The Axes of Islamic Civilization

Now on strangers does the world bestow its favours and esteem,
All we have been left with is a phantom world and a dream

Muhammad Iqbal, poet and philosopher, writing in his 1909 poem
of lament, 'Shikwa' ('The Complaint'), in *Shikwa and*
Jawab-i-Shikwa, transl. Khushwant Singh
(OUP/OXFORD INDIA PAPERBACKS: DELHI, 1981).

There is little doubt that the civilization of Islam is undergoing a monumental crisis. In one form or another, this crisis has been going on for well over two hundred years. It still has not worked itself out. Islam as a religion, as a method of worship for millions of believers, is most certainly alive and well. The vitality of the faith is palpable. So is what most people, especially in the West, understand to be Islam nowadays; namely the political and violent manifestations of radical Islam. These are ever present and have caused the rest of the world profound concern and anxiety. When Islam is seen only in terms of the ideology of political Islam, it is not in crisis, but rather one cause of crises. Both these aspects of Islam – religious observance and the political arena – seem to give the lie to the assertion that Islam is in retreat. But focusing on the religiosity of Muslims or on the rise of political Islam simply deflects or disguises the problem. The world which Islam had built over the centuries – its civilization in the broadest sense of the word – has been seriously undermined. How this came about and whether the damage inflicted on Islamic civilization is terminal or not is the subject of this book.

Forming a Civilization

All civilizations are balanced between the individual and the collective (or the group); and between this-worldliness and other-worldliness. Shifts between the relative importance of these cornerstones is what gives civilizations their distinctive colouring. Oriental despotisms were built on the glorification of the individual ruler, who was deified and raised above mere mortals. In the Roman Republic on the other hand, the virtues and ideals of society were embodied in group institutions such as the Senate. Roman civilization shifted when republican virtues turned to imperial grandeur and when the collective wisdom of the Senate was subsumed into the edicts and decrees of an individual emperor. In classical tyrannies, autocracies and despotisms, the will of the individual ruler becomes the determining and driving force of social action. In the totalitarian communist societies of the twentieth century the opposite was the case. Individual will was obliterated by the power of the collective manifested in a party or elite. This is the theory at least, but often the cult of the supreme leader is superimposed on the collectivist or corporatist ethos. Mao, Stalin and Hitler are just such examples. The modern West – particularly its English-speaking part – is defined by a decisive shift away from the collective and the sacred and towards the individual and the secular. In the self-image of the West, the individual is ennobled and given the power to determine the course of his or her personal development, together with that of society, through the idiom of rights and the practice of a democracy based on laws and rules. The main purpose of society becomes to provide the environment for individuals to develop their potential and, in the process, to enrich and advance society as a whole.

Other modern societies reject the notion that the individual should be the undivided focus of attention; they reverse the formula. The interests of the group – be it the party, the clan, the military or the nation – becomes paramount. Any number of states, including not a few democracies such as Japan and the Scandinavian countries, would tilt the balance towards the collective rather than the individual. Other countries explicitly seek to reconcile and balance the twin and often conflicting demands of individual and collective action through a calculus of shared interests. This is the basis of the progressive politics of the democratic left in western countries. But such attempts are often short-lived, as the exigencies of time and place impose the domination of one over the other. The demise of the communal spirit which has underpinned the post-war European

welfare state and the social democracy it engendered is ample proof of this. Post-Soviet societies have violently oscillated between a rampant and often criminal individualism and a return to authoritarian hierarchies and structures.

Even religions have varied in the way they weigh the individual and the collective. Buddhism is essentially a solitary path to self-realization and fulfilment, while Judaism is eminently concerned with the collective trajectory, spiritual and worldly, of a particular people. At its heart, the Protestant reformation was about the possibility of the individual, through acts of personal piety and worship, to attain salvation specifically without the intercession of a hierarchical church. Most religions interpose a priestly class to act as interpreters and mediators between the individual and the object of worship. Depending on one's viewpoint, this learned class is either the curse of religions or its essence.

Critical disjunctions in human history occur when the individual paradigm is overturned or tilted in favour of the collective, or vice versa. These turnabouts are common in history. A new pattern of values becomes established and these continue to colour society until such time as another new set of circumstances forces a change. The precise moments or periods when these transformations take place are never clearly determined. Defeats in wars, famines and natural catastrophes, economic or financial collapses, generally result in the undermining of a prevailing system, while conquests, discoveries, and material abundance strengthen existing systems – at least in the short term. Such events can affect civilizations suddenly or in a long, cumulative process which creates incremental changes. But vestiges of replaced or overwhelmed civilizations may continue to exist and interact with the dominant order in ways which are not necessarily antagonistic, but which are invariably subordinate. More subtly, however, changes can operate at the individual level, and gradually, progressively, they generate internal forces which overcome the host system. For example, the small but coalescing groups of Christians within the Roman Empire gradually challenged the ethos of the Roman state. By the fourth century, Christianity had established its ascendancy over the old pagan order with the Emperor Constantine's conversion, an outcome which forever marked the destiny of the former territories of the empire.

The potential for tension between the individual and the collective is ever present in modern society. The former generally seeks to maximize his or her autonomy and freedom, while the latter seeks to establish its norms and rules and the power to enforce them. The tensions even inflect

the ethical dimension. For example, while individuals pursue liberty, societies may seek social justice. One could conflict with, or even contradict, the other. An adversarial relationship almost inevitably ensues which is not always satisfactorily resolved at the political level, even in democracies. The post-war welfare-state balance, which allows for individual profit and self-interest but seeks to channel it to social ends through the redistributive power of the state, is a clumsy and often ineffectual compromise between the two elements.

The moral imperatives of earlier times – as manifested, say, in the nineteenth-century Christian socialist movement – which sought to focus on the obligation for charitable works and to help the needy through community-based or collective institutions, have faded. The philanthropists of the twenty-first century bear little resemblance to the great social reformers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It would be difficult to envisage today's billionaires spending their fortunes on founding experimental or utopian communities such as George Cadbury's Bournville village or Robert Owen's New Lanark. Society's concern for the weak and impoverished, briefly shining through a few decades after the Second World War, has been in serious retreat after the rise of neo-liberalism in the 1980s and thereafter. China appears well on the way to abandoning the collective principles of its formal allegiance to communism, while India – at least its 'progressive' middle classes – appears to be faintly embarrassed by the perceived archaism of the communal ethos of Mahatma Ghandi.

Paradoxes of the 1990s

The general drift of the western world in recent times has been towards some consensus on the primacy of individual over collective rights. This has been worked out in the unravelling of the post-war welfare state, as well as in the adoption by most of the world of the ideas of untrammelled individualism. Totalitarian anti-individual systems, such as the Nazi state and the Soviet empire, have been militarily defeated or have collapsed, leaving the field clear for the seemingly irresistible rise of a global civilization. The contours of this order are defined substantially by the West. The demarcation lines between the public and private domains have now become increasingly fuzzy. In fact, expanding the sphere of activity of the private sector has become almost synonymous with enhancing the rights of individuals as consumers. The functions of the state have been radically recast so that areas which were well within its exclusive remit, such as the provision of health and educational

services, pensions, public transport, and even defence, became open to the private sector. Even states such as China, which are still officially communal in their ideology, have succumbed to the imperatives of the new order in their drive for economic growth. Witness the official indifference to the appalling conditions in many of China's factories and the armies of desperate unemployed which roam the Chinese countryside and haunt the margins of its exploding cities. Milton Friedman and Friedrich von Hayek became the icons of the times, rather than John Maynard Keynes or Karl Polanyi. The values of the European 'Enlightenment' have been dusted off and given a new lease of life by being conflated with 'universal' rights and values. The process has been accompanied by an aggressive insistence on the correctness and universal applicability of these values. Furthermore, it has become practically axiomatic that these rights and values are defined and achieved only within the context of liberal democracy, a market economy open to globalization and continuous technological progress.

Thus the sustaining vision of this period is one of mankind approaching the final resolution of the age-old conflicts between freedom and authority, between religious faith and secularism. The balance would tilt decisively in favour of freedom in all its manifestations: individual, social, religious and economic. This became commonplace in the 1990s, in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet bloc. But the march towards an 'end of history' and towards a benign symbiosis between the individual and the collective has been severely jolted by continuing (and possibly exacerbating) tensions between and within societies and individuals. The number of failed states has grown alarmingly, and many of the world's poorest countries have hovered on the brink of disaster – or even jumped into the abyss. Liberia, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Burma, Iraq all mocked the easy assumptions and forecasts of the era. This was also the time when religious passions spilled over into the political arena. The wars caused by a disintegrating Yugoslavia as well as the Chechnya conflict had an overt ethno-religious dimension. Societies which followed the new prescriptions for economic success were faced with increasing internal economic inequalities and income disparities. In a 2007 report, the Asian Development Bank reported alarming rises in income inequalities in the decade leading to 2005, in fifteen of the twenty-one countries it had examined.[1] Income inequalities in the developed world, especially in Japan, the US and the UK, also rose markedly in this period. If anything, fragmentation and disorder ended up carrying the day, and demons that one thought would have been long buried or forgotten emerged to increase the sense of chaos and fear. What was seen as the dawn

of a new golden age of tolerance and mutual respect turned out to be the harbinger of another cycle of fear and violence.

The celebration of individual freedoms and liberties has been short-lived. Collective anxieties – about other races, classes, ethnicities, sects, religions, and now entire civilizations – rather than communal solidarity, have replaced the euphoria that accompanied the fall of apartheid and the collapse of the Soviet system. Legitimate self-defence has given way to the doctrine of pre-emption and prevention. Individual rights to private property gave way to the imposition of market fundamentalism on down-trodden peoples and nations. The 1990s were full of this whiplash effect. By 2001, the decade that started with such promise had almost reversed itself entirely. At its heart, the tension was elemental, between fear and hope, control and freedom, hoarding and sharing, conquest and submission, and it was played out at the level of individuals, groups and even whole civilizations. Which set of elemental forces would predominate was to determine the course of events on the global stage. In the end, the baser forces have prevailed.

