CHAPTER 2

Present-Day Islam Between Its Tradition and Globalization

Mohammed Arkoun

Mohammed Arkoun is arguably one of the most influential voices of moderate Islam today. Born in Algeria in 1928, he moved to Paris to pursue graduate studies at the Sorbonne, obtaining a PhD degree in 1956. Having held several academic positions in France and elsewhere in Europe and in the United States, Arkoun is currently Emeritus Professor of the History of Islamic Thought at the Sorbonne. He is also a Senior Research Fellow and a member of the Board of Governors of the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London. A powerful advocate of Islamic modernity and humanism, he is the author of a number of books in French, Arabic, and English.

Over the years, Arkoun has produced a rich body of literature on a wide variety of topics dealing with Islam, using the findings and methods of semiotics, structuralism, discourse analysis, post-structuralism, and structural anthropology. This has at times left Arkoun open to the criticism that there is no unifying theme in his writings. Nevertheless, Arkoun's principal concern is to critique traditions—both Western and Islamic—and, in the process, to articulate a new philosophical and jurisprudential framework for understanding and practicing Islam. Towards this end, the topics he has written about range from the relationship between "the church and the state," the importance of constructing a new hermeneutics of Islam, Islam's relationship with other religions, and Sufism, to name a few. In the essay that follows, Arkoun presents a wide-ranging, critical overview of the history, current predicament, and the future of Islam in the age of globalisation. The essay originally appeared in Mohammed Arkoun, "Present-Day Islam Between Its Tradition and Globalisation," in Farhad Daftary (ed), Intellectual Traditions in Islam (London: I.B.Tauris, 2001), pp 179–221.

The title of this essay announces three major fields of inquiry and critical analysis: present-day Islam; the living tradition dating back to the emergence of the Islamic fact in 610–32 and 661; and globalization. My objective in including under the same critical scrutiny themes as complex as these is to
set apart, in every possible manner, the *implicit* that are lived but unthought in each of these three areas of individual existence and historical action from the *explicit* that are problematized, thought for the first time or rethought, in the perspectives opened up by the new phenomenon of globalization.

For methodological and epistemological reasons which will become apparent in the course of the exposition, I will begin by defining the new context created by the forces of globalization and then tackle the questions of present-day Islam and Islamic tradition.

What is globalization?

Until the years 1960–70, human thought had known a particular idea of the world, or worlds in the plural. This idea itself nourished a large number of representations whose spiritual, artistic, and scientific productivity varied according to their cultural environments and historical conjunctions. It is thus that with Copernicus, Galileo, and Kepler, one passed “from the closed world to an infinite universe.” What has long been called international relations by no means covers the concept of globalization, the active forces and the realities of which all individuals and societies are discovering or experiencing at the present time.

Globalization upsets all the known cultural, religious, philosophical, and politico-juridical traditions; even modernity that issued from the reason of the Enlightenment does not escape from it. That is why, since the 1980s, various analysts, thinkers, and researchers, particularly in the United States, speak of *post-modernity.* I prefer to avoid this term, which refers to a concept badly and little elaborated and which keeps us in the linear historical trajectory inaugurated in Western Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Globalization forces the Europeans themselves to speak of the limits and perverse effects of the reason of the Enlightenment, which has allowed, among other things, the construction of the secular, democratic, and liberal nation-state, the progress of scientific research, and the transition from the solidarities of clan, blood, and confession to the contractual solidarities regulated by the state of law. With the resolute march towards European union, one crosses a new historical stage in the organization and widening of the spaces of citizenship, which is at the same time the basis and object of democratic life. The nation-state is in the process of accomplishing its mission in Europe by putting in place civil societies, sufficiently emancipated juridically, to act as effective and necessary partners of the states of law. However, crossing this historical stage proves as difficult and uncertain as that which led absolute monarchies of divine law to become constitutional monarchies and democratic republics. The problems arise, in effect, from diverse European cultures and visions of the world linked to the slow and difficult ascent of nation-states, which reveal their provincial limits, their exclusion of other cultures of the world, their xenophobia, and their latent violence, always ready to be exercised against the foreigner, however near geographically (as was the case in the Franco-German wars).

