
Introduction

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The papers included in this issue of the *Yearbook of the Sociology of Islam* come from two workshops held at the Kulturwissenschaftliches Institut (Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities), Essen, in April 2004 and April 2005. The program of the first one linked the comparative analysis of Islam to ongoing debates on Axial Age theory as related to the formation of major civilizational complexes. The second workshop was primarily concerned with the historical sources and constellations involved in the formation of Islam as a religion and a civilization. Since the two stages of the project were closely related, it seems appropriate to publish the results in one place and allow for multiple foci.

The origins of the axial hypothesis

It has been observed that Max Weber's sociology of religion and in particular some passages from an article on Hinduism and Buddhism published in 1916 in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* prefigures the core hypothesis of Axial Age theory (Arnason 2005: 22)¹. This theory is based on a comprehensive hypothesis concerning the nature of the radical transformations that made possible a momentous breakthrough in the complexification of community life and the differentiation of social fields out of archaic communities regulated by cyclical and mythical views of the cosmological order. The Axial approach facilitates examining on a comparative basis the basically simultaneous discovery of "transcendence" across various civilizations.

Historical and civilizational analysis is oriented here to Axial Age theory intended as a research program for locating and explaining, in historical-comparative and sociological terms, the type of breakthrough that allowed, through the shaping of notions of transcendence, for the emergence of a type of human reflexivity conventionally identified as the passage from the narrativity of *mythos* to the rationality of *logos* (Jaspers 1953 [1949]). As maintained by Björn Wittrock, transcendence is not to be interpreted in strictly theological terms, but as the emergence of a form of reflexivity that transcends those activities tied to the

1 Arnason, Johan P. (2005) "The Axial Age and its Interpreters: Reopening a Debate." In: Johann P. Arnason/Shmuel N. Eisenstadt/Björn Wittrock (eds.) *Axial Civilizations and World History*, Leiden: Brill, pp. 19-49.

daily necessities of human beings, as also reflected in elaborate mythologies of cosmological shape or in what we might call the ritual integration of community (Wittrock 2005: 62)².

More than any other particular line of inquiry, new historical and sociological approaches to the Axial Age revived the idea of comparative civilizational analysis and channeled it into more specific projects. A closer look at the problematic place of Islam in this context will help to clarify questions about the axial version of civilizational theory as well as related issues in Islamic studies. For pre-sociological interpretations of the Axial Age, exemplified by Jaspers's well-known essay on *The Origin and Goal of History* (Jaspers 1953 [1949]), Islam was at best of marginal interest. The phase of intellectual and/or religious breakthroughs, occurring in major civilizational centers, was – roughly speaking – dated from the eighth to the third century BC; this strictly chronological demarcation excluded the much later rise of Islam. Further reflection should, however, have highlighted precisely the Islamic case as a problem for the chronological model. The Islamic vision of a new order based on transcendent imperatives was at least as close to the ideal type of an axial breakthrough as any other example. Islam defined itself as a perfected and definitive version of an axial innovation, namely monotheism; and it translated its claim into civilizational patterns on a larger scale than any earlier culture or religion of the axial type had done.

Another potentially critical point was the historical role of Islam as a synthesizer and transmitter of Hellenic and Judaic legacies. Comparison with this other successor civilization, on which the Western Christian rediscovery of classical sources had at first been dependent, might have cast doubt on the tacitly Eurocentric presuppositions of early axial theory. The failure to pursue these problems is obviously linked to a longer history of European relations with and perceptions of the Islamic world, and to concomitant trends in civilizational studies. Seen from Western Europe, Islam had for a long time represented a more advanced civilization whose achievements could to some extent be borrowed across religious barriers. In the early modern era, it was still perceived as a dangerous adversary: until late in the seventeenth century, the strongest Islamic power – the Ottoman Empire – could threaten the heartland of Western Christendom, whereas Christian advances against the Islamic world were confined to more peripheral areas.