The Muslim world was not spared the paradoxes of the 1990s. Individual Muslim countries have with varying degrees of enthusiasm joined the globalization bandwagon, easily jettisoning their former allegiances in favour of the new verities, with all their promises and problems. Again, with a few exceptions, they succumbed to the military and political supremacy of the US on the world stage. But Islam, the invisible glue which binds Muslims into another set of loyalties and identities beyond the nation, has not yet acknowledged the inevitability of the new global civilization. It is Islam, rather than individual Muslim nations, that is seen to be at odds with the rest of the world.

The world perspective on Islam has been in many ways determined by the state of other societies, especially those of the West. During the long post-war boom which ended with the stagflation of the 1970s, western countries were formally indifferent to Islam, except perhaps as an ally in the cold war. Political Islam had not yet evolved into an intimidating external threat, and the army of Muslim migrants who flooded into Europe in the immediate post-war era to fill low-paying jobs silently accepted their social obscurity and exclusion. The boom times coincided with the rise of the welfare state in the western democracies. When the socially aware, communal or collective spirit was prevailing, the 'threat' from Islam was hardly ever mentioned, at least not in its present form. The traditional left in the West identified with the causes of anti-imperialism

and alleviation of poverty in the developing countries and improvement in the lot of the migrant communities in their midst. In both cases, Islam, although mainly a passive bystander, was seen as a potential ally. There were a huge number of Muslims in the developing world, and they formed a significant percentage of the excluded migrants, especially in western Europe. The fear of Islam has followed the demise of social democracy in the West, and the decay of the socially centred movements in the developing world. The Reagan–Thatcher period in the 1980s coincided not only with the anxieties generated by the Iranian Revolution but also with the controversies surrounding Islam's apparent inability to accept western freedoms uncritically. This was best exemplified by the Rushdie affair, which poisoned intercommunity relations in the UK as well as in Europe.

The 1990s increasingly, and often fatuously, saw a connection between acts of terrorism and the religion of Islam, and also large-scale slaughter perpetrated mainly against Muslims: in Bosnia, Kosovo, Chechnya and Gujarat. 'Let Muslims understand', said a statement by the Hindu nationalist movement, the Rashtriya Sevayamsevak Sangh (RSS), 'that their real safety lies in the good will of the majority.'[2] This came not from some crank organization, but from a movement whose political arm, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), led India's government for eight years after 1996. It was also the decade when the thesis of the 'clash of civilizations' became identified specifically with Islam and its inability to accommodate modernity. The thesis became a truth upheld, even fought for, by a huge swathe of groups, ranging from liberal columnists in western Europe to Serbian gunmen ethnically cleansing whole parts of Bosnia and mobs whipped up into a murderous frenzy by the right-wing Hindu extremists of the RSS in India. The growing tide of antipathy to Islam reached an apotheosis of sorts after the 9/11 attacks.

Blocking the Pathways of Islamic Civilization

History cannot be read, understood and interpreted according to a fixed set of rules and structures, but every epoch has its own patterns of explanation. In one epoch, the problem is couched in terms of individual rights, liberties and freedoms; in another, it is the duty of the individual to the collective; in yet another epoch, nations and their heroes are glorified and assigned almost mythic dimensions. But the temptation is always to consider the verities of a particular age to be universal and valid for all time and place. These renderings, which are frequently portentous and self-congratulatory, then come to define the political culture. They are often

carried abroad by the triumphant civilization, and once there they inflict considerable damage and destruction on the host society and culture. Just think of the call of *La Mission civilitrice*, behind which imperialism hid its ugly face. In an essay extraordinarily entitled 'The Government of the Subject Races', Lord Cromer, the real ruler of Egypt in the years 1883 to 1907, wrote: 'We need not always enquire too closely what these people . . . themselves think is in their own interests. It is essential that each special issue should be decided mainly with reference to what, by the light of Western knowledge and experience . . . we conscientiously think is best for the subject race.'[3] Local 'modernizing' elites to whom power was frequently bequeathed by the departing imperial authorities were equally adept at tearing apart the fabric of traditional societies.

The entire edifice of latter-day Islamic societies has been subjected to this shock treatment at the hands of a host of would-be local reformers, determined to 'rescue' their societies from powerlessness, poverty and marginalization. They have drawn on a host of ideologies that promised an easy solution to the Muslims' dilemma, but these have nearly all failed. Another set of solutions are then trotted out, tried as palliatives for a diminishing time-span, and then abandoned as a lost cause. The procession of forgotten, discredited and discarded theories stretches as far as the eye can see. The uncritical adoption of whatever appears to be the prevalent mood in the West is an unfortunate feature of the make-up of the ruling elites in the Islamic world.

At the same time, no real attention has been given to the effects of impersonal forces on the world of Islam. These forces have gathered ever greater power since the collapse of the Soviet Union. They often eclipse the power of nations. Commodity, currency, capital and energy markets are not altogether under the control of nation–states, and their movements can have untold effects. Acting under the rubric of globalization, lightly regulated markets, unimpeded capital flows and financial liberalization, they have increasingly defined the substance of power. As the gap between what is perceived as the latent potential of the Islamic world and its reality of economic backwardness and political dependency becomes ever more obvious, the siren song of the ideologues of political Islam reaches more and more ears. Their image of a *pur et dur* Islam of old has proven very attractive, and not one to be easily forgotten.

The temptation, when times are dark, has always been to imagine a 'golden age', an Arcadia, or a City-on-the-Hill. All cultures and most religious traditions have it. John Bunyan's wonderfully constructed story, *The*

Pilgrim's Progress, can stand aside al-Farabi's vision of the 'Virtuous City', and both would appeal to the same desire for uplift, certainty, and a way out of an impossible present. They remain products of a nostalgic, even romantic, yearning and besides being works of literature or philosophy have little further practical consequence. But nostalgia can be a powerful force and, in time, can even be turned to quite dangerous ends. All 'fundamentalisms' are, in one way or another, an exercise in nostalgia. They claim to represent the essence, the kernel, the undivided truth of the idea or the religion, and they promise their adherents a pathway towards certainty and fulfilment. Once in power, all fundamentalists revert to type. Their claims that they can forge a new purpose for mankind and construct a system where the individual and society can grow and prosper invariably fail. A new tyranny arises as the early promise degenerates into a greedy monopoly on power or, worse, descends into chaos and a free-for-all.

All these factors have come together in the global preoccupation about Islam. Ever since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, Islam has been at the centre of the world's concerns. The fixation on Islam became even more pronounced after the attacks of 11 September 2001. The religion, the cultures, the civilization of Islam, Muslim nations and peoples, all became the subject of intensive exploration and probing by a huge array of analysts, from the most thoughtful to the most incendiary, from the most illustrious to the most obscure, from the most sympathetic to the most bigoted. Islam seemed to offer the perfect laboratory specimen for exploring what were essentially the concerns and preoccupations of others. The general tenor has been one of profound bias against Islam. The retort, on the part of those who supported the legacy of Islam, has been mainly defensive and apologetic. An important minority on both sides of the divide has been openly antagonistic. Every incident of terrorist violence has been magnified by some as a clear indicator of the malevolence that lies at the heart of Islam; every provocative newspaper headline has been pounced on as an example of the West's irredeemable hatred for Islam.

The crisis in Islamic civilization arises partly from the fact that it has been thwarted from demarcating its own pathways into contemporary life. The western mould of modernity has been superimposed on its world view, and Islam has been unable to relate to the modern world except through this awkward and often painfully alien framework. But Islam as a religion – or even as the remnant of a world civilization – has never surrendered wholly to the demands of a de-sacralized world of modernity. A rearguard action of resistance to the claims of secular modernity has

waxed and waned over the past two centuries. Rulers over Muslims may behave atrociously, continuing the venerable traditions of misrule, violence and corruption that have plagued the Islamic world for most of its history. But the echoes of 'what could be' still reverberate among the multitude – and even among some of the elite.

The unease as to where Islamic civilization is heading, or is being pushed, provides the underpinnings for the stream of projects to 'reform' or 'revitalize' Islam. These have continued uninterrupted from the early nineteenth century to the present day. They have all relied on a reinventing of Islam by secularizing, liberalizing, historicizing or radicalizing Muslims' understanding of their religion. All these schemes have so far failed to stop the erosion of the vitality of Islamic civilization. One can only conclude, therefore, that individual and societal regeneration in Islam has either passed the point of no return or that its roots must be sought elsewhere than in the prescriptions of Islam's would-be reformers. What the reformers or critics of Islam failed to acknowledge is that the spiritual dimension of Islam has imbued the entirety of its civilization. Almost by definition, therefore, any starting point for revitalizing the world of Islam must begin with Muslims' connection with the transcendent reality which lies at the heart of the message of Islam. Regaining knowledge of the sacred is an essential requirement for this.

The Individual in Islam

Within this interpretation of the world view of Islam, the purpose of all knowledge must be to seek, find and affirm the divine basis of all right-thinking and right acting. The sharp dichotomy between the sacred and the profane – 'Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's' – does not hold in Islam, if it despiritualizes the foundations of both individual and collective action. Rather than be separate, Islam requires that the two be reconciled. Otherwise, the teachings of Islam affirm, mankind would be denying the source of its vitality, and would be in a state of perpetual warfare with what ultimately sustains mankind's existence. Mankind's first order of duty must be to acknowledge, openly and freely, the basic principle which underpins its very existence. This has nothing to do with saving souls, redeeming sins or rejecting gross material existence. The Quranic text never ceases to admonish and remind mankind that its submission to the decrees of God must form the bedrock of any permanent, and permanently valid, ethic of being and action – a

personal ethic as well as the basis for public organization. This is the starting point for all authoritative renderings of Islam, and it has survived the vicissitudes of time and place. It can brook no compromise. All authentic traditions of Islam carry this imprint, as they must.

