1 ISLAM AND DEMOCRACY

The Perverse Charm of an Irrelevant Question

A MAJOR PREOCCUPATION of nineteenth-century social theorists was to dispel the distinction between the religious and the *non*religious. Now, after over a century of modernization, we are compelled to differentiate between the religious and the *more* religious. This "over-religiosity," couched in various terms as fundamentalism, revivalism, conservatism, fanaticism, or extremism, appears to represent a global trend that involves most of the world's major religions. Yet it has shaped a particular negative thinking about Muslim societies in particular.

Undoubtedly, the terrorist attacks in the United States on September 11, 2001, and the subsequent developments have greatly intensified Western anxiety over the "threat" of "Islamic fundamentalism" and have reinforced more than ever the notion of the "peculiarity of Muslims." Of course, the notion of "unique" Muslims is not new; it has been the hallmark of the "Orientalist" outlook that Edward Said and others have so remarkably and critically taken up.[1] For Said and other critics, Orientalism represented a discursive apparatus that produced knowledge as an instrument of power, as a means to maintain domination. It is the story of how a host of travelers, novelists, artists, diplomats, scholars, and now the media depict the Muslim Middle East as a monolithic, fundamentally static, and therefore "peculiar" entity. By emphasizing the exceptionality of Muslim societies in general, they focus on the narrow notion of a static culture and religion as the context of historical continuity and on individual elites or external forces as the source of change. Consequently, group interests, social movements, and political economies as internal sources of change are largely overlooked.

But how "peculiar" are Muslim societies, if they are at all? Are they so different as to require different analytical tools? Can we speak of such a thing as "Muslim societies" at all? By employing such a broad category are we not in a sense "re-Orientalizing" Muslim societies and cultures, constructing homogeneous entities where they do not exist? Does the category "Muslim societies" not imply religion as the defining characteristic of these cultures? Would this category not exclude and "otherise" the nonreligious and the non-Muslim from citizenship in nations with a Muslim majority? While such questions address legitimate concerns, I believe nevertheless that "Muslim societies" can serve as a useful analytical category.

I have proposed elsewhere that the terms "Islamic world" and "Islamic society," used in *singular abstract* forms, may indeed imply that Islam is the central factor that shapes the dynamics of these societies.[2] "Islamic society" becomes a generality constructed by others to describe Muslims and their cultures. It tells how others imagine what Muslims are and even how they should be. This worldview has been perpetuated in part by some Muslim groups (mainly Islamists) who themselves construct a unitary Islamic landscape. In contrast, the designation "Muslim societies," understood as *plural* and *concrete* entities, allows a self-conscious Muslim majority to define their own reality in an inevitably contested, differentiated, and dynamic fashion. Here the emphasis is not on Islam but on Muslims as agents of their societies and cultures, even if not of their own making. And "culture" is perceived not as static codes and conducts but as processes that are flexible, always changing, and contested. These are the societies in which aspects of Islam, interpreted and adopted in diverse ways, have influenced some domains of private and public life—including the realms of morality, family relations, gender dynamics, law, and sometimes (but not always) politics and the state. What is common to this differentiated whole is the claim of all Muslims (liberal or conservative, activist or layman) to "true" Islam, to the sacred texts.

Yet in reality "Muslim societies" are never monolithic and never religious by definition; nor are their cultures confined to religion alone. Indeed, national cultures, historical experiences, political trajectories, and the element of class have often produced distinct cultures and subcultures of Islam, as well as different religious perceptions and practices. In this sense, each "Muslim" (majority) country comprises an ensemble of people with varying degrees of religious affiliation: political Islamists, the actively pious, the ordinarily religious, and secular or non-Muslim minorities. Degrees of religious affilia-

tion among these groups can even change at different historical junctures. In this sense, Muslim societies resemble their counterparts in the developing world. Similarities are particularly compounded by the relentless process of globalization, which tends to produce not only differentiation, but also parallel structures and processes between the nations of the globe and without regard to religion.

Despite structural similarities, the Muslim Middle East (and by extension the Muslim world) is still measured by the "exceptionalist" yardstick of which religio-centrism is the core. Thus the region's authoritarian regimes, "weak civil societies," or political cultures are often attributed to its main religion, Islam. Although "exceptionalism" is not limited to the Muslim Middle East—we have also "American exceptionalism," "European exceptionalism," and the "peculiarity of the English," as E. P. Thompson called it—it has often led to the marginalization of this region from mainstream scholarly perspectives.