During the 18th century, as the West gained the upper hand against Islam, it also began to come into closer contact with the Indian and Chinese worlds, and these new encounters posed more complex hermeneutical problems than the interaction with Islam had ever done – because of the greater cultural distance and

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as a result of changes to Western self-interpretations. Reflections on civilizational pluralism and its world-historical meaning (never more than an intermittent tradition in Western thought) tended then to focus on the eminently Oriental Indian and Chinese cases, whereas Islam became a more marginal theme.

The crux of Islam within comparative civilizational analysis

Two outstandingly seminal visions of universal history, developed in an early and a late phase of global European ascendancy, may be cited to illustrate this trend. In Hegel's philosophy of history, China and India appear as distinctive and necessary stages on the road to a full realization of reason in history, while Islam looks more like an anomalous sideshow: since it exists, it must be fitted into the model, but this cannot occur on the same conceptual level as for China or India. Max Weber's comparative studies of Eurasian civilizations deal with multiple contrasts between China, India and Western Europe; although a planned study of Islam was never written, enough is known about Weber's views on this subject to conclude that conceptual obstacles counted for something in this failure.

The career of the axial model after Jaspers reflects this traditional neglect of Islam, with some qualifications and corrective trends. Marshall Hodgson's work (which will be discussed at some length in this volume) is a crucially important exception to the pattern described above. Hodgson responded to Jaspers's formulation of the axial model, at a time when it went otherwise unnoticed among comparative historians, and revised it in ways more conducive to an adequate understanding and appraisal of Islamicate civilization or "Islamdom" (a term of his coin). But Hodgson was in many respects ahead of his time, and a sustained discussion of his work is only beginning; his influence on Islamic studies was limited, and there is no evidence of a significant impact of his work on axial theory.

When S.N. Eisenstadt shifted the methodological terrain of analysis from philosophical interpretation to a historical sociology of axial civilizations, he did not – at first – alter the chronological framework. On this view, the rise of Islam was the result of much later developments and took place in a very different historical milieu; but since the new, historical-sociological model was explicitly designed to explain long-term historical trends, it had to go beyond Jaspers's account and accommodate Islam within a broader perspective. Eisenstadt's initial solution to this problem was the concept of a "secondary breakthrough," applicable to Islam as well as Christianity and some less radical innovations in other civilizational settings (such as Neo-Confucianism in East Asia). According to Eisenstadt, breakthroughs of this kind were characterized by comprehensive reinterpretations of axial traditions and strong aspirations to establish a new institutional order.

The concept was later abandoned, on the compelling grounds that it implied

an a priori denial of the originality of post-axial transformations, and Eisenstadt moved towards a major revision of the axial model. He argued that a typological frame of reference would be more useful than the chronological one: axiality could thus be redefined as a set of characteristics that enhance the transformative potential of culture, and do so in specific ways linked to visions of transcendent reality. Changes along such lines may have been particularly widespread and intensive during the Axial Age, but that is not a valid reason for defining them in chronological terms. Axial transformations can occur and axial patterns can crystallize in other historical situations; it is the structural aspect that matters, rather than the genetic one.

From this point of view, Islam appears as a key case to be included in the typological core. Eisenstadt has unequivocally accepted this conclusion, with the result that questions relating to Islamic societies and their historical dynamics have become more important in his most recent work.

Yet the typological turn is only one of the new trends emerging in debates around the axial framework of inquiry, and it poses a whole set of new problems. If axiality is to be understood as a mode of transformation, it can easily shrink to a stage in a rather uniform progression towards higher levels of reflexivity and enlarged horizons of human action. On the other hand, the general category of “axial civilizations” (supposed to replace “Axial Age civilizations”) seems to involve quite strong and debatable assumptions about cultural orientations embodied in and constitutive of whole civilizational complexes. A more limited conception of axial patterns, centered on the relationships between intellectual and political elites and their role in historical transformations, would have to allow for contextual determinants that vary from case to case.