It is in this sense that Islam departs from the mainstream of modern constructs of the individual and of the group. In classical Islamic doctrine, the problem of the nature of the individual as an autonomous entity endowed with free will simply does not arise outside the context of the individual's ultimate dependence on God. The Arabic word for 'individual' – *al-fard* – does not have the commonly understood implication of a purposeful being, imbued with the power of rational choice. Rather, the term carries the connotation of singularity, aloofness or solitariness. The power of choice and will granted to the individual is more to do with the fact of acquiring these from God, at the point of a specific action or decision – the so-called *iktisab* – rather than the powers themselves which are not innate to natural freedoms or rights. *Al-fard* is usually applied as one of the attributes of supreme being, in the sense of an inimitable uniqueness. It is usually grouped with others of God's attributes (such as in the formula *al-Wahid, al-Ahad, al-Fard, al-Samad*: The One in essence, state and being, and the everlasting), to establish the absolute transcendence of the divine essence. Man is simply unable to acquire any of these essential attributes. Therefore to claim the right and the possibility of autonomous action without reference to the source of these in God is an affront, and is discourteous to the terms of the relationship between the human being and God. The entire edifice of individual rights derived from the natural state of the individual or through a secular ethical or political theory is alien to the structure of Islamic reasoning. The individual has a reality, but this is contingent upon a greater reality.

None of the free-thinking schools in classical Islam – such as the *Mu'tazila* – could ever entertain the idea of breaking the God–Man relationship and the validity of revelation, in spite of their espousal of a rationalist philosophy. Man's ability to reason independently and to ascertain right from wrong – and therefore lay claim to autonomous action – is ultimately derived from the imperative that God acts justly and does so by empowering Man with the faculty of reason. One cannot eliminate God from the equation.

Latter-day thinkers such as the Franco-Algerian deconstructionist philosopher Muhammad Arkoun have raised the possibility of an alternative Islamic reasoning which could lead to an unravelling of dogmatic

orthodoxies and the adoption by Muslims of what he calls 'the unthought-of and the unthinkable'. Presumably this would include accepting and adopting western notions of the individual, culture and rights. Even so, the bedrock of any Islamic sensibility must be the textual certainty of the Quran as the unaltered and unalterable word of God. Irrespective of how it is read or interpreted, the Quran necessarily introduces the divine into the actions and choices of human beings.

The God-Centred Community

At another level, the contemporary Arabic word for society (*al-Mujtama'a*) is a recent construct and was not used with the same sense in the pre-modern period. It is a composite word, invented to accommodate an understanding of the modern, western notion of society. In fact the Quranic term for 'community' – *Umma* – has often been used in juxtaposition with the term for 'society', implying (as it does) a community of believers. But here again, the term has nuances which go beyond the mere sense of 'grouping of people'. The Quran refers to the prophet Abraham as being an *Umma* in himself, in a clear allusion to the possibility of there being an identity between a community of believers and an individual, perfected person. In Islam, the individual generates from within the virtues of the community, and vice versa. So there is a continuum between the individual and the group, with little possibility of ethical atomization at the individual level or an oppressive conformity at the group level. The purpose of the righteous collective (and the individual) *Umma* is one which 'enjoins the Good and shuns the Unlawful'. This, of course, is the ideal. The reality is frequently perversely different, as when the moral police in Saudi Arabia and Iran go about their petty harassments under the banner of 'enjoining the good and shunning the unlawful'. Nevertheless, the ideal has not been erased from the consciousness of Muslims.

In the language of Islam, the simple affirmation *La Hawla wa La Quwatta illa Billah* ('there is no [independent] power or strength except from Allah') basically determines the parameters by which actions and decisions have to be measured. For Muslims, there is no escaping the consequence of such a declaration. It defines the individual immediately, governs his or her actions, and, equally critically, sets the boundaries and limits to the legitimate form and direction of such actions. Any collective of such individuals must follow along these very same principles. There can be no deviation from this affirmation and no let-up. This brings us to

the notion of *Tawhid*, the spiritual mechanism by which individuals and society can function in an integral manner by referring all action to a higher principle.

A root principle in the world view of Islam is that no individual or social group, if it seeks harmony and justice, can assume the absolute power to determine its own ethical standards of conduct. The operative phrase here is the qualification regarding harmony and justice. There are any number of ethical models and norms of morality and moral conduct which do not seek their justification in anything but reason, utility, personal desire or natural rights. But Islam would venture that these cannot but be unstable. They lead to an incessant struggle between what is already established and alternatives seeking its overthrow and the establishment of a new ascendancy. An ethical system of dynamic stability and justice must derive its coordinates from outside itself. Life must derive from the 'life-giver' (*al-Hayy*); power, from the 'power-giver' (*al-Qadir*); and knowledge from the 'knowledge-giver' (*al-ʿAlim*). Only then can individuals and groups be guided and constrained by the only permanently legitimate form of authority.

It becomes clear now that the claim for absolute autonomy for man in the design of his moral universe is in itself an invalid and false claim within the framework of Islamic reasoning. However, Islam would reject the notion that human dignity is in any way diminished or compromised when one acknowledges the absolute as the source of authority; rather, this bestows dignity on humans and ennobles their actions: they are the actions of inspired beings, not of beings who move on the shifting sands of moral relativism. Certainty constrained by the permissible is the only way of correct action for individuals and societies. Once God's authority is established as the indispensable source for the ethical organization of human affairs, individuals and societies begin to follow a different trajectory for their development. It is clear of course that in only very brief instances in human history – if ever – has this imperative of total submission to an absolute moral arbiter directed individuals and societies. But this remains the ideal, even if it is flaunted in practice. This condition has nothing to do with a so-called theocratic, or even a religiously inspired, society. Such societies, more often than not, surrender power to a priestly class which uses an elaborate theology to justify the all-too-human basis of its order. But it has everything to do with a virtuous society in which individual action is built on a profoundly ethical foundation, derived from absolute moral archetypes.

This necessarily brings us to a problematic and frequently contentious issue, which has bedevilled Islamic history even in modern times: how can ethical designs and commands, which are anchored in Islam's affirmation of man's dependency on God, be reliably transmitted? How is one to determine truth and authenticity? God cannot be known directly. It is a feature of dependency that the dependant is always in a subordinate role. But there cannot be a value system determined by God if there is no reliable way of understanding its decrees and rules of conduct and action.

Islam postulates two essential ways of comprehending the divine plan. The first is based on reason. Man uses his intellectual resources to understand and then utilize God's decrees, so as to establish a moral order which will guide individuals and order societies. In many ways, though, a reason-based method cannot be valid at all times. In itself, it would be subject to varying interpretations determined by historical, social and cultural contexts. While there may be alternative readings of the divine text, there are nevertheless limits beyond which Islam will not acknowledge a purely reason-based outcome. First principles are immutable. Murder will always be murder; theft will always be theft. There is no room for relativism in the acceptance of first principles. Even schools within Islam that appear to acknowledge the validity of a reason-based argument in generating new understandings or interpretations of divine commands narrowly circumscribe the ambit in which such reasoning is allowed free play.

The second way of understanding the divine plan is through what has been called the revelatory experience, or prophecy. In this construct, God encompasses all of existence. The signs of God are disclosed to man in endless forms and manners, both measurable and immeasurable. It is essential therefore for man to have a reliable and true method of comprehending and interpreting the signs which emanate from this reality. The purpose of prophecy is to provide this indispensable medium for understanding the ways of God. In the Quran, God has chosen thousands of prophets to act as the bearers of this knowledge; some are known, such as Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. Others are not. The Quran privileges some prophets over others, but they all fulfil the essential function of being reliable and trustworthy bearers of the truth to their own people and to mankind at large.

Most ethical systems which purport to rely on the sacred fall down at this point. The need for an intermediary to carry the signs and signals which allow the individual and society to relate to the absolute raises the thorny issue of what is a true, reliable and effective medium. In short, how does man

know that the medium through which such an approach will be made is authentic? Ultimately, the purpose of all religions is to make intelligible the ways of God at the human level, but all religions have shown signs of deviation and atrophy; they become veils which actually hide the way to God.

Nevertheless, at the core of all great traditions of knowledge and wisdom is a frame for reaching a true cognition of the decrees of God. This frame relies on the existence of a perfected human being, who acts as a conduit for receiving and transmitting truthfully the message of being and of existence, and who realizes and confirms, in his or her person, the unfolding of the virtuous way. Such a person becomes the ideal model of behaviour and conduct, and is the standard by which actions, intentions and states are to be judged. The prophetic model establishes its authenticity in a variety of ways, but none more potent than when the model is accompanied by inspirations drawn from revelatory experiences. These form the basis of the textual record of the revelatory experience and confirm its authenticity. In this manner, the sayings and conduct of the Prophet Muhammad become the idealized form from which an ethically inspired life can be derived.

The last factor necessary to complete the framework of a God-based and timeless ethical system in Islam is the assertion that human virtues cannot exist in isolation from their roots in the attributes of God. Thus the panoply of human virtues – generosity, compassion, justice, clemency and so on – must trace their origin to the divine Oneness, where their essences are to be found. The meanings which infuse creation and all creative acts must relate to each other as well as to their origin. There are no human virtues as such. As one of Islam's greatest moralists, the Andalusian Ibn Hazm, wrote in the eleventh century,

> If you study the laws that regulate human nature and the development of different characters according to the mixture of elements rooted in their souls, you will surely become convinced that you have no merit from your own virtues, that they are only gifts from the Almighty . . . You should replace the pride that you take in your own virtues with acts of grace towards the one who gave them to you . . .[4]

Modernity and Islam

These basic principles of human and social organization have always been affirmed within the context of the world view of Islam. The interjection of

the divine in the ordering of human relationships continues to waft over the world of Islam – even if it is no more than the use of the ubiquitous *inshallah* ('God's will') that accompanies any Muslim's discussion of the future. This notion has yet to be reduced to a figure of speech devoid of any positive statement about the world. Muslims, however, have been prone to assume that the virtuous community did indeed exist in the pristine world of early Islam, and to some extent human affairs have been seen in terms of the extent to which mankind has strayed from these founding principles. The contemporary Muslim world is, almost universally, contrasted unfavourably with the world of early Islam. This contributes to the prevailing sense of moral inadequacy that permeates Muslim societies whenever they are compared to the Medina of the Prophet and early caliphs.