The economic, monetary, and technological forces of globalization have achieved a primacy and priority in the process of history, while snatching from abstract idealism the spiritual, philosophical, ethical, political, and juridical values, whose bases or concrete material components are increasingly better explicated. However, political idealism continues to seek refuge in nationalist discourse, as can be noted in the resistance to the progress of the European Union which began as no more than a simple community formed to regulate the production of coal and steel. The claims of national specificity, authenticity, and exception curb the advances towards the revision of national historiographies, intellectual frames of interpretation, and re-appropriation of values. The example thus given by the “old” nations to their former colonies, which became “emerging nations” without transition, provides dangerous “arguments” to the party-nation-states which assumed power in these countries during the years 1950–70 in conditions that are known to us, and which are leading programs of “national construction” in the new context created by globalization. This remark must be retained for a better evaluation of the role of Islam and its tradition in the mounting tensions between these party-nation-states and societies whose democratic structure and legitimate aspirations towards democratization are not really taken into consideration.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union as a geopolitical political power, the United States exercises a hegemonic control over all the forces of globalization. The Europeans, including Russia and its former satellites, rather than nourishing rivalries, seek alliances, contracts, and collaboration with the United States. Thus the burden of this hegemony makes itself felt more upon peoples and nations in the process of emancipation and unification. The right of peoples to self-determination,” which nourished so many illusions about national emancipation in the context of the Cold War, has become an ideological insanity in the face of intolerable civil wars that tear apart so many societies long seized in the grip of totalitarian nationalism and projected suddenly into the savage liberalism of *McWorld* (which I discuss in the next section). The latter invented a new concept, “humanitarian aid for peoples in danger of genocide,” which is as vague and illusory as its predecessor. But the economic and monetary forces of globalization do not today concern themselves with humanitarian aid any more than the bourgeois
capitalist conquerors of the nineteenth century worried about the emancipation of their own womenfolk, the working classes, or, a fortiori, the colonized peoples. Humanitarian aid, the rights of peoples, human rights, and democratic sermons form part of the panoply of political slogans, adapted to every geopolitical conjuncture by those who contrive to their advantage the operations of globalization. It is thus that the nationalist elites—who believed that they were giving real content to these slogans by engaging, in the years 1960–70, with the politics of economic development in the frame of “cooperation” and “development aid”—generated, with their statist and economic partners of the West, the riposte of the so-called Islamic Revolution (see what follows on jihad versus McWorld), supported by marginalized social strata which were badly integrated in enclaves of modernity too narrow, and dispossessed (even in the case of rural villagers and forcibly sedentarized nomads) of their languages, cultures, ecological equilibria, customary codes, and traditional solidarities—just as the European peasantry had been dispossessed under mounting pressures of industrialization, but in its case with long transitions and effectively integrated institutions. Globalization deploys on a planetary scale the strategies of market conquest and multiplication of consumers and their loyalties without any regard for the cultural regression, intellectual misery, political oppression, social tragedy and individual enslavement brought about by this “unequal exchange” which for so long has been denounced in vain. We know how the strategies of globalization bring about, on the one hand, interstate agreements and diplomacy for the flow of goods in exchange for the importation of raw materials, and, on the other hand, the media which denounce the totalitarian, fanatical, and repressive policies of those very states recognized officially as respectable partners and interlocutors.

Let us note here an important political notion rarely highlighted by analysts and almost never included in the themes of electoral campaigns in the most advanced democratic regimes. It concerns the systematic ignorance in which citizens are kept about everything pertaining to interstate diplomacy. That which is called popular sovereignty is unable to exercise any type of control over diplomatic relations, which lie in the exclusive competence of the heads of states and their ministers for foreign affairs. Thus the responsibilities incurred in conflicts such as those of Algeria, Rwanda, Zaire, Iran, Sudan, Bosnia, etc., are not only dissimulated to those citizens most capable of undertaking juridical, historical, and ethical analysis, but are knowingly distorted by the easy indignation generated against the crimes, assassinations, and destruction stigmatized every day by the media. On this level, the most pertinent analyses and the most legitimate critiques are brushed aside with repeated appeals to the “reason” of state security against the “chattering” of idealist intellectuals.

This functioning of democracy is accepted particularly by civil societies as they are inclined in the first place to defend the “social gains” which are in themselves brought about by globalization. This accounts for the development within the European Union of the notion and practice of strikes by proxy—the strike by every sector or professional category, supported unconditionally by all the workers who feel equally threatened with losing the advantages gained, and above all their jobs. One is far from the simplistic frontiers charted by class conflict, but the selfishness of civil societies, necessarily supported by their states, replaces that of the former classes, and it exacerbates the situation of those very people who are at the same time exploited and excluded by the forces of globalization, especially when delocalization is involved. One thus finds, once again, a relation comparable to that between the colonizing nation-states and the peoples colonized until 1945.