More generally speaking, the axial model is now being transformed through discussions that continue to produce arguments for and against contending views. It would be vastly premature to try to close the debate, and misguided to bypass it. The divergent approaches have more or less direct implications for Islamic Studies and for the sociology of Islam. As will be seen, contributors to this volume differ in their opinions on these issues; for introductory purposes, it may be useful to outline a cautiously defined common ground, limited to a heuristic use of the axial model finalized to highlight significant features of Islam as a religion and a civilizational formation. Some basic considerations in that vein will help to sketch in a background to more disputed questions. We can, without making any strong assumptions about the scope or status of axial theory, examine the *axial dimensions* of Islam from a comparative viewpoint. This applies, first and foremost, to the Islamic vision of transcendence: more precisely, to its version of monotheist transcendence.

The Islamic message defined itself as a purifying, radicalizing and restorative twist to preexisting monotheisms; at the same time, it was from the outset much more directly intertwined with political strategies and processes. The prophet Muhammad and his first following were very soon drawn into a state-building

project, and the codification of the new religious teaching soon overlapped with a process of empire-building on a vast scale.

Yet a comparative approach must also take into account the spatial and temporal distance from established models. Islam emerged outside the central domain of axial transformations, and long after they had matured into cultural and institutional paradigms. The same cannot be said of Christianity: most historians would now agree that the original “Jesus movement” was part of an ongoing reformist current within Judaism, and that the mutation into a separate universal religion was a complex process, decisively affected by the catastrophic defeat of the Jewish rebellion against Rome in the 1st century CE.

Because of the different historical context, Islam related to *axial sources* on a different basis and in varying ways. With regard to major axial traditions, the emphasis was sometimes on religious and sometimes on broader civilizational aspects. Judaism was of crucial importance as a religious source, whereas interaction with the persisting diasporic Jewish civilization was very limited; the occasional episodes of more intensive contact were – possibly with the exceptions to which the papers of Stauth (chapter 6) and Khoury (chapter 7) point in this volume – more productive on the Jewish side; Persian sources were primarily put to use on the civilizational level; the Hellenic legacy was essential to the flowering of Islam as a civilization during its classical period, but it also played a significant role in attempts to rationalize the religious foundations of Islamic identity and make them more compatible with philosophical modes of thought.

Apart from these central connections, recent scholarship has taken note of inputs from more marginal or interstitial sources. South Arabian traditions, including a monotheist turn that does not seem to have been a simple reproduction of the Judaic model, are now widely seen as a distinctive and important part of the background. The issue of Islamic links to the Judaeo-Christian sects that had tried to bridge the gap between two increasingly alienated communities remains more controversial.

If a comparative history of Islamic civilization has to deal with axial sources, it is by the same token tempting to interpret Islam as an *axial synthesis*. But this suggestion calls for some qualifications. It seems clear that Manichaeism had aspired to synthesize several axial traditions (including Buddhism). This was, however, a precedent the prophet Muhammad and his followers were thoroughly unwilling to recognize. Manichaeism was never included among the religions of the book, and when Manichean communities came under Islamic rule, they were massively persecuted. On the religious level, the original Islamic vision did not aim at a synthesis, but at the final and unadorned grasp of fundamentals that had previously been obscured by adaptation to specific contexts and perverted through further assimilation.

Nonetheless, as new civilizational patterns crystallized around the imperial power structures built under the banner of a new religion, the radically monotheistic and universalistic world-view became a framework for the fusion of differ-

ent civilizational legacies. But if the cultural traditions of conquered regions were brought together in a synthesis, there was no uniform pattern of integration. A vigorous but selective appropriation was, as noted above, crucial to the creativity and radiating power of Islam during its classical age. Peter Brown has suggested that Islamic civilization retained closer links to the Greek ideal of *paideia* than did other heirs to the classical legacy of antiquity. The assimilation of Persian traditions was a more long-drawn-out-process, and they became a more enduring component of political culture.

A new pattern of interaction emerged as a result of the Islamic expansion into a third major civilizational area. Whether the idea of a civilizational synthesis can be applicable to the Indo-Islamic world will depend on more substantive interpretations of this very particular case: was it a civilizational formation encompassing two very different religions, or a regional complex made up of two civilizations? The question will not be discussed in this volume, but it should at least be noted that the Indian part of the Islamic experience was – for both comparative historians as well as students of Islam – long overshadowed by the more familiar record of the Middle East and the Mediterranean.