Modern western society assumes a priori that this world view can and should change. The permissibility of change and the terms of such change become the battlefield between the traditional and the modern. The conflict between religious societies and avowedly secular ones has also been described in these terms, but this division is false. Overtly religious societies are not necessarily synonymous with traditional societies in their concern for the transcendent. Their claims are frequently based on the partial use of a historical narrative or on the selective and incomplete reliance on a holy text. More often than not, they degenerate into dogmatism and then tyranny, caricaturing in their action their own lofty principles.

Islamic society and individual moral conduct have moved away from reliance on the fundamentals of the revelatory experience and the example of the prophetic model. In a number of Muslim countries, a dogmatic scientism has driven the sense of the sacred away from private and public consciousness. Even in apparently traditional societies which have survived into the twenty-first century, including those which explicitly acknowledge the extra-human bases of morality and ethics, a similar condition prevails. The accretion of alienating religious dogma and the gradual distancing of the spiritual from the quotidian experience of Muslims have led to a similar moral alienation in those societies which claim continuity with, and allegiance to, a traditional moral order. They have all been infected with a modernity which does not recognize the sacred in practice, but such societies nevertheless maintain the fiction that they do. The petrodollar states of the Arab Middle East are a case in point. The result is not schizophrenia, but open hypocrisy between what people feign to believe and what they actually do believe.

The Islamic criticism of modern societies relates partly to the gradual erosion of the fundamental moral bases of individuals and societies and to their replacement by a relativism that allows for a crude utilitarianism and mindless consumerism. The manufacture of wants and desires, with little understanding of the true function of happiness – in particular, the absolute requirement that it should be shaped towards a meaningful end – has imprisoned the human self in its lowest common denominator. The self cannot break out of its self-made prison and is caught in a vicious cycle which condemns it to an incessant clamour for gratification. The function of the collective becomes one that seeks to assuage these desires, while at the same time developing the demand for newer desires. The engine – what the political philosopher Bertrand de Jouvenel termed 'the Minotaur' – crushes all in its path, and at the edge reduces human beings to machines of consumption.[5] A coarsening of the human condition prevails, even though it might be accompanied by a glittering materialism. Fear and anxiety, violence and aggression, are the obverse to the modern ethics of desires rooted in the material, as the individual and, more broadly, societies contemplate the possibility of losing the means by which their desires are to be gratified.

Islam's retort to this type of modernity does not, on the surface, appear to be much different from the arguments of all anti-modernists, including large swathes of the intelligentsia in the western world itself, as well as in other non-Muslim traditional societies. How does this reaction differ, one may well ask, from the moral conservatism of the Catholic church, the European New Right, the modern advocates of an ethics of virtues such as the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, or the neo-Confucianism of the proponents of 'Asian values'? The Russian writer and Nobel laureate, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, presaged many of these concerns in his celebrated 1978 commencement address at Harvard University, entitled 'A World Split Apart'.

The concerns of Islam are not too different, it is true, but Islam is, theoretically, the only force which can move beyond the polemical into the realm of the political, through its explicit connection with states and governments, and thus with power. It can therefore create the circumstances to propose and even go down an alternative route into modernity. There are dozens of nation–states which claim, one way or another, to be guided by Islam. These states could be active in defining other forms of modernity but there are few signs that anything like this has been taking place.

However, most if not all Muslim societies appear to have surrendered to the imperatives of the modern world, if not at the political level then at least

at the economic and, increasingly, cultural levels. Within Muslim societies this process has gone furthest in the Arabic world, leading to a frightening bifurcation in the minds of people and engendering the extremes of garish opulence for the few and a destructive nihilism which affects a large number of disenchanted youth. There is no easy method to halt what appears to be an irreversible trend towards a permanent disjunction between the sacred and the profane.

The Rejection and Acceptance of the Unseen

Within the ambit of Islam's world view, modernity and its fragmented successors are all seen to be part of the spectrum which is anchored in a formal rejection of the unseen as the basis for any moral order. But the issue is not simply one of confrontation between the modern mind and a grab bag of revolutionary states, global terrorists and religious revivalists. The fact that mankind ignores, claims to refute, or ridicules the validity of moral absolutes, does not detract from their essential truth. Or at least that is what the traditions of Islam postulate. Whatever the outcome of a conscious rejection of this order, it does not affect the permanent existence of an alternative, more valid, order. In this regard, mankind receives its just rewards by failing to adhere to the principles of right living. Man's progress towards the ultimate good can only be advanced through a correct inter-action with the decrees of God. Felicity is an outcome determined by a correct interaction with these decrees.

The person who focuses on the unseen must also engage with the here and now. There have been centuries of human civilization whose axis has been other than the sacred. Notions of 'progress', 'modernity', 'scientific advance', carry different meanings for those who continue to maintain a sense of the sacred. If societies and civilizations are to reflect a renewed sense of the sacred, their values must be radically rethought in accordance with a new sense of priorities in the organization of human affairs. This, of course, would apply in particular to Muslim societies, which continue to claim a loyalty to, and inspiration from, the Quran and the example of the Prophet.

It is not that Islamic civilization or cultures have reflected an abiding concern with other-worldliness. This is manifestly untrue. The concern of their rulers and elites has not been much different in substance to the concerns pertaining in other civilizations. Power and control, conquest and aggrandisement, the history of Muslims is littered with tyrants and despots.

But the personal, and to some extent the social, spheres, have remained outside the ravages of the ruler's span of control. Islam's spiritual landscape has continued to be firmly based on a God-centred perspective of the cosmos, without serious disruption by either temporal or religious powers. Knowledge of the transcendent has informed the lives of the multitudes in spite of the general tolerance shown for libertines and free-thinkers in the history of Islam. The power of the mystical Sufi orders or *tariqas* and the spiritualized world of Imami Shi'ism ensured the centrality of the sacred in the private lives of people. Intra-religious wars within Islam were never as pronounced as they were in the history of the West. There is no Islamic equivalent to the Thirty Years War, at least in terms of its violence and duration, or to the long-drawn-out struggles of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation. The *Mihna*, a form of inquisition during the Abbasid period, were hardly occasions for mass slaughter, and where that did happen, as in Tamerlane's conquests of recalcitrant Muslim lands (Tamerlane himself was a Muslim), it was due to marauding armies rather than campaigns against schismatics or sectarians.

The closest thing, perhaps, to mass killings over a prolonged period were the successful campaigns in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries to establish Shia Islam as the formal religion of Iran and the uprooting of the Fatimi Ismaili dynasty in twelfth-century Egypt by Saladin and his successors (which was accompanied by much less violence). Islam has had its share of terrorists and assassins – the latter are in fact a corruption of the dreaded '*hashashin*', an Ismaili sub-sect active in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, but these were well outside the core beliefs of Islam. The imposition of 'orthodoxies' of whatever variety was not generally accompanied by coercion and mass killings. The recourse to the burning stake or to the gibbet was not an acceptable option in the tussle between various religious schools, aided perhaps by the absence of any formal 'church' in Islam. (Rulers, of course, liberally used the executioner's sword when their powers were challenged.) Nevertheless, Islamic history does have its share of controversial executions of the unorthodox – such as the medieval mystics Husayn ibn Mansur Hallaj and 'Ayn ul-Qudat and, more recently and in the same vein, the Sudanese reformer Mahmoud Muhammad Taha.

Writers as diverse as the great medieval theologian al-Ghazzali (known as Algazel in the West) may have bemoaned the Muslim's loss of spiritual bearing, but they never despaired of their potential for reform or return to the 'true path'. Islam had its atheists – the *Dahriyuun* – as well as its doubters and sceptics, but none could break through the ramparts of

belief (*iman*), inside which the vast majority of Muslims resided – and still do. Hope and salvation, both temporal and other-worldly, continued to be seen in the context of the spiritual architecture of Islam and not outside it. There was no Renaissance or Enlightenment in Islam, simply because its trajectory was different from that of the West. There was no need or requirement to dethrone its perspective on the created universe and on mankind, because it was seen and believed to be true and real. The cosmos was held by the 'breath of the all-merciful'; the revelatory experience of Prophet Muhammad was authentic and veracious; the textual base of the Quran was undoubtedly the word of God. *Homo Islamicus,* at least in the pre-modern period, was defined by the person's implicit trust in a divine order, mediated at the human level through prophethood. The ordering of daily lives was built on this bedrock of certainty; on belief in an invariant scale of right and wrong, in spite of the dishonesty of individuals, the injustices of society and the capriciousness of rulers. Not fatalism, but the sure knowledge that the inevitable divine justice would prevail. The individual who combined the sacred and the profane in his or her person may not have existed in an idealized form, but *homo Islamicus* was as close a copy of this as possible, at least in Islam's self-definition.

However, the world view of Islam began to be seriously eroded in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This was not only because of the retreats of the Muslim empires of the period (Mughal, Persian and Ottoman) in the face of unrelenting pressures from the economically, militarily and technologically more advanced European powers, but, equally importantly, because of the inability of the religious, political and administrative classes to see the crisis affecting Islamic civilization in any way except as the loss of power or weakening of religious dogma. The divisions within the Islamic world quickly hardened, pitching traditionalists against modernists, secularists versus revivalists. The pattern repeated itself from Morocco in the west to Java in the east.

The idea of the nation–state, which arose particularly in the nineteenth century, challenged the Islamic political entity. Sultanate and caliphate were contested by political parties and by the modern military castes. *Imama* or rulership faced elected assemblies and notions of 'popular sovereignty'. Extended families were threatened by shifting economic foundations and women's rights. The power of the judges who ruled by Sharia had to concede to the new canons of secular civil and criminal law. The open marketplaces of bazaars, artisanship and traditional exchange patterns gave way to the corporation, interest-based finance and foreign

investment. The list is almost endless and all-encompassing. A new world was perched uneasily on the partial ruins of the old. Muslims would not quite abandon the past, nor quite embrace the future. Their confidence crumbled as they reflected on what they had been and what had become of them. No wonder many thought that they had been abandoned by God.

