as one of very few cases where Western scholars have been most willing to apply a concept of revolution derived from European experience. One author even refers to it as "one of the best organized revolutions in history;" (Sharon 1983: 16) another considers it "a most appropriate example of the method by which a loosely controlled revolutionary apparatus is transformed into an established government of imperial capabilities"

(Lassner 1980: 7). More concrete parallels have been suggested. In a critical review of the literature on the subject, R. Stephen Humphreys (1991: 109) argues that “many of the questions we ask about the Bolsheviks would be equally significant in regard to the Abbasids.” This broad agreement on the revolutionary dimensions of dynastic change has not precluded dispute about the specific character of the revolution. Some basic features are uncontested. The Abbasid revolution was prepared by a clandestine organization which in due course launched an armed rebellion on the eastern periphery of the empire, overthrew the central government, and established a new geopolitical balance of power. The leaders and activists of the revolution shared a strong but ambiguous ideological orientation. On the one hand, supreme power was to be restored to closer kinsmen of the prophet, but this demand could still leave the field open to several contenders, and neither the timing nor the operative details of the Abbasid takeover have been easy to explain. On the other hand, the appeal to a broader community of believers marked a decisive step beyond the ethnic particularism of earlier Islamic regimes. Taken together, the two aspects exemplify one of Eisenstadt’s observations about Islam: the fusion of a strong universalism with limited but crucial primordialist elements. The practical meaning of this ideology in the context of a revolutionary transformation is a good deal more controversial.

It seems clear that the debate on the Abbasid revolution has, most recently, taken a turn that revives traditional views against the revisionist positions defended by later 20th-century scholars. The traditional interpretation was stated in classic terms by Julius Wellhausen (1973 [1927]: 558): “Under the guise of the international Islam, Iranianism triumphed over the Arabs.” Although Wellhausen was not very explicit about his underlying conceptual framework, this formulation clearly suggests a vision of history as the realm of one *Volksgeist* in contest with another, with religion – universal or not – reduced to a ‘superstructural’ role. But other statements would seem to throw doubt on that assumption, and to imply a more autonomous role for religion. At the end of the book, Wellhausen contrasts the Abbasids with the dynasty they had overthrown: “While the Umayyids [sic] had essentially rested upon a nationality, they [the Abbasids] supported their government upon a guard and upon the religion. Their Khaliphate may be described as a Caesareopapy” (ibid.: 564). He also notes that the supposed triumph of the Iranians, who were eventually ousted by the Turks, was more short-lived than that of “international Islam.” All this points to the conclusion that the Abbasid revolution might have had less to do with one ethnic category replacing another than with a new relationship between religion and political power, as well as between religious and political community. The second thoughts thus indicated were taken much further by later historians who found it difficult to locate the Iranian factor. Moshe Sharon, summing up his analysis of the Abbasid revolution with particular reference to the rebellion in Khurasan, stresses “the Arabism of its leadership and the Islamism of its ideas,” (Sharon 1983: 198) and although this opinion was never uncontested, it was shared by many other schol-

ars in the field. Following its lead, the Abbasid revolution would be best understood as a reactivation of the Arabic-Islamic nexus that had already given an impetus to conquest and empire-building.