The long-term *axial dynamics* of Islam are a further theme for comparative analysis, going beyond and building on those mentioned above. The civilizations most directly associated with the axial model are, as has often been stressed, characterized by a dialectics of traditionalism and renewal. Reinterpretations of core traditions provide frameworks for socio-cultural transformations, while at the same time maintaining a recognizable civilizational pattern across historical divides. This combination of change and revival is a recurrent and well-known feature of Islamic civilization. So is another closely related phenomenon, particularly prominent in analysis of axial traditions: the interplay of orthodoxy and heterodoxy.

Constellations of that kind were central to all phases and branches of Islamic history, even if it seems clear that the tension between the two poles never reached the level of a civilizational schism comparable to the 16th century rupture within Western Christendom. Finally, axial theorists have noted the need for more detailed study of the connections between cultural traditions – more specifically religious ones – and imperial formations, but this is still a relatively underdeveloped domain of comparative analysis. The history of imperial power in the Islamic world took a distinctive course that suggests several lines of comparison with other traditions. The formative and classical phases (until the later 9th century) were characterized by uniquely close links between the growth of imperial power and the crystallization of a new civilizational pattern. During the following five to six centuries (the “middle periods” according to Hodgson’s scheme), political fragmentation went hand in hand with the consolidation of cultural unity on a more global scale than any other civilization achieved in premodern times.

This is not the only case of marked divergences between the dynamics of cul-

tural and political integration, but the contrast became exceptionally stark in the Islamic case, all the more so through the cultural assimilation of the disunited heirs to foreign conquest: the Mongol successor states. But the Islamization of Inner Asian conquerors also became the starting-point for the three imperial projects of the early modern era: the Ottoman, the Safavid, and the Mughal (Hodgson's "gunpowder empires"). In all three cases, imperial expansion within the Islamic civilizational domain was combined with conquest across its borders. The plurality of imperial centers within one civilizational formation bear some resemblance to the modern constellation in Western Europe, but because of the very different spatial dimensions, contacts between the empires were of a limited kind, and these empires never embarked on the distinctively European enterprise of overseas conquest.

The last question to be considered in this context has to do with *axial closure*. This theme has not been in the foreground of the debate, but it merits more discussion. Although the axial model stresses new openings of multiple kinds, conducive to higher levels of diversity and conflict, efforts to reintegrates such trends into definitive and comprehensive frameworks are also typical of the traditions in question. Axial transformations give rise to new forms of change as well as new ways of containing it. Both ideological and institutional modes of closure reflect their specific civilizational contexts. Western perceptions of Islam, shaped by very asymmetrical encounters, have tended to exaggerate its resistance to change, whether generated from within or induced from without. Scholarly analysis has modified this view, but not disposed of the problem.

The distinctively Islamic dynamics and strategies of closure are still important topics for comparative analysis. To conclude this part of the discussion, three key historical signposts should be noted. The first centuries of the second millennium CE are no longer seen as a phase of transition to long-term stagnation or even regression; a much more complex image of this period is emerging from current scholarship, so that the specific achievements of Islam's later centuries are now more adequately understood. Yet from a comparative perspective, the available evidence and the most plausible accounts of it nevertheless suggest that the Islamic world did not experience anything comparable to the innovative developments that took place in Western Europe and East Asia between the 11th and the 13th century.³

When it comes to more recent transformations, especially those interconnected with the global rise of Western power, there is no denying that the Islamic world did not match the most salient non-Western responses to or reinventions of Western models. There is no Islamic parallel to the East Asian reinvention of

3 This refers to arguments developed in the two books coming out of Firenze Uppsala workshops: *Axial Civilizations and World History & Eurasian Transformations, 1000-1300: Crystallizations, Divergences, Renaissances*.

both modern capitalism and the project that began as an alternative but became a detour towards the same goal, and nothing comparable to the Indian experience of democracy. Nationalism in the Islamic world has – notwithstanding crucial differences between Arab and non-Arab parts of this world – a long history of problematic and unsettled relations with Islam.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the redefinition of the inherited relationship between religion and politics is posing more complex problems in Islamic societies than anywhere else. “Fundamentalism” may be a misleading term, and the most insightful analyses of the phenomenon in question have rightly underlined its modern features, but this does not alter the fact that it reflects an unfinished and particularly conflict-ridden process of transposing a religious and civilizational legacy into a modern context.