At least three factors have contributed to the "exceptionalist" streak in the perception of the Muslim Middle East. The first is the continuing prevalence of Orientalist thought in the West, particularly in the United States, which seems to converge well with interventionist foreign policy objectives in the Middle East. The second is the persistence of authoritarian rule by local regimes (for example, the Shah's Iran, Saddam's Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt) that have often been supported by Western states, especially the United States. The third factor has to do with the regional emergence and expansion of socially conservative and undemocratic Islamist movements. These positions and processes have given rise to countless claims and counterclaims that revolve around the infamous question of whether Islam is compatible with democracy—the question to which this book is devoted.

ISLAM, DEMOCRACY, AND SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Prevailing media and intellectual circles in the West view Islam as being at the root of authoritarian polity in the Muslim Middle East. To them Islam is patriarchal and lacks any concept of citizenship and freedom, since its belief in God's sovereignty has diminished popular power.[3] The religion of Muhammad, instead of being a private matter, is essentially political. Islam embodies, it is often claimed, a "world in which human life doesn't have the same value as it does in the West, in which freedom, democracy, openness and creativity are alien."[4] Such views have been energized by many home-grown Islamists

who, in the name of their religion, suspect democracy as a "foreign construct" and suspend popular will in favor of God's sovereignty (see Chapters Four and Five). In contrast to advocates of this "incompatibility thesis," others tend to present an *inherently* democratic spirit of Islam and claim it as a religion of tolerance, pluralism, justice, and human rights.[5] "Islamic rule is by nature democratic," according to Rashed al-Ghannoushi.[6] The Qur'anic notion of *shura* (consultation), in this perspective, ensures the compatibility of Islamic doctrine with democracy, and its valuation of human beings by degree of piety implies equality in race and gender and free will. The God-given sovereignty of the *umma* (community of Muslim believers) underlies democratic governance based upon pluralism, difference, and human rights.[7]

In their methodological approach, both "skeptics" and "apologists" share an exclusive commitment to texts, drawing their arguments from the literal reading of sacred scriptures (the Qur'an and *hadīth*), and pay astonishingly little attention to what these texts mean to the fragmented Muslim citizenry in their day-to-day lives. What is more, rarely is there discussion of how these meanings change over time.

A central argument of this book is that sacred injunctions are matters of struggle, of competing readings. They are, in other words, matters of history; humans define their truth. The individuals and groups who hold social power can assert and hegemonize their truths. Historical narratives in this book demonstrate how societal forces, notably social movements, play a decisive role in changing and shaping the "truth" of holy scriptures. The plurality of various theological genres—liberation theology, feminist theology, "queer theology," and, I would add, "republican theology"—reveals how different social groups (the poor, women, homosexuals, the religiously oppressed) define their religious meanings by and large according to their social existence.

Is Islam, then, compatible with democracy (assuming that "democracy" is free of ambiguity, which it is not)?[8] My contention is that this is the wrong question to pose in the first place. The question is not whether Islam is or is not compatible with democracy or, by extension, modernity, but rather under what conditions Muslims can *make* them compatible. Nothing intrinsic to Islam—or, for that matter, to any other religion—makes it *inherently* democratic or undemocratic. *We*, the social agents, determine the inclusive or authoritarian thrust of religions because, from this perspective, religion is nothing but a body of beliefs and ideas that invariably make claims to authentic meaning and a "higher truth." Regardless of whether religious beliefs

and experiences relate to supernatural reality, in the end, according to James Beckford, "religion is expressed by means of human ideas, symbols, feelings, practices, and organizations."[9] In a sense, religious injunctions are nothing but our understanding of them; they are what we make them to be.[10]

Some fifty years ago many social scientists believed that Christianity and democracy were incompatible.[11] But today the most deep-rooted democracies are in the Christian heartland, even though fascism also emerged, and was associated with the church, in the heartland of Christianity. Indeed, authoritarian and exclusivist ideologies coupled with Christianity have not been uncommon. Early Christian sects promoted loyalty to authoritarian rulers, so long as they were not atheists and did not harm the believers. Obedience was at the heart of Christian political thought, based on the belief that higher powers were ordained by God. "Those who sit in the office of magistrate sit in the place of God, and their judgment is as if God judged from heaven," Martin Luther proclaimed. "If the emperor calls me, God calls me."[12] Indeed, early Christian accommodation of authoritarian power led to a tragic anti-Semitism enshrined by biblical interpretation of the Crucifixion for which the Jews, not the Romans, were claimed to be responsible.[13] Even today, some staunch Christians proclaim democracy is the "cause of all world problems" because, as the invention of Satan, it rules not by God's will but by the will of "sinful humans" who demand "abortion laws, anti–death penalty laws, gay rights," and the like.[14] This might represent the voice of Christian extremists or "outlaws," but in September 2000 the Vatican itself lashed out at the idea of "religious pluralism," pronouncing non-Christian creeds as flawed and "defective" and their believers as being in a "gravely deficient situation."[15]