If the 'Iranianist' interpretation is regaining ground, this is less a matter of returning to Wellhausen's position than of revisiting the whole problematic from angle more conducive to adequate grasp of the civilizational questions at issue. Saleh Said Agha's analysis of the "revolution that toppled the Umayyads," (2003) by far the most detailed of its kind, goes beyond earlier scholarship in distinguishing between the activists of the revolutionary organization and the forces involved in the revolutionary process. On both levels, careful scrutiny of the sources confirms the preponderance of Iranians, but not of the same type: Islamiized clients (*mâwali*) of Iranian (and other non-Arabic) origin were the backbone of the organization, whereas more recent converts were mobilized for revolutionary action and gave it the character of a popular revolt. As Agha argues, historians have often disregarded ethnic stratification and conflict for no better reason than an a priori commitment to oversimplified modernist theories of nationalism. Once the latter are subjected to due criticism, collective identities (in this case Arab and Iranian, allowing for internal differentiation on both sides) can be taken more seriously as a ubiquitous but context-dependent historical factor. They can in some constellations give rise to premodern nationalism, but circumstances can also channel them in more self-transcending directions. In the specific conditions of the early Islamic world, the problems posed by an increasingly explosive ethnic divide were susceptible to integrative and universalistic solutions. Conversion was, as Agha puts it, a Trojan horse: the non-Arab converts could turn the "moralistic, egalitarian and inclusive aspects" (ibid.: 170) of Islam against an Arab establishment that was also vulnerable to accusations of having betrayed both the principles and the family of the prophet. But the Trojan horse was also a transforming factor for those who used it: their success made membership in the universal community of believers more important than any pre-Islamic identities.

It is now widely accepted that the anti-Umayyad revolt in Khurasan, prepared by an organization first active in Kufa, was one of several movements that tore the Umayyad empire apart in the 740s. Some of them had distinctive regional and/or ethnic backgrounds. A Berber rebellion in North Africa, linked to Kharijite dissent, foreshadowed later upheavals in the region. Yemeni connections seem to have been important for a briefly successful Umayyad pretender. However, the movement that brought the Abbasids to power stands out – not just as the most successful one, but also as endowed with a transformative dynamic that can hardly be claimed for other cases. This explains the attractivity of the idea of the 'Abbasid revolution.' But if that interpretation is to be upheld, on more conclusive grounds, further specifications to the concept of revolution are needed. Said Arjomand (1994) defines the 8th-century transformation of the Islamic empire as an 'integrative revolution.' In a general sense, this term refers to an

enlargement and restructuring of the political community; subtypes, including the 'constitutive revolution' that brings statehood to previously stateless societies, can be distinguished on the basis of various criteria (cf. also Arjomand's contribution to this volume, as well as a forthcoming book). With regard to the Abbasid revolution, several interconnected aspects of an integrative dynamic may be noted. Arjomand's main emphasis is on the integration of non-Arab Muslims into the elites as well as the religio-political community at large (as he notes (Arjomand 1994: 20), "the Abbasid revolution was accompanied by massive conversions of the non-Muslim subject population to Islam"). In this respect, the Abbasids in power continued along the lines envisaged by the organizers of the revolution. But in the present context, the processes of intercivilizational integration are particularly noteworthy. Here, too, recent work has vindicated the Iranian approach, albeit in a modified sense. There was no abrupt or wholesale Iranianization of central state structures after 750; earlier accounts tended to exaggerate the difference between the two dynastic regimes. Nor did the borrowing of Iranian techniques and traditions begin with the Abbasids. The Umayyads had already taken interest in Persian statecraft and relied on specialists trained in that tradition. Arjomand stresses "the permanent mark left on the Islamic civilization by Ibn al-Muqaffa and the generation of Persian secretaries that supplied strong elements of continuity between the two eras divided by the Abbasid revolution;" (ibid.: 36) as he also shows, with particular reference to Ibn al-Muqaffa, these intercivilizational architects of a new order could develop projects that were only in part adaptable to the practical strategies of the rulers. But the trend was certainly accelerated by the integrative dynamic of the Abbasid revolution. The more inclusive definition of the community made for a more receptive attitude to cultural legacies of the region (at least during the formative phase), and the Iranian connection was crucial in both respects – not least because of the transfer of the geopolitical centre to a former core domain of the Sasanian Empire. The concomitant changes to the style and symbolism of monarchic rule paved the way for the incorporation of an old and rich tradition of discourse on kingship. On the other hand, the revolutionary movement had drawn on Iranian traditions in a different way. Agha (2003: 212), drawing on Madelung and others, refers to "an Iranian para-Islamic continuum:" a whole counterculture of dissent, protest and revolt, with elusive but undoubtedly significant links to memories and surviving elements of Mazdakism. Translation into Islamic terms was not yet the only outlet open to traditions with an older pedigree in the region: the 8th-century upheaval was accompanied by millennial revivals within other religious communities (Arjomand 1994: 21). The overall picture is unclear and the record very fragmented, but the appeal to a 'continuum' seems to have been essential to the successful rebellion in Khurasan. As the new regime consolidated its hold on power, it cracked down on erstwhile allies and agents, often with extreme brutality; some of the currents first mobilized and then suppressed entered into the making of new heterodoxies.