As Iqbal wrote, in grief, while surveying this forlorn landscape:

All we had lived for was to battle; we bore the troubles that came,
And we laid down our lives for the glory of Your Name.
We never used our strength to conquer or extend domain,
Would we have played with our lives for nothing but worldly gain?
If our people had run after earth's goods and gold,
Need they have smashed idols, and not idols sold?[6]

Why on earth would anyone question and, heaven forbid, jettison this certain form of knowledge for a lesser and ephemeral vision? Why indeed? But this is what has undeniably happened.

CHAPTER 1

Tearing the Fabric

The rain cloud of adversity is spreading over their heads [Muslims].
Calamity is showing itself.
Inauspiciousness is hovering behind and in front. From left and right is coming
the cry; 'Who were you yesterday, and what have you become today! Just now
you were awake, and now you have gone to sleep!'

Prologue to the *Musaddas* of the Indian Muslim poet, Hali,
first published in 1879, on *The Ebb and Flow of Islam*
<small>(TRANSLATED BY CHRISTOPHER SHACKLE AND JAVED MAJEED, OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, DELHI, 1997), p. 103.</small>

What marks the decline or end of civilization? It is clear that certain civilizations and cultures have irretrievably disappeared from the passage of human history. The Meso-American civilizations of the Maya are a case in point. They collapsed, leaving monuments to their former glory but little else besides.[1] Carthage was physically erased from existence by the punitive acts of a pitiless Rome – '*Carthago delenda est*', said Cato the Elder, and he meant it.[2] Most distinct civilizations, however, are either absorbed into more successful ones – frequently through conquest – or continue with their distinct patterns but in a greatly weakened or submissive state.

The Retreat of Islamic Civilization

The apparent decline of Islamic civilization has been grist for the historians' mill for over three hundred years, yet without any satisfactory and definitive conclusions as to its extent, causes, and prospects. The early

versions of the decline of Islam connect it to the fall of Baghdad to the Mongols in the thirteenth century: a discredited thesis, but one which still colours the popular imagination. What it lacks in historical veracity it makes up with the sheer drama of the end of the Abbasid Caliphate. It also perpetrates the dangerously deceptive conflation of Islam with the Arabs, ignoring the continuing vitality of the post-Abbasid empires and states based in Iran, Central Asia, North India and, of course, the Ottoman world. A universal consensus has evolved, however, to the effect that Islamic civilization has been in decline since the seventeenth century and that the community of the 'World of Islam' – the huge hemispheric 'Islamicate' space[3] – has been under serious assault, both from within and without. The patterns of unity that marked this universe appear to have broken up, leaving powerful collective memories of what had been – imagined or otherwise.

Will the civilization of Islam ever be capable of regeneration in the form and extent of its past? Is this a dangerous nostalgia which could descend into an irascible sullenness – or, worse, into violence and terror? Islamic civilization has occupied a critical and commanding position in world history. However, the redefinition of the world according to the norms of modernity and the huge technological, cultural, military and economic power of the West, centred as it is around the United States, and increasingly also of East Asia, have consigned it to an essentially subordinate – and even meaningless – role. Islam, even on its own terms, appears to be at odds with the rest of the modern world. A once distinguished historian of Islamic civilization has ended up by treating the subject of his life-long studies as a form of tranquilizing drug, 'bringing comfort and peace of mind to countless millions', but little else besides – to relieve unrelenting poverty and underachievement.[4] At best, Islam is damned with faint praise which accentuates its marginalization and irrelevance.

This is not the only depiction of Islam. There are by now a large number of apologists who argue for Islam's compatibility with the modern world. They include Muslims and non-Muslims, scholars and laymen. Their musings are driven by a desire to make Islam fit into the shoe of modernity and into the world of universal human and democratic rights.

Both these attitudes can trace their lineage to similar debates, which have been raging ever since Islamic civilization moved from being the dangerous 'Other' to falling into the sphere of control of the European powers. There is a remarkable resonance between the spirited clashes of the nineteenth century among Islam's defenders and detractors and

what is taking place now between proponents of the permanent ascendancy of the West as the engine of world history and those who believe in the potential of Islamic civilization to revitalize itself, regain its confidence and assert its vision on mankind. Now that Islam is once again the dangerous 'Other', the outcome of these debates can have momentous consequences.

These issues first broke into the public arena in the nineteenth century, as the European powers' hold on the Islamic world consolidated. European encroachments into Muslim territory had begun well before this period, but the protagonists were not primarily states but commercial companies with special, often monopoly, charters. Companies such as the English East India Company, founded in 1600, or the Dutch United East Indies Company (VOC), which was established in 1602, were also authorized to wage war and negotiate treaties. As these companies sought to dominate the trade in spices and other commodities and goods from territories ruled by Muslims, they encountered the first signs of popular resistance. In Java, a rebellion against the Dutch VOC company broke out in 1670, led by the charismatic Sufi Sheikh Yusuf al-Maqassari. Born into a noble family from the Celebes, he departed for Mecca when he was eighteen, to pursue his religious education. He was initiated into a number of Sufi orders and returned to become a teacher and spiritual guide (as well as son-in-law) to the Sultan of Banten in Java.[5] The rebellion was finally put down in 1683, whereupon Sheikh Yusuf at the age of sixty-eight was exiled to the Cape colony, which was also run by the Dutch East Indies Company. The few years that Sheikh Yusuf spent in the Cape colony before his death in 1699 left a lasting mark on the course of Islam in South Africa. His burial place in the Cape became a much visited shrine for the Muslims of South Africa.

But the age of the European commercial company brandishing a royal monopoly charter and acting as the vanguard of the penetration of Muslim lands did not last beyond the nineteenth century. It was now the turn of nation–states to dominate as imperial powers. The periphery of the Islamic world came under attack first. France launched its North African empire with the capture of Algiers in 1830, sparking a decades-long struggle against strong local resistance led by the towering figure of the Emir Abd el-Qadir. In 1858, following the savage repression of a widespread insurrection against British encroachments, Britain finally imposed its direct imperial authority over India, displacing centuries of Muslim control – even though mainly titular – over large parts of the sub-continent. The British government also abolished the East India Company, which had directly

administered most of India. Britain added Egypt to its dominion over Islamic lands in 1882. By the end of the nineteenth century, entire swathes of Muslim territory fell under European control, leaving only a shrinking Ottoman Empire and the Qajar dynasty in Iran as much diminished states. By the end of the First World War, what remained of that rump became reduced even further, as the Ottoman Empire – for long the pride of Muslim power – was broken up into an array of successor states in the Arab Middle East and Turkey. Islamic civilization, which had nearly always been coeval with rule by Muslims over Muslims, had to contend with a drastically changed world order.

In earlier times, when Muslims came under the control of non-Muslim powers, the outcome was, more often than not, mass expulsions and an early form of 'ethnic cleansing'. The experience of Muslims in Spain after the fall of Granada in 1492 is a case in point.[6] The retreat of Ottoman power in the Balkans is another example where displacement and expulsion of long-settled Muslim populations was a concomitant of the establishment of nation–states in the former Balkan territories of the empire.[7] However, the crisis that affected the Muslim self-image as a result of the imperial invasions and intrusions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was of a qualitatively different nature. The incoming powers sought economic and political dominion and dispossessed and displaced large numbers of people in the process. But in only a few instances was there a concerted effort to replace the indigenous population through colonial settlements, or an ethnically or religiously motivated plan to denude the area of its Muslim population. That would come later. The projection of European imperial power in an almost effortless demonstration of its superiority in military, technical, material, organizational and governance matters challenged the core assumptions that underlay the world view of Islam. Nearly all contemporary Muslim observers of the unfolding drama of European conquest and expansion would bemoan the huge chasm which had opened between the capabilities of the two civilizations and the helplessness of Islam in front of the European juggernaut. As one would-be reformer wrote in 1879:

O, Sons of the East, don't you know that the power of the Westerners and their domination over you came about through their advance in learning and education, and your decline in these domains? . . . Are you satisfied after your past achievements . . . to remain in that wretched state into which you were plunged by ignorance and error?[8]

Missing the Danger Signals

The failure of Muslim rulers and societies to address the twin threats of growing European imperial power and the advent of modernity has exacerbated the Islamic crisis. At one level, this was prompted by the unwillingness of a long-dominant civilization, which had been confident of its superior worth, to engage with what it considered a lesser form. This is certainly the perspective of those who see Islam as engaged in a millennium-long struggle with other civilizations – in particular with Christendom – when, for most of the time, Islamic civilization was ascendant. The sense that Islamic civilization could learn anything of consequence from such cultures – until then considered marginal – was preposterous. The religion of Islam had been perfected, and Muslims, as long as they remained faithful to Islam's precepts, would ensure their victory in this world and the next.

At another level, this failure has more to do with the unprecedented rate at which the technical and scientific advances in the West developed after the seventeenth century; they created an almost unbridgeable 'technological gap' between the West and the Muslim empires of the pre-modern period. The adoption of the techniques of modern warfare and administrative organization by the Muslim empires of the era, mainly for defensive reasons, simply could not keep pace with the changes taking place in the West. It was almost inevitable that the confrontation, when it occurred, would be one-sided. Islamic civilization had perfected itself within its own realm and did not have the attributes necessary to confront a civilization organized along unfamiliar, and ultimately more dynamic, principles.

Of course, these arguments cannot be conclusive. Their starting point has mainly been an occidental framework leading to conclusions which are not shared by those whose conceptual basis is different. Another perspective is that of the West's overt proselytizers, be they religiously or racially inspired or simply intoxicated by the very success of western civilization. The much maligned orientalists of the nineteenth and twentieth century fit partly into this category, although it is not too clear how far they were motivated by their supposed role as imperialism's apologists and handmaidens. Muslim thinkers have understandably viewed the causes of their own decline from a different perspective, but they were certainly affected by the torrent of analyses of their civilization emanating from the metropolises of imperial power.