Despite this history, today few lay Christians would probably read the Bible in the authoritarian terms of Luther and "Christian outlaws" or treat their creed as exclusively as the Vatican. In other words, *we*, as social forces, render a religion inclusive or exclusive, monovocal or pluralist, and democratic or authoritarian.[16] Resorting to mere literal readings of scripture to determine the democratic thrust of a religion will not take us very far, not only because ambiguity, multiple meanings, and disagreement are embedded in many religious scriptures (as the scholars Nasr Abu Zayd and Khalid Mas'ud have shown in the Qur'an and *hadīth*), but because individuals and groups with diverse interests and orientations may find their own, often conflicting, truths in the very same scriptures.[17] Rather than resorting to the Qur'an or Shari'a to make sense of Osama bin Laden, or of Islamist radicalism in

general, we need to examine the conditions that allow social forces to make a particular reading of the sacred texts hegemonic. And this is closely linked to groups' capacity to mobilize consensus around their "truth." Mere reference to scriptures may not serve as a useful analytical tool, but it is at the core of the political battle to hegemonize discourses. Stating that "Islamic rule is by nature democratic" might be naïve analytically, but it is an expression of the struggle to *make* Islamic rule democratic. At any rate, efforts to make a religion democratic undoubtedly begin at the intellectual level. The challenge is to give democratic interpretations material power, to fuse them with popular consciousness.

Foucault's emphasis on the power of words, the power of discourse, is well known and instructive. Yet we can also dispute Foucault's unqualified claims by arguing that power lies not simply in words or in the "inner truth" expressed in words, but primarily in those who utter them, those who give truth and thus power to those words. In other words, discourse is *not* power unless it is given material force. Perhaps we should look not simply for what the discourse is, but more specifically for where the power lies. The idea of, say, "Islam being compatible with democracy," carries different weight depending on who expresses it. It is not enough to utter "right" ideas; those ideas must be given material force by mobilizing consensus around them. This inevitably leads us into the realm of social movement theory and practice, which, I suggest, mediates between discourse and power, between the word and the world. The compatibility or incompatibility of Islam and democracy is not a matter of philosophical speculation but of political struggle. It is not as much a matter of texts as it is a balance of power between those who want a democratic religion and those who pursue an authoritarian version. *Islamism* and *post-Islamism* tell the story of these two social forces.

ISLAMISM: MOVEMENT AND WORLDVIEW

In its high degree of generality, Islamism emerged as the language of self-assertion to mobilize those (largely middle-class high achievers) who felt marginalized by the dominant economic, political, or cultural processes in their societies, those for whom the perceived failure of both capitalist modernity and socialist utopia made the language of morality, through religion, a substitute for politics. In a sense, it was the Muslim middle-class way of saying no to what they considered their excluders—their national elites, secular governments, and those governments' Western allies. They rebuffed "Western

cultural domination," its political rationale, moral sensibilities, and normative symbols, even though they shared many of its features—neckties, food, education, and technologies. In contrast, those who enjoyed and prospered under the modern socioeconomic and cultural conditions of globalization, if they were not secular, adhered to a different kind of Islam, the so-called moderate Islam, or more precisely, "passive piety."

In a quest to operate within an "authentic" nativist ideology, Islamists tried to articulate a version of Islam that could respond to their political, economic, and cultural deficits. Thus Islamism imagined Islam as a complete divine system with a superior political model, cultural code, legal structure, and economic arrangement—in short, a system that responded to all human problems. More important, this Islam offered Muslims a sense of self-respect, self-confidence, and a wide-ranging autonomy. Accompanied by strong populist language and heavy-handed social control, this interpretation of Islam would inevitably marginalize and even criminalize those who remained outside its strictures: nonconformists, seculars, non-Islamist Muslims, religious minorities, and many women. At the core of the Islamist paradigm, then, lay a blend of piety and obligation, devotion and duty.