Finally, integrative developments in the aftermath of the revolution also had to do with the socio-cultural constitution of the Islamicate world. Marshall Hodgson's seminal treatment of that problematic is discussed elsewhere in this volume, and the field will only be briefly revisited here. Four main aspects of the socio-cultural integrative process may be distinguished. The construction of an Islamic tradition in a strong and systematic sense through collected (and very often invented) reports on the founding phase and its protagonists, was in the main an achievement of the early Abbasid era. As Arjomand notes, this resulted in a distinctively Islamic link between revolution and tradition, and more specifically in the canonization of the Medinese paradigm as a model for radical political change, conceived as a return to pristine principles. The elaboration of Islamic law went hand in hand with the formation of tradition. Opinions differ on the importance of the earliest decades and the Umayyad period for both *hadith* and law, but the crucial contributions of legal scholars during the ascendant phase of Abbasid rule are undisputed: this period saw both the systematization of law and the differentiation of approaches that found embodiment in schools of jurisprudence and their respective sub-traditions. Law and tradition, together with the interpretation of the Quran, became the reserved domain and defining concern of the 'ulama, who thus established themselves as a civilizational elite. Finally, the social constellation that prevailed during the later classical period – the 9th and 10th centuries – fostered strong links between 'ulama and merchants. S.D. Goitein (1966: 217-241, 242-254) saw the merchants as a 'Muslim bourgeoisie,' capable of social self-assertion and self-expression through an articulate economic ethic, but not of the kind of organization needed for the pursuit of political power. His terminology now seems somewhat anachronistic, but there is no doubt about the importance of the merchant-'ulama nexus. It shaped the distinctive features of the public sphere in Islamicate societies, including those that insulated it from the exercise of political power.

As Hodgson and other historians of the 'High Caliphate' have stressed, the internal structuring of Islamicate civilization was – in the first instance – compatible with openness towards other civilizations and creative appropriation of their achievements. This does not settle the question whether the internal logic of integration was in the longer run conducive to closure and detrimental to transformative capacities. That issue opens up a vast field of inquiry, far beyond the formative period, and therefore beyond the scope of this paper. It may, however, be noted in passing that no answer to the question can justify a purely internalist reconstruction of Islamic history. The defining patterns that crystallized during the period discussed here affected all later developments, but only in conjunction with a complex set of external factors.

In light of the broader implications and long-term consequences discussed above, the term 'Abbasid revolution' seems justified. It might still be objected that the description is less applicable to the revolutionary process as such. The subtitle of Agha's book (2003), "neither Arab nor Abbasid," sums up a complex