All these aspects of the Islamic trajectory call for integration into a more systematic historical analysis, which would in turn lay the foundations for more precisely targeted comparative studies. But at the present moment, combinations of historical and comparative approaches to the study of Islam tend to focus on particular aspects or episodes, rather than on problems of civilizational identity and difference. Marshall Hodgson’s work remains the most ambitious and original attempt to reconstruct the long-term dynamics of the Islamic world as a civilizational complex. This is not to deny its shortcomings, some of them obvious from the outset and others more apparent in retrospect.

Hodgson’s *The Venture of Islam* is an unfinished work, and some parts more visibly so than others, especially the sections dealing with early modern Islam and with Islamic responses to the global impact of what he called “the great Western transmutation.” More recent work has thrown new light on various issues and raised questions about established views that Hodgson took for granted. To take the most spectacular example, ongoing controversies between traditionalists, revisionists and post-revisionists have changed the whole framework of research on Islamic origins (see chapters 4 and 5 by Arnason and Arjomand in the present volume). Together with other developments, increased knowledge of the Ismaili tradition has enriched and modified the received picture of the late classical and early middle periods (Hodgson was one of the pioneering scholars in the field of Ismaili studies, but further progress was made after his death).

Finally, the revival of civilizational theory during the last quarter of a century has made it easier to identify and criticize Hodgson’s theoretical premises. However, allowing for all these critical considerations, it must be added that no comparable project has so far emerged, and that *The Venture of Islam* set standards for future efforts, even if an enterprise of that caliber can now only be imagined as an *ipso facto* unlikely fusion of multiple specialized perspectives.

Islam in the historical process: civilizational and comparative perspectives

Although only a few of the papers in this volume engage explicitly with Hodgson's ideas, they share with his work an interest in the historical dynamics of Islam as a civilization, in a comparative perspective with other cases of similar dimensions. The chapters are grouped into three sections which are systematically, not chronologically ordered.

The first section embraces the dimension of "crystallization" of the civilizational analysis of Islam and is therefore closest to Hodgson's own approach, albeit with sensible alterations. In chapter 1 Johann P. Arnason discusses the conceptual and historical foundations of Hodgson's program for civilizational studies, with particular reference to the role of the intellectual and religious traditions that constituted the core of city-centered high cultures.

Hodgson's variations on axial themes are discussed in relation to his distinctive interpretation of Islam. The second part of the chapter deals with the classical period in *The Venture of Islam*, reconstructs its main lines of argument, and confronts it with more recent scholarship in key areas. Hodgson's concept of absolutism as a political pattern typical of agrarianate societies is compared to the Weberian model of patrimonialism and taken as a starting-point for a more nuanced approach to the processes of state formation.

Chapter 2, by Babak Rahimi, focuses on the "middle period" of Islamic civilization, as demarcated in Hodgson's scheme, and links this chronological category to the more theoretical questions raised in an essay on the historical interrelations of societies, where Hodgson argued for a more polycentric conception of world history. Rahimi then develops these combined themes in ways partly aligned with more widespread views on the early second millennium CE as a time of innovative developments on an Afro-Eurasian scale, by laying a particularly strong emphasis on intercivilizational encounters and transcultural formations both within and on the margins of major civilizational areas. Against this background, he finally analyzes the emergence of Turkish and Persianate regional and civilizational variants within the Islamic world or, as he terms it, "Islamic axiality."