In all of these variants of the question 'What went wrong?', few have stood back to assess the failure of large parts of the Islamic world to recognize the

danger signals. The initial threat came from the West as well as from the territorial expansion of the Tsarist state. It arrived imperceptibly and took Islam completely unawares. Islam did not face much of a menace from Hinduism, Confucianism or Buddhism. China had been inward-looking for centuries. Japan was an insular power and had effectively cut itself off until the arrival of Commodore Perry's flotilla of 'Black Ships' in 1853, in Tokyo Bay. The warships had been dispatched by President Fillmore as a show of force, with a demand that Japan open itself up to international trade. In most of India, Hinduism had been subordinate to the primacy of Muslim rule. Muslim travellers and diplomats in the West could not quite translate what they saw and experienced into an urgent clarion call to action. And, when the threat finally began to reach home – through military defeats, superior western technical and organizational skills, or seizure of markets by western manufactured goods – it was never recognized for what it was until it was almost too late.

For example, the gradual extension of the reach of the East India Company into large parts of India presaged the destruction of Muslim power in the sub-continent. But the campaigns of Tippu Sultan, the ruler of Mysore, were equally directed against recalcitrant Muslim princes and rulers who had made common cause with the company. In his final battle against the British in 1799, in the fourth Anglo-Mysore War, in which he was killed, Tippu Sultan had to face not only the troops of the company but an equally large force raised against him by the Muslim Nizam of Hyderabad. The flood of adventurers and land-grabbers into Algeria in the 1830s and 1840s did not galvanize all of Algeria's tribes into a common front in the face of the menace from foreign colonizers and settlers. Neither could these tribes relate the gathering threat to the inclusion of their territories into France's empire. There was little understanding of the dynamics of imperial powers, and the patterns by which their control and dominion were achieved were not fully understood by Muslims.

In other instances, the threats were simply ignored because recognizing them would have conflicted with one or more of the established centres of power. So the resistance of the Ottoman elite forces – the Janissaries – to wholesale reform and reorganization was partly due to their fears that their privileges and unique structures would be abolished. Similarly, the religious scholars – or *ulema* class – in nearly all the nineteenth-century Muslim empires refused to countenance the introduction of administrative, educational and legal reforms because that would have undermined their own status as guardians over law and education.

Muslim leaders of command and genius did appear on the scene but they were severely mismatched, especially when the European power would bring all of its material and organizational resources to bear. Frequently the leader of the time would be fighting several battles against his fellow Muslim rulers and putative allies as they would neither acknowledge nor accept his command, driven as they were by jealousies and fear of loss of power and status. Betrayals and double dealings by one's own people were the order of the day in the wars of Emir Abd el-Qadir against the French in Algeria (1832–47), or in those of Imam Shamil against the Russians in Chechnya and Daghestan (1834–59). This experience would be repeated whenever traditional leaders first rose to confront the intruders. In the case of Abd el-Qadir in particular, the necessary combination of religious authority and military prowess could have provided the prototype for the sort of leadership which was needed in order to secure for Islam the space for coming to terms with 'technification' and its profound implications, before European power became irresistible.[9]

The Resistance of Traditional Islam

The campaigns of Abd el-Qadir (frequently termed *jihad*) also provide tantalizing glimpses into the way particular Muslim societies could have slipped into the pathways of modernity on their own terms. Abd el-Qadir was not unaware of the material and technical advances of his adversaries. He confronted them regularly on the battlefield. In the state he ruled in Algeria he did try to introduce the elements of the new technical civilization, but always in a role subordinate to the Islamic nature of his government. His was the last generation of those who confronted these challenges from an Islamic framework that was not affected or distorted by a superimposed European imprint.

The overlay of modern western institutions and perspectives necessarily changed the state of mind of the next wave of Muslim leaders. This began roughly around the mid-nineteenth century. By that time, the effect of European ideas, institutions and power began to dominate the world of Islam. The prevalent world view of Islam, which Abd el-Qadir and his contemporaries held to be true, quickly turned into the 'traditional' view and, later, into the 'reactionary' view as they were rapidly supplanted by new frameworks. At its core, this view was based on the twin pillars of Sharia law governing outer life and the ethical foundations underpinning *tariqa* Sufism, foundations which provided for social solidarity. The latter

were ubiquitous religious orders that existed throughout the world of Sunni Islam, with a rough counterpart provided by the popular piety associated with the veneration of the Imams in Shia Islam. There were other forms of popular organization that provided for social cohesion in the world of pre-modern Islam. In the setting of Islam's cities and towns, these included the craft and professional guilds associated with the *futtuwa* – or chivalric – movements. (In Ottoman Turkey, such guilds were known as *akhis*; in Iran, as the *javanmardi*.) These also had a profound ethical foundation and linked their adherents in a long chain leading back to the early spiritual masters of Islam.

The qualities that Abd el-Qadir exhibited during his near twenty-year struggle with the French – and, equally importantly, during his imprisonment in France and exile to Turkey and Syria – were a textbook case for the type of inspirational leadership that fitted into the heroic mould of Islamic history. In critical times, a leader would emerge who, by military, organizational or political genius, would overcome formidable odds, repel aggressors and re-establish justice and order. Saladin had been just such a leader – at least in the profane world. His valorous achievements against the crusaders had receded from popular memory and had languished for centuries, unrecognized, until they were resurrected in the nineteenth century and re-entered Muslims' imagination. In religious terms, it was the person of the Mahdi – the Redeemer – who played the role of the one who saved the Muslims from oppression and godlessness. The great revolt of the neo-Mahdi, Muhammad Ahmad, in the Sudan in 1881, against Anglo-Egyptian subjugation was just such a case of heroic leadership which combined the religious with the political and military element.

Abd el-Qadir combined several qualities in an epic struggle against the might of the French empire, a struggle which was ultimately doomed to failure. His extraordinary feats of chivalry became the stuff of legend and carried into his period of exile. His treatment of his enemies was invariably correct and marked by his meticulous observance of the Islamic rules of warfare. At one point, he released his French prisoners of war because his army did not have sufficient provisions for them. These were the very virtues that summed up the prototype of the inspired leader. They were undoubtedly rooted in a deep Islamic identity, through which events and personalities were filtered and assessed. Abd el-Qadir addressed the French not in the idiom of race or nation, but in that of the religion and the civilization it nurtured. 'How do you boast of the power of France without knowing the power of Islam? The past centuries are the best witnesses of

the power of Islam and its victories over its enemies. And we – even though we may be weak as you claim – are strong by the grace of the One and Only God.'[10]

The response of Imam Shamil, a Sufi sheikh of the Naqshabandi order, as he was fighting the Russian incursions into the Caucasus in the same period would have been no different. There is some anecdotal evidence that Shamil may have met Abd el-Qadir in Mecca during the Hajj (the obligatory Muslim pilgrimage to Mecca) of 1825. These two Sufi adepts would later lead two of the most celebrated wars of Muslim resistance to European advances. Abd el-Qadir was immersed from his earliest youth into the Sufi *tariqa* of his father, Muhyi-el-Din, who was a sheikh of the Qadiri order and a follower of the great Andalusian medieval mystic, Ibn 'Arabi. The governments that Abd el-Qadir and Shamil established for brief interludes, before they were overwhelmed, were all Sharia-based. In the Caucasus, the period of Shamil's state is known as 'the time of Sharia'. There was no other model that they would, or could, have considered.

At the same time, Abd el-Qadir could sense the weaknesses of his society and was aware that the struggle might be unsustainable, not only because of the military imbalance but also because France embodied the desperate challenges of technological and organizational proficiency his world had not yet found means to cope with. The truces which he signed with the French and which punctuated the war were partly to do with his realization that the conflict could not, in the long run, work to the advantage of Muslims. Above all, time was needed – but it was not forthcoming. With his struggle being ended by a combination of extreme French brutality and serial betrayals by his allies, Abd el-Qadir opened another chapter, in many ways more remarkable, in his life. This phase saw the full flowering of his spiritual consciousness.[11] He understood that his outer *jihad* was lost because of the fatal weaknesses in his society and because of the absence of any tools in its armoury with which to confront the utterly new forces it was facing. In many ways, Abd el-Qadir was the last leader of the pre-modern Islamic era who sought to understand and address the challenges of the emergent world in terms of Islam's classical heritage. Until his surrender in 1847 to the Duc d'Aumale, Abd el-Qadir had spent his entire life without any serious exposure to Europeans or European ways, even though he had kept abreast of debates in the French Assembly in so far as they related to France's Algerian policies. After that, the Islamic response to imperial expansion and to modernity became inflected with the creeping modernization of Muslim societies. Even traditionalists – *malgré*

eux mêmes – were unable to frame a world view free from the new para-
digms that were sweeping the globe.