analysis of both issues. No further comment is needed on reasons for rejecting the Arabist interpretation; as for the other point, Agha argues – to my mind convincingly – that the Abbasid takeover was engineered on the eve of final victory over the Umayyads, and thus later than most historians have wanted to admit; that it was a coup within the revolution; and that it imposed hereditary dynastic rule on a movement that had wanted to link succession within the family of the prophet to election by the community (without a clear delimitation of the latter). The dynamic of this takeover and the need to consolidate its results were obviously central to Abbasid policies in the aftermath of victory. But Agha's interpretation does not disconnect this factor from the broader context. In that regard, a brief comparison with a view from the other side may be useful. Jacob Lassner's work on the formation of Abbasid rule (1980) has mostly been aligned with the Arabist position. As far as the preparatory phase is concerned, that seems to be true, but when it comes to the revolutionary process as such, Lassner is less interested in ethnic backgrounds and cultural borrowings (as he sees it, speculations on the latter will never get beyond vague conjectures) than in the internal logic of a power structure being adapted to specific goals. The Abbasid way of consolidating revolutionary power was, first and foremost, based on generalized and innovative use of the institution of clientage. Lassner takes this explanatory model very far: for him, the 9th- and 10th-century shift to massive use of slave soldiers was the "logical conclusion" (ibid.: 16) of Abbasid-style clientage. At this point, critical comments are in order. Arguments about intercultural borrowing may sometimes be unavoidably vague, but the notion of power-seeking strategies and their unintended consequences unfolding in a cultural vacuum is thoroughly implausible, and doubly so when applied to rival factions within a conquering elite with a very distinctive ethnic profile, operating in the kind of intercivilizational environment characteristic of the 7th- and 8th-century Near East. An interpretation which disregards that part of the picture is *a priori* unconvincing.

To conclude, it should be noted that the debate on the Abbasid revolution goes beyond controversies about ethnic or social background and ideological content. Recent scholarship on states and social revolutions has shown a general tendency to take geopolitical conditions and dynamics more seriously. In the Abbasid case, that line of argument was to some extent anticipated by those who stressed changing power balances between provinces, but there is at least one attempt to develop it in a broader context. Khalid Yahya Blankinship's analysis of the Umayyad 'jihād state' and its collapse draws attention to the Eurasian geopolitical setting that first facilitated rapid conquest and then proved fatal to a regime bent on further all-round expansion. In the first phase, the emerging Islamic empire made huge gains at the expense of the Byzantine one and destroyed its Sasanian rival; further offensives led to the conquest of Berber North Africa (where conversion seems to have played a greater role than elsewhere at this stage), the overthrow of a particularly fragile post-Roman regime in Visigothic Spain, and the establishment of a first foothold in India. Let us note in passing that this pat-

tern of sustained expansion makes the absence of any serious action against the declining Axum empire rather puzzling. But a second round, beginning in the late 720s, brought the Umayyad state face to face with a whole series of much more resilient adversaries: the Franks in the west, a reinvigorated Byzantine Empire, the Khazars in South Russia, the Turks in Central Asia, and the stronger Indian kingdoms east of the Indus. Efforts to overcome these new obstacles proved fruitless, and the strain was too much for the Umayyad regime. Blankinship thus agrees with Hodgson on a fundamental point: the Marwanid power structure had collapsed before the Abbasid revolution, and the Abbasid leadership was one of several contenders in the field. But his analysis leads to further claims. He underlines the impact of the great Berber revolt in the last stage of Marwanid rule, which caused “the breakup of Muslim political unity and the end of the universal jihad,” (Blankinship 1994: 203) he also suggests that “with the failure of the universal war jihād, more emphasis began to be placed on the peaceful quest,” and that thus “the doors were opened for the already extant spiritual element of Islam to undergo a development which has greatly enhanced the attractiveness of Islam to non-Muslims” (1994: 4).

3. According to Marshall Hodgson’s periodization of Islamic history, the classical phase ended in the middle of the 10th century. For present purposes, we do not need a precise date, and a strict chronological delimitation would in fact seem implausible. But there are good reasons to regard the crystallizing phase as continuing well into the 10th century, all the more so if we include the formation of the most ambitious and most widely active heterodoxy of the Islamic world: the Ismaili movement. Some historians (Western and Islamic) would question this categorization. As they see it, the term ‘heterodoxy’ prejudges a question that should still be open to debate: whether the Ismailis or their established adversaries were closer in spirit to the original Islamic message. But in the given context, the concept of heterodoxy can be defined in less loaded terms. It can, in other words, be used to describe a movement centred on a far-flung clandestine organization, committed to religious ideas incompatible with the enforced standards of orthodoxy, and capable of translating religious dissent into strategies for revolt and conquest on several fronts. As Eisenstadt has argued in both theoretical and empirical contexts, the dynamics of interaction between orthodoxies and heterodoxies are a particularly promising theme for comparative civilizational analysis. In that regard, the Ismaili movement stands out as one of the most interesting cases.