Chapter 3, by Arpad Szakolczai, examines contrasts and parallels between Islam and Christianity as prophetic religions, particularly ways of identifying prophetic founders and the implications of different solutions to this problem for the self-images of religious communities and their modes of relating to unbelievers. Moving away from macro-civilizational analysis, Szakolczai argues that identity formation in world religions is best analyzed in terms of the dynamics of experience and recognition; building-blocks for such a theoretical framework can be found in the works of Max Weber, Alessandro Pizzorno, Victor Turner and René Girard.

Johann P. Arnason provides in chapter 4 a theoretical elaboration of the con-

cept of socio-cultural crystallization to the development of Islamic civilization which began with religious and political innovations on a local scale and culminated in new imperial and civilizational structures. Several aspects as well as phases of this process can be distinguished. It resulted in the imperial unification of a region that had not been controlled by one political centre since the collapse of the Persian empire and its ephemeral Macedonian successor; more importantly, civilizational unity was for the first time imposed on that same region and consolidated in a form that proved capable of further expansion. This chapter concludes with a brief discussion of the Ismaili movement as a schismatic current within this civilizational pattern.

The second section probes into specific “crossroads and turning points” which are particularly significant for the civilizational analysis of different momentums of Islamic history, beginning with the rise of Islam. This process has occasionally been described as a revolution, without however providing further reflection on the implications of that label. Said Amir Arjomand’s chapter 5 is the first systematic attempt to situate early Islam within the framework of a typology of revolutions, and at the same time to draw on this crucial case to advance our understanding of types less familiar to modern western interpreters of revolutionary phenomena. A constitutive revolution is, according to Arjomand, one that establishes a new political order by imposing a central authority on a previously segmented society. The emergence of Islam exemplifies this general pattern, but some unique features set it apart from other cases: in particular, this was the only constitutive revolution that coincided with and depended on the promulgation of a new monotheism, and this factor affected both the initial project and its later metamorphoses in multiple ways. Comparative and theoretical perspectives can thus be brought to bear on disputes that have mostly developed in isolation from broader contexts.

Two contributions deal with specific countries and their roles in the historical formation of Islamic traditions. Egypt constitutes a markedly different case which does not fit easily into typologies linking radical socio-political transformations and axial crystallizations. The civilization of the Nile had been central to religious and intellectual cross-currents of Late Antiquity, but became more marginal to the schisms and crystallizations of early Islam. Georg Stauth’s chapter 6 argues that despite the recent interest in Egypt in the context of Late Antiquity, the axial framework of analysis, by focusing on monotheism and revelation, has largely sidelined Egypt as a residual cultural heritage within patterns of cultural reconstruction culminating in Christianity and Islam. This chapter attempts to show some of the antagonisms which relate to the synchronic coexistence of the civilizational heritage of Pharaonic religion-*cum*-politics and the reasserted and radicalized, monotheistic visions of rising Islam. Such antagonisms have shaped the vitality of a lived religion, specifically in local contexts – as viewed here – in the Eastern Nile Delta. Taking a view on the role of ‘Abdallah b. Salam – the first Jewish witness of Muhammad’s monotheistic revelations in the prophetic

tradition, and at the same time a locally venerated Islamic saint in that region – it becomes evident that the ‘denial’ of the civilizational heritage of the Nile is as much a source of orthodox monotheist reconstruction in Islam (as it was in Christianity), as it bears a great part of the symbolic, legendary and mythological legacy which played an important role in orthodox theology and in popular imaginary from the early Islamic period onwards. Paradoxically, the Islamic negations of Pharaonic civilization and its wonders still occupy a great role within orthodox practice and modern reflection of Islam. This negation at the same time preserves and incorporates the archaism which it wishes to suppress. This is a possible qualification and a point of critique of the axial framework.

Yemen was, as historians are now coming to recognize, not only an important cultural centre in its own right and a prominent part of the civilizational background to Islam, but also – as Raif G. Khoury argues in chapter 7 – a meeting ground of multiple traditions. The Yemeni share in political, cultural and religious life during Islam’s early centuries was highly significant, but it has proved difficult to trace – not least because it was later obscured by dominant traditions – and is still a controversial theme. Khoury shows how important Yemeni connections and crossroads were for conceptual, historiographical and literary developments that took place during the first phase of the classical period of Islamic civilization.