Spirituality and Leadership in Islam

Abd el-Qadir's extraordinary spirituality has been virtually ignored in the
assessment of his significance as a leader. Nearly all biographies gloss over
the years of his exile in Turkey and Syria, when he appeared to have made
an accommodation with the French occupation of Algeria. Historians have
preferred to concentrate on his role as a military figure and, latterly, as a
nationalist hero. In fact it was not his careful observance of the outer rules
of Islamic conduct that was striking. This was the norm of nearly all
Muslim leaders of the period. Rather, it was his intense spiritual exercises,
which he conducted in private during his years of campaigning. A chroni-
cler of Abd el-Qadir's wars was Léon Roche, a Frenchman who had feigned
to convert to Islam in order to join the emir's entourage. Roche, pretending
to be asleep, observed Abd el-Qadir at night during a siege of an Algerian
town in 1838. 'He was standing there three steps away from me. His two
arms were raised to the height of his head . . . He had come to an ecstatic
state. His aspirations towards heaven were such that he seemed no longer
to touch the earth.'[12] Abd el-Qadir's heightened self-awareness was central
to his persona. It continued in a more open and obvious manner in his
years of exile, especially as he settled into a more pronounced contempla-
tive life in Ottoman Damascus. He was a noted commentator on Ibn 'Arabi
and wrote a magnificent spiritual work, the *Mawaqif,* on the milestones of
the spiritual seeker. In another extraordinary feat of chivalry and courage,
his mansion compound became a refuge for thousands of the Christians of
Damascus who were fleeing from the murderous onslaughts of the mob
during the Maronite and Druze wars in Mount Lebanon in 1860. Lanusse,
the acting French consul in Damascus at the time, credited him with saving
the lives of 11,000 Syrian Christians.[13]

It would be impossible to separate Abd el-Qadir's conduct and achieve-
ments from his heightened spiritual awareness. This also explains the speed
with which he came to terms with French and, by inference, European
preponderance, and his subsequent reluctance to lend his name to anticolo-
nial agitation. His intense connection with the medieval master Ibn 'Arabi
went beyond his immersion in the latter's works. He visited his tomb in
Damascus during his earliest pilgrimage to Mecca, the Hajj, and in his exile
years Abd el-Qadir gave frequent instructions in the system of Ibn 'Arabi.

There is sufficient evidence to consider Abd el-Qadir to have been a follower of the Ibn 'Arabi school – the so-called Akbarian school of Sufism – even during his campaigns against the French. Before his death, Abd el-Qadir ordered that his body should be interred near the tomb of Ibn 'Arabi himself, and it was from there that his remains were returned to Algeria in 1966. The same Ibn 'Arabi would write in one of his masterful spiritual poems: 'My heart has become capable of all forms; for gazelles a meadow, for monks, a monastery.'[14] But at the same time he would not hesitate to admonish a ruler for not applying the precepts of the Sharia.

For Abd el-Qadir there was no contradiction between fighting the French for years, at immeasurable odds, and being prepared to walk away from this once it became obvious that it was no longer propitious to continue, but rather to acknowledge the changed circumstances. As he wrote to the French Provisional Government following the 1848 Revolution, protesting his imprisonment, which violated French oaths given at his surrender: 'I defended my country and my religion as long as I could . . . When I was conquered – when it was impossible for me any longer to doubt that God, for inscrutable reasons, had withdrawn his support from me – I decided to withdraw from the world.'[15]

The spiritual dimension of Islamic leadership was an essential component of the archetypal leader in pre-modern times. The systematic distancing of the requirements of spiritual attainment in the making of a leader became a trait of all later Muslim reformers and thinkers. In fact modernist Islam dismissed all claims for spiritual realization implicit in the Sufi orders. Later, this turned into outright hostility, opening the way for the elimination of the spiritual in determining the suitability of a ruler. This dichotomy between the wordly and the spiritual has always been a feature in Islamic history, and, more often than not, was settled in favour of worldly, cunning or duplicitous leadership. It goes back to the earliest days of Islam of the seventh century, when the archetypal worldliness of Mu'awiyya and his Umayyad descendants were pitted against the archetypal spirituality of the Household of the Prophet.

In practice, the exigencies of political power in Muslim lands have tended to ignore the imperatives of moral, let alone spiritualized, rule implicit in the world view of Islam itself. This trait has naturally accelerated in modern times, resulting in the astonishing argument made by modernists that it was the spiritual dimension of Islam, distorted by the Sufi orders, that led to the decay and decrepitude of Muslim countries and opened them to foreign exploitation and conquest. Spirituality became

suspect and, with it, the possibility that leadership could arise from the inspired individual. This tendency was increased by the deterioration of the condition of the Sufi brotherhoods themselves. By the early twentieth century, colonial authorities had managed in many instances to undermine the traditional resistance to their power of the Sufi brotherhoods. The colonial governments encouraged the Sufi brotherhoods to concern themselves exclusively with spirituality, frequently by co-opting sheikhs of the orders who were willing to collaborate with, or at least tolerate, the presence of the colonial power. This neutralized the orders as a potential focus for dissent or resistance, and frequently put them on a collision course with the more radical, anti-colonial Islamic modernists of the times. For example, the anti-colonial Association of Muslim Scholars in Algeria was virulently opposed to the Sufi *tariqas* and saw them as an obstacle to raising the political consciousness of ordinary Algerians.[16]

Abandoning the Islamic World View

The mid-nineteenth century saw the Muslim world convulsed by the dramatic changes which jolted its consciousness. What united the disparate parts of the civilization of Islam at this point were the issues of foreign encroachments and Muslim weaknesses. To the new breed of Muslim thinkers and scholars, there was simply no room for the notion of the individual balancing between the demands of an inner ethic and an outer code of action. These were insufficient to address Muslim powerlessness in the face of unremitting imperial expansion. It was action, not contemplation, that was needed. What mattered was to refashion the understanding of Islam in ways which would ensure that Muslims had the wherewithal to confront the claims of the West to political, economic and military superiority. The sense of inadequacy in front of European civilization extended even to the moral sphere. Many exclaimed that it was now Europe that carried the virtues which Islam had claimed as its exclusive preserve.

A process was started which radically undermined the possibility of reaching a form of modernity that stayed within the framework of Islam. Critically, the gateway to modernity, and thus to re-empowerment, was seen as lying outside the civilization of Islam itself. In many ways, the need to justify the world view of Islam echoes the debates between the Muslims of the early centuries of Islamic civilization and the Hellenized and Christian populations who lived under Muslim rule and who doubted

Islam's superiority as a religion and as metaphysics. The great difference was that, in the earlier period, it was Islam that held temporal power and could determine the direction of its outcome. The situation was now reversed, with a confident and expansionist West relentlessly challenging the basic assumptions of a civilization which was clearly in retreat, at least in its territorial dimension.

Here the case of the successful modernization of Japan, which commenced in earnest only in 1868 after the Meiji Restoration, represents a serious counter-example and raises a dilemma concerning the apparent failure of modernization in the nineteenth-century Muslim world. In fact Egypt, which had became an autonomous political entity in 1821 under the rule of the Albanian Muhammad Ali, had embarked on an effort to modernize its state and society a full fifty years before Japan started its own process.[17] At the end of the century, Japan was well on the way to joining the advanced powers, while Egypt languished under British rule. In Japan, the emphasis was on strengthening the bonds of Japanese exclusiveness through education, through state Shintoism and through the traditional virtues of thrift, diligence and loyalty in order to construct a modern economy. These were the legacies of Japan's Tokugawa past, and they were not discarded or questioned in the Meiji reformers' plans. It is true that Japan's modernizing ethic involved an acceptance of certain western ways, especially in state administration and economic and technological management, but this acceptance was always discriminating, even eclectic. The alliance between a reforming bureaucracy and a nascent industrial and financial class did ultimately end in militarism, plutocracy and a catastrophic war, and the country had to be fundamentally recast in the post-war era, but this was by no means preordained.[18] In Egypt, the possibility of Islam providing a door to modernity was not only questioned; it was often rejected on principle. Worse, there was an attempt to shoehorn Islam into the constructs of modern science and rationality, the implicit assumption being that Islamic civilization was incapable of providing the foundations for its own scientific explorations and advance.

The illustrious Indian paedagogue and scholar Sir Syed Ahmad Khan had said as much. In an 1884 lecture on Islam, Sir Syed spoke of the need for a new rationality – a new theology which reinterpreted the sacred text of the Quran in the light of reason and science. This was the precursor to countless calls to re-read the texts of Islam in an allusive manner, from the angle of personal or social utility, democratic rights, socialism, feminism – or whatever the pressing issues of the time might have been.

In 1883, the noted French philologist Ernst Renan delivered a lecture entitled 'Islam and science', in which he asserted, *inter alia*, that the Arabs were hostile to science and philosophy and that whatever science had entered Islamic civilization came from non-Arab sources. A retort followed from the pan-Islamic agitator and ideologue, the Iranian-born Sayyid Jamaluddin 'al-Afghani'. He broadly agreed with Renan, but went several steps further towards a general denunciation of religious faith and of its incompatibility with the scientific spirit. Afghani wrote in his 'Response to Renan': 'A true believer must, in fact, turn from the path of studies that have as their object scientific proof . . . What would be the benefit of seeking [scientific] proof when he believes he possesses it all?' Later in the article Afghani wrote, specifically as regards the Muslim religion: 'It is clear that wherever it became established, this religion tried to stifle the sciences . . .'[19]

It is astounding that one of the greatest exponents of pan-Islamic revival, who had an unrivalled influence on his contemporaries, could hold his own civilization in such scorn. Afghani's thought influenced a great number of people and his speculations on Islam and science became received wisdom for the next century and set the pattern of subsequent views regarding the essential incompatibility between Islam and science.

The undermining of confidence in the ability of Islamic civilization to adapt to modernity extended over all aspects of life, propelled by the torrent of new thought flowing in from the West. The uncritical adoption of western ideas by leading reformers of the Muslim world, who had lost their connection with the universe of the spiritually balanced individual and community, contributed greatly to the collective loss of self-understanding which was felt in the entire Muslim world in the nineteenth century. One after another, the pillars of Islam's unique constructs were demolished, frequently without the proponents of an alternative being fully aware of the consequences of their acts.

One example is the financial and economic consequences arising from juridical opinions given by Muhammad Abduh, Afghani's foremost disciple and co-worker (until he broke with him). Abduh was an advocate of *ijtihad* – that is, the use of independent reasoning to reach juridical conclusions – and he extended its scope to cover areas that were not previously considered within its legitimate ambit. In this process, Abduh authorized, for instance, the establishment of interest-based banking in a 1903 *fatwa*. This legitimized the establishment of financial institutions of a western type, which set the pattern for economic development in Egypt and

elsewhere in the Muslim world.[20] This simple move effectively put a stop to the possibility of developing any meaningful financial and exchange institutions which might have drawn on the tradition of Islamic economic and financial transactions, avoiding the religiously problematic issue of interest altogether.