The Ismaili movement was, as a recent history of Islamic political thought puts it, an attempt to “take over the Muslim world in the name of a new creed” (Crone 2004: 197). This happened at a stage when Islamic religious ideas were being institutionalized as civilizational premises in a more sustained fashion than before (cf. Eisenstadt’s distinction between the two aspects of religion). In that regard, the Ismaili project invites comparison not only with other major religious heterodoxies, but also with civilizational divisions in a more general sense. Inter-

nal conflicts of interpretations are a recurrent civilizational phenomenon, but in some cases they go so deep that it seems appropriate to speak of civilizational schisms: radically different versions of shared cultural premises, with implications translating into alternative institutional patterns and historical trajectories. If this concept is to be applied for comparative purposes, we must allow for considerable variation within its range of meaning. The institutional impact of cultural interpretations is less significant in some cases than others, and even when it reaches relatively high levels, the dynamic of the schism as such may be inflected or overlaid by other factors. It would be hard to find a more convincing example of civilizational schism than the 16th-century bifurcation of Western Christendom. But the interplay and the divergent paths of the two reformations (one of them somewhat misleadingly known as the Reformation and the other as the Counter-Reformation) were complicated by a simultaneous civilizational mutation that involved a broader spectrum of forces: the Western European transition to modernity. Earlier cases to be considered include the Indian trajectory during the Axial Age, which led to the separation of Buddhism from the evolving traditions that later crystallized into Hinduism, but views on the civilizational significance of this schism will to some extent depend on the disputed question whether Buddhism was linked to an alternative conception of kingship. At any rate, the contest ended with the virtual disappearance of Buddhism from its original homeland, and its diffusion elsewhere took place in a different institutional environment. Finally, it should be noted that civilizational schisms do not ipso facto take a religious form. It is tempting – and certainly not incompatible with classic accounts left by contemporaries – to see the conflict between Athens and Sparta as a schism within Hellenic civilization. In this case, the outcome was self-destructive from the broader civilizational point of view: a fatal weakening vis-à-vis neighbouring powers with imperial ambitions.

The case for understanding the Ismaili movement as a civilizational schism can begin with its reinterpretation of the Islamic revelation. The Ismailis relativized the prophetic paradigm by inserting it into a more complex cyclical scheme where the last prophet is succeeded by a whole sequence of imams; the authority of the latter was more emphatically related to an esoteric spiritual meaning of the divine message, and this soteriological remodelling was linked to an eschatological vision that brought the apocalypticism of early Islam back in a new setting. When taken to its extreme conclusion, the Ismaili conception of the imam – and especially of the Mahdi, the ultimate redeemer – tended to overshadow the prophet. Disagreement on that issue was one of the major causes of division within the movement. The most telling way to relativize the status of the prophet was to downgrade his role as a lawgiver. The esoteric core of Ismailism was, in general, conducive to antinomian tendencies, but their strength depended on circumstances; only two small-scale and short-lived attempts to abrogate the official version Islamic law are known (under the Qarmati regime in Bahrain in the 10th century and in an Ismaili stronghold in northwestern Iran in the 12th century).