A concluding paper in this section, chapter 8 by Josef van Ess, critically reassesses the core idea of breakthrough or radical transformation that underlies the axial framework of analysis in its successive adaptations and revisions. Van Ess digs deeply into the reasons of why the axial idea of Jaspers was itself at odds with Islam for being at the service of a distinctive idea of the “modern subject” that needs, by definition, a convenient other, a civilization resistant to those radical transformations that are supposedly rooted in the “self.” Indeed, Islamic civilization is characterized by innovation and reformation within a stronger line of continuity with Late Antiquity. Van Ess suggests that the notion of “turning points” in a longer term perspective of civilizational developments and cross-civilizational influences seems to be more suitable to the analysis of Islam than the original axial idea of “breakthroughs.”

The third and last section includes contributions summarizing “cultural and institutional dynamics” of Islamic civilization, partly in a comparative perspective referring to other world religions and their civilizational ramifications. Here again the reframing of the axial problematic becomes more explicit.

Said Amir Arjomand’s chapter 9 considers the divergent paths of Western Christendom and the Islamic world from a specific angle, concerning the institutions of higher learning and their relationship to political culture. This approach differs from the line taken by those who consider the role of universities only in relation to the genesis of modern science; it gives due weight to the interplay of structural and contingent factors; and it stresses different ways of appropriating older traditions. According to Arjomand, the failure to translate Aristotle’s *Poli-*

tics conditioned the development of political thought in medieval Islam. Yet the significance of his intellectual blockage can only be understood in connection with larger patterns of Islamic history before and after the Mongol invasions.

Arpad Szakolczai's chapter 10 links these issues to even broader historical horizons. Szakolczai does not deny that the idea of the Axial Age has helped to open up comparative perspectives. He insists, however, that it has also obscured other important themes for comparative analysis: in particular the question of similarities and differences between prophetic religions. Only some of the innovations commonly ascribed to the Axial Age were associated with prophetic figures; on the other hand, the prophetic religions that had the most massive impact on world history emerged long after the end of the Axial Age. A different historical frame of reference is therefore needed. Moreover, a closer analysis of prophetic religions will draw attention to another topic that has often been noted by axial theorists, but never fully integrated into their problematic: the ecumenic empires, with which the religions in question interacted in very different ways.

In chapter 11 Armando Salvatore questions both the typological conception of axiality and the interpretation that subsumes axial breakthroughs under a more general and much too abstract category of reflexivity. Drawing on Voegelin's descriptions of the "metastatic," i.e. exponentially and uncontrollably transformative character of axial discourse, especially in its prophetic variant, he stresses the sustained and divergent but sometimes interconnected dynamics of traditions that grew out of axial beginnings, as well as the need for an adequate concept of tradition that could provide the key to a comparative understanding of varying cases. An informed definition of axiality can only emerge out of such historical and comparative studies. In that context, Salvatore argues that Islam and Christianity are best seen as interrelated parts of a Western complex of axial traditions and that much more work remains to be done on Islamic sources of European thought.

The section and the volume conclude with S.N. Eisenstadt's reflections on public spheres and political dynamics in Islamic societies in chapter 12. Growing interest in the political aspects of modernity has brought the varying types of public spheres and civil societies to the forefront of comparative analysis; and since the prospects of political modernity in the Islamic world have seemed particularly troubled, this has led to distorted views of Islamic political traditions. The widespread notion of despotic rule as an enduring characteristic of Islamic societies is incompatible with the historical record. But as Eisenstadt argues, the Islamic experience is also particularly instructive with regard to the distinction between public sphere and civil society. Public spheres exist in widely varying forms in different civilizational settings, but the development of civil society depends on more specific conditions for individual and collective access to the political domain. Vigorous public spheres, centered on a set of distinctive institutions, were characteristic of Islamic societies, but other components of the institutional framework blocked or minimized access to political centers.