Revivalists and the 'Golden Age of Islam'

Revivalist movements in Islam pre-dated the arrival of the Europeans. The eighteenth century saw the rise of a number of significant movements for reform and revival that sought to purify Islamic life and society. These coincided with the ebb of power that affected all the three main Muslim empires of the time. The leaders of these movements were mainly drawn from the ranks of the *ulemas* (religious scholars) and from the Sufis. The *ulemas* were appalled by the loosening of religious standards and the toleration of dubious, even pagan, practices that increasingly inflected popular Islam. This was especially evident in the multi-ethnic Mogul empire of India, with its large Hindu majority population, where an accommodating and syncretistic Islam was tolerated and even promoted by the court. The last of the powerful Mogul rulers, Aurangzeb, abandoned the policy of religious accommodation and sought to impose a strong Islamic identity on the empire. The Mogul state was greatly weakened by his death in 1707, and could no longer foster a powerful Islamic identity. The task of protecting the cause of Islam fell to the *ulemas.*

One of the first to rise to the task was Shah Waliullah Dahlawi (1703–62). Born in Uttar Pradesh in India, Shah Waliullah spent twelve years in Mecca and Medina advancing his religious knowledge and credentials. He was an advocate of a close reliance on the *Hadith* – the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad – as a guide to correct Islamic action and conduct. The emphasis on the authority of the *Hadith* is a common feature of Islamic reformers and revivalists, even into the present period. Shah Waliullah left over fifty major works in Arabic and Persian, including two, the *Sata'at* (*Shining Lights*) and the *Lamahat* (*Flashing Lights*), which are masterpieces of mystical philosophy. He was a tireless proselytizer for Islam and a champion of Islamic unity in India, and he sought an accommodation between the Shia and Sunnis. His son Shah Abdul Aziz was himself a noted scholar in the revivalist tradition. By that time India was slipping nearly entirely out of Muslim control, which prompted Shah Abdul Aziz famously to declare India to be *Dar-ul-Harb* ('The Abode of War'). India could no longer be considered

a domain under Islamic law. Shah Abdul Aziz's 1803 *fatwa* was directed mainly against the British and called for a *jihad* against their presence.

In West Africa, the revivalist movements originated mainly from the Fulani people, with their deep Islamic attachments. Their spread into the Sahara brought them in contact with pagan and semi-Islamized tribes, which prompted one of the most famous *jihads* of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, that of Usman dan Fodio (1754–1817). Usman never travelled to Mecca or Cairo for his religious education, drawing instead on the Sufi networks of the Sahara to which he belonged. Usman's preaching in the Hausaland – modern-day northern Nigeria – generated tensions with local rulers, which led to his call for a *jihad* in 1804. The wars were successful and Usman founded the Sultanate of Sokoto, which persisted until the British conquest of Nigeria at the end of the nineteenth century.[21]

The revivalist movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were also related to the rise of the Naqshabandiya Sufi movement, an order that sought to purify Sufism from practices and accretions that were unacceptable to the orthodox *ulema*.[22] A number of the leaders of the reform movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were themselves affiliated to the Naqshabandiya order, including Shah Waliullah himself. The anti-Dutch rebellions in Aceh (in northern Sumatra), throughout the nineteenth century, were also actively supported by the Naqshabandiya. A similar story unfolds in the Caucasus. Both major rebellions against the Russians, by Imam Mansur in 1785–91 and later by Imam Shamil, were led by Naqshabandiya sheikhs. In eastern Turkestan, Naqshabandiya sheikhs led uprisings against Manchu rule throughout the nineteenth century. Other Sufi orders of the period also sought to purify their doctrines and practices and bring them closer to orthodoxy. These orders would play a major part both in the revivalist movement and in the resistance to foreigners. The Sanusiya order founded by Muhammad Ali al-Sanusi (1787–1859) is a case in point. Al-Sanusi founded numerous lodges (*zawiyas*) in the Libyan Desert which acted both as a scaffolding for the nascent state and as the focus of resistance to French – and, later, Italian – advances into the Sahara.

Part of the message – and allure – of the revivalists consisted in their attempts to construct a 'golden age' of Islam, an age from which Muslims deviated, thereby condemning themselves to a secondary status. The many revivalist movements of the pre-modern period were ultimately eclipsed in their significance by the uncompromising and literalist monotheism associated with the Hanbali scholar[23] Muhammad ibn Abd el-Wahhab (1703–92) – the founder of the eponymous Wahhabi movement. Abd

el-Wahhab had based his teachings partly on the rediscovery of the prolific writings and screeds of the medieval theologian Ibn Taymiyya, which purported to give substance to the notion of a golden age. The influence of the Wahhabis was limited to the wilds of the Nejd, until their aggressiveness pushed them out of their desert redoubts and into the Hejaz, the homeland of Mecca and Medina, and the fringes of Iraq. At that point the Ottoman authorities prevailed upon their then viceroy in Egypt, Muhammad Ali, to dispatch an expeditionary force into Arabia to destroy the Wahhabist state. The Wahhabis' 'capital', the village of Dari'yya, was razed to the ground in 1818 and its ruler, Abdullah ibn Saud, was hauled off to Istanbul, where he was put to death. This apparently ended the Wahhabist revival.

However, the themes associated with Wahhabism, especially its insistence that there was a 'pure' Islam relating to the early days of the Prophet and his immediate successors, became the stock in trade of the next wave of religious reformers of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Afghani, though a Shia by birth and thus an apostate in Wahhabi demonology, seemed to be the first to use the notion of a 'golden age' to whose values and conduct Muslims should return if they were to confront western advances. This idea was later built on by Abduh, who resurrected the phrase *al-salaf al-saleh* ('the righteous forefathers') to designate the idealized community of Islam. He included in it not only the companions of the Prophet and the early 'rightly guided caliphs', but also the carriers of the intellectual and religious legacy of Islam's middle period. This was an Islam where the rewards of scrupulous religious observance and obedience were political, intellectual and worldly success.

The *Salafiyya* movement, or Salafism grew out of Abduh's reformist circles. It called for a return to a 'fundamentalist' form of Islam before its purported corruption by centuries of lax Muslim rulers and superstitious customs and innovations. It evolved further with the writings of Abduh's disciple, Rashid Ridha (1863–1935), and his widely-read newspaper *al-Manar*. From its base in Cairo the paper reached the far corners of the Muslim world.

The *Salafiyya* movement owes its origins to an intellectual reaction to the plight of Muslims in the heyday of European ascendancy. It cannot seriously claim any continuity with the historical intellectual traditions of Islamic civilization. In this sense, fundamentalist Islam is an eminently modern phenomenon. Later in the twentieth century it converged with a Wahhabism which was re-empowered after the fall of the Arabian Peninsula to the forces of Ibn Saud in 1925. Both currents, Wahhabism and

Salafism, joined forces to redefine the practices, beliefs and norms of Islam for a great number of people.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the territorial, cultural and psychological unity of Islamic civilization had been torn apart. It was a unity based, in the final analysis, on the outcome of successive Muslims' interaction with the Quran and with the prophetic message in a geographical space which was continuous, or that at least allowed for continuous contact. Islam did not participate in the epochal changes that transformed western societies, and, when modernity finally came to its societies, it was frequently accompanied by a sense of degradation and failure. The notion of the autonomous individual dedicated to progress and freedom, and the idea of the mass, which interacts with history as class or nation, were utterly alien and too far removed from the legacy of Islam. Yet the elites of the Muslim world might have been able to connect with such notions, if only because they had the material wherewithal and the political or social desire to do so, and some were open advocates of an eventual – benign – melding of Islam with the West.

In his sojourns in Paris and London, Afghani was smitten with the freedoms and order of the West. 'In Europe I saw infidels who behaved as Muslims; in Muslim lands I saw Muslims who behaved as infidels,' he was reputed to have said. But the individual Muslim could not easily jettison his or her world view without a traumatic break with the past. How were they to acquire the virtues embodied in European civilization without seriously compromising or abandoning their own legacy? And what aspects of the West were they to acknowledge as the foundations of modernity? The Judaeo-Christian heritage? The literary traditions of France and England? Parliamentary democracy – or Prussian militarism? Renaissance art – or the philosophy of Kant? Many Muslims would in fact indiscriminately adopt the culture and customs of the West, seeing in them the prototypes of all that was vital and progressive. Entirely new arenas of art and culture appeared to beckon, from novel writing and playwriting to painting and the opera. But the ensuing hybrid culture would never amount to much. It was unable to establish its worth in modern terms by using contemporary aesthetic or critical standards. Islam's own heritage of high culture was being removed as the living and guiding tradition for the moral or creative Muslim, and it was replaced, sometimes by its own guardians, by something entirely alien: the imported culture of the West.

At the same time, the terms upon which modernity was introduced into Islamic societies were very different in form and intent from what was

taking place in the West itself. It often arrived in garbled and barely recognizable form, mimicking rather than duplicating the original model. The comparison with Japan is, once again, very instructive. Tokyo University reached the heights of academic excellence, but not so Syed Ahmad Khan's Aligarh Muslim University, or the Egyptian University at Cairo, both of which were established along European lines and with the loftiest of intentions of bringing modern education to the elites.[24]

The disruption of continuity with the past was not something that the ordinary occidental needed to ponder or manage, even when historical change advanced at a rapid pace. After all, the locus of the great engine of transformation was firmly the West. The Muslim individual, increasingly disconnected from his past and not yet in the folds of the atomized crowd, had nowhere to turn for what was familiar and comprehensible. The divisions within Muslim societies became ever sharper as the nineteenth century came to a close. The work of Islam's modernizers was pushing religion increasingly into the private sphere, where it could never belong exclusively in any case. By trying to come to terms with European ascendancy, the reformers succeeded, perhaps unconsciously, in justifying an entirely different perspective on life. They used their own construct of Islam, one which was not contiguous with Islam's own past. They even purported to give it moral sanction. As the living edifice of the civilization was gradually being dismantled, Islam retreated into a historical consciousness which retained a still powerful sense of identity. It would emerge later in the twentieth century, in forms that would be scarcely distinguishable.