The association of the imamate with esoteric knowledge was anchored in gnostic traditions and modes of thought. Islamic gnosticism was, however elusively, affiliated to late antique gnosticism, and scholarly approaches to the former are bound to reflect interpretations of the latter. The most recent work (cf. especially Williams 1999 and Stroumsa 1992) tends to stress the heterogeneity of the gnostic field. A cluster of religious countercurrents responded to the problems and perceived shortcomings of both Judaism and Christianity; they overlapped in significant ways, but can hardly be reduced to a common denominator. However, no better term has so far been suggested for the complex of elective affinities that gave rise to the notion of gnosticism. On this view, the idea of a continuous gnostic tradition persisting within Islam becomes untenable. On the other hand, the sources do not seem to allow a reconstruction of specific links to particular traditions. As for the overall picture, B.S. Amoretti (1975: 488) suggests that an Islamic mould for Gnostic themes might have been constructed in a manner somewhat analogous to the surpassing of the older monotheisms, with “the Quranic message itself viewed as deriving from and re-interpreting the Hellenistic-Christian-Iranian gnostic culture of the age.” The Ismaili movement linked this re-interpreted gnostic heritage to political messianism based on two principles: an emphatic re-unification of religious and political authority through the imamate, and legitimation through a direct dynastic connection to the prophet. No more pronounced case of politicized gnosticism has ever been recorded (by comparison, the reconstruction of gnostic trends in modern politics depends on more complex and problematic assumptions). According to Patricia Crone, this “odd mixture testifies to the extraordinary impact of Muhammad’s career on the Middle East: even Gnostics came to see religious state formation and conquest to be the way out of their problems” (Crone 2004: 117). The suggestion is no less plausible because it comes from an author who had previously gone very far indeed in impugning the historicity of Muhammad’s career. But if the mixture helped to mobilize opposition to the Abbasid regime and its representatives throughout the Islamic world, it was (as Crone also shows) not a solid foundation for an alternative model.

Bernard Lewis’s early work on the origins of Ismailism – one of the first attempts to relate the movement to its historical context – stressed two aspects: the religious expression of a social protest movement, most strongly rooted among artisans, and the active interest in other religious traditions that could, at its most articulate, develop into a “strong strain of interconfessionalism, verging at times on complete rationalism” attitude (Lewis 1975 [1940]: 94). Later scholarship does not seem to have refuted these claims, but it has relativized them through stronger emphasis on other points. In its heyday, Ismailism appealed to individuals and groups with very diverse social and cultural backgrounds, and this broad basis highlights the unifying force of the religious message that held it together. There is evidence of unorthodox openness to traditions long established and still active in the region, but this stance was subordinate to the quest for a final per-

fection of the revelation. Measured against the claims made on that basis, the political results were conclusively disappointing. The Ismailis were at first remarkably successful in organizing a clandestine counter-community, on a civilizational scale and throughout the Islamic world. When they moved on to open revolt, it proved difficult to maintain the ideological bond between local power centres established in places separated by vast distances. Conquest on a larger scale, first in the Maghreb and then, much more significantly, in Egypt, was followed by rapid adjustment to the existing mainstream techniques and frameworks of state building. In fact, the Ismaili (Fatimid) regime in Egypt became a prime example of state power based on slave soldiers, with early signs of all the attendant problems of this institutional complex. Apart from the claim to represent a more legitimate succession to the prophet, and a more authentic union of religious and political authority than the Abbasid caliphate, there was next to nothing distinctively Ismaili about this state. This is not to deny that it played an important role in Islamic history. The Fatimid caliphate in Cairo was a major power in the Mediterranean region, and it was – after an interval of thousand years – the first fully independent state centred on Egypt. As such, it also laid the foundations for Egypt's later cultural pre-eminence in the Islamic world. But this was not what the Ismaili activists had aimed at.

On the intellectual level, some offshoots of the Ismaili movement may be seen as major landmarks of the dialogue between philosophy and religion within Islamicate civilization. The two cases most familiar to Western scholars are the 10th-century “Brethren of Purity” in Basra and the 11th-century work of Nasir-e Khosraw (1990). But the long-term pattern of sectarian survival after political failure was a very different matter (for a comprehensive history of Ismailism from the beginnings to modern times, cf. Daftary 1990). Small communities, often in remote places, perpetuated Ismaili traditions but abandoned the political activism that had once been associated with them. If early Ismailism had the potential to develop into a civilizational schism, it was contained during the decisive phase and thoroughly neutralized in subsequent centuries.

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