Contemporary Islamism, as a movement and discourse, has grown since the 1970s against the backdrop of cold war politics and is clearly a historical phenomenon. Two simultaneous but contradictory processes pushed Islamism toward its hegemonic position: opportunity and suppression. The opportunity for massive educational expansion, economic development, an abundance of wealth (oil money), and social mobility went hand in hand with continuous political repression, marginalization, a sense of humiliation, and growing inequality (see Chapter Two). In the 1950s, ten universities existed in the entire Arab world; by 2003 that number had increased to over 200.[18] The crucial point is that members of this now widely educated but still marginalized middle class became acutely aware of their marginalization, experiencing a strong "moral outrage" that they directed at their own elites and governments, which had allied with Western powers, particularly the United States, the very government that had, ironically, favored Islamic opposition as a bulwark against both communism and secular nationalism. In the Arab world, the political classes considered the long-standing U.S.-backed Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands as evidence of their subjugation at the global level. Intransigent Israeli occupation (in particular under the rightist Likud governments) assumed such a central place in Arab/Muslim popular

sentiment that the people's struggle to regain "dignity" by freeing Arab lands often overshadowed their quest for democracy. In other words, freedom from foreign domination took precedence over freedom at home.[19]

Induced by Islamist populist language, some observers tend to associate Middle Eastern Islamist movements with Latin American liberation theology. Although religion frames each movement, they have little else in common. Liberation theology began as an attempt to reform the church from within and evolved into a social movement in which the concerns of the dispossessed assumed a central place. Liberation theology aimed at transforming the oligarchic disposition of the Catholic church and its neglect of the poor, in conditions where socialist movements (notably the Cuban revolution), by raising the banner of social justice, had pushed the church to the brink of social irrelevance. Led by socially conscious theologians, liberation theology's strategic objective was the "liberation of the poor"; its interpretation of the Gospels followed from this strategic ambition.[20]

In contrast, Islamism, despite its variation, has had broader social and political objectives. Its primary concern has not been social development or the plight of the poor but rather building an "ideological community"—establishing an Islamic state or implementing Islamic laws and moral codes. Only then could the poor expect to profit from a kind of Islamic moral trickle-down effect. In short, Middle Eastern Islamist movements and Latin American liberation theology represent two quite different social and political trajectories. If anything, Islamist movements, especially radical Islamism, resemble the Latin American guerrilla movements of the 1960s and 1970s—not, of course, in their ideologies, but in the social profile of their adherents and the conditions under which they emerged. The rise of both movements can be traced to simultaneous conditions of social transformation (rapid urbanization, mass schooling, higher education, and an expectation of mobility) and social exclusion of those whose dream of economic mobility had been dashed by unjust social and political structures. Of course, different global and regional contexts gave each movement its own ideological framework: secular leftism in the case of Latin American guerrilla movements and radical religion among Middle Eastern Islamist movements.

In the Muslim Middle East, the political class par excellence remains the educated middle layers: state employees, students, professionals, and the intelligentsia who mobilized the "street" in the 1950s and 1960s with overarching ideologies of nationalism, Ba'athism, socialism, and social justice. Islamism

is the latest of these grand worldviews. With core support from the worse-off middle layers, Islamist movements have succeeded for three decades in activating large numbers among the disenchanted population through *cheap Islamization*: by resorting to the language of moral and cultural purity (e.g., calling for the banning of alcohol or "immoral" literature, or raising the issue of women's public appearance), appealing to identity politics, and carrying out affordable charity work. However, by the mid-1990s it became clear that Islamists could not go very far when it came to a more costly Islamization: establishing an Islamic polity and economy and conducting international relations compatible with the modern national and global citizenry. Consequently, Islamist rule faced profound crisis wherever it was put into practice (as in Iran, Sudan, and Pakistan). At the same time, violent strategies and armed struggles adopted by radical Islamists (in Egypt and Algeria, for example) failed to achieve much. Islamist movements were either repressed by authoritarian states or compelled to revise their earlier outlooks. Many departed from totalizing discourses or violent methods and began to develop a more democratic vision for their Islamic projects.

These changes did not terminate the political role of Islam. Global and domestic social and political conditions have continued to generate appeals for religious and moral politics, especially in nations that had not experienced Islamism. Anti-Islamic sentiment in the West after the September 11 terrorist attacks, and the subsequent "war on terrorism," reinforced a profound feeling of insecurity and outrage among Muslims who sensed that Islam and Muslims were under an intense onslaught. This increased the appeal of religiosity and nativism, and Islamic parties that expressed opposition to U.S. policy in Afghanistan scored considerable success in several national elections in 2002. The Justice and Development Party in Morocco doubled its share to forty-two seats in the September 2002 elections. In October 2002, the Islamist movement placed third in Algerian local elections, and the alliance of religious parties in Pakistan won fifty-three of the 150 parliamentary seats. In November, Islamists won nineteen of the forty parliamentary seats in Bahrain, and the Turkish Justice and Development Party captured 66 percent of the legislature.[21] However, these electoral victories pointed less to a revival of Islamism(understood as a political project with national concerns) than to a shift from political Islam to fragmented languages concerned with personal piety and a global, anti-Islamic menace. Indeed, many Muslim societies were on the brink of a *post-Islamist* turn.