It must be admitted that in the current state of the world, the relentless march of globalization generates more ruptures, tensions, contradictions, and collective conflicts than did the exportation of fragments of material modernity to colonies in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Neither the researchers and theoreticians with the highest competence and knowledge, nor the expanding armies of managers of large multi-national firms, nor the politicians who monopolize the use of “legal violence” (as Max Weber would say) integrate into their analyses, expectations, and strategies of development the real problems, the needs and hopes of those peoples who are deprived of adequate representation, as well as possibilities of direct expression and emancipation. The philosophical implications of this global process of change, which relate as much to scientific research as to technological innovation and economic expansion, are not even evoked as one of the decisive parameters which ought to inform decisions at all levels and in every sphere of activity. This is because philosophical thought itself is mostly mobilized by the urgent need to rethink the essential connections which bind together philosophy and democracy. I refer here to the very suggestive report entitled Philosophie et démocratie dans le monde, compiled by Roger Pol Droit at the request of UNESCO, on the present state of the teaching of philosophy in member countries. Rare are the countries which have introduced or maintained any serious teaching of philosophy at the high-school level. In the Islamic context, the rich philosophical tradition that was developed from the eighth century until the death of Ibn Rushd (Averroës) in 1198 has, since the thirteenth century, been lost. Here is how
Droit defines the traits of "the common space" fundamental to philosophy and democracy, both bring about a "founding relationship" with the following features:

1. **Speech:** for a thought exists only when it is stated, expounded, submitted to discussion, criticism and arguments of others; this remark applies to philosophical thought as well as political positions in a democracy.

2. **Equality:** for one does not ask others "by what right" they intervene in the debate; one does not require by any means that they be provided with any authority or authorization; it is sufficient that they speak and argue. [I modify Droit's remark as follows: In the perspective of globalization, it is no longer only the citizens of one particular nation who take part in the political debate; for the first time, and in philosophy since the ancient Greeks, the entire human race is concerned as much with the political as with the philosophical debate on the subject, notably the founding conditions of political legitimacy in local regimes and the governance—in English, governanability of the inhabited planet.]

3. **Doubt:** since immediate certitudes have wavered, in order to ensure that the research of the true as well as general discussion of the subject is open, it is necessary for one to be no longer in a universe of answers and beliefs, but of questions and research.

4. **Self-institution:** for no external decision comes to create the philosophical stage or the democratic community, no authority legitimates it "from outside," nothing guarantees it "from above," they receive their power only from themselves and are not subjected to any authority whose source they would not be.

I shall return to the critical examination of these definitions when I compare the status of the theologico-political implied by R.P. Droit to that of the philosophico-political which is inseparable from our modernity. This comparison is indispensable for demonstrating the incoherencies, anachronisms, and illusions of the contemporary Islamic discourse on Islam and democracy. But first I will put forward three preliminary remarks:

1. On February 25, 1795, the French Revolution was defined by Joseph Lakanal as this "educative Utopia" aiming "to put an end to the inequalities of development affecting the citizen's" capacity to judge. In fact, philosophical teaching organized by the Republic was and is offered in public and private establishments subsidized by the state. This French tradition may have been able to generate a taste for theoretical speculations, yet one cannot say that political thought in France and the current traits of French-style democracy are more marked than elsewhere by a philosophical attitude as just defined. The original harm comes, without doubt, from the tight control exercised by the secular republican state in the French sense, ever since the foundation of technical schools and high schools. In the seventeenth century, Benedict Spinoza defended rather the right for all men "to teach [philosophy] publicly, at their own expense and at the peril of their reputation." 3

2. In the perspective of political reason, called upon to manage all the processes of globalization in the real, constant interest of every person-individual-citizen, it becomes necessary for the society and the regime, where this reason is called upon, to deploy its existence and redefine the conditions for a concretely universalizable philosophical attitude. It is in this sense that I shall examine the contribution that critical thought can make to this project in concrete Islamic contexts.

3. The concept of person-individual-citizen which I have just introduced deserves to be elaborated in the perspectives opened up by anthropology for the exploration and critical analysis of all cultures, and no longer only the "great" cultures which, at various times in history, exercised or still exercise a hegemony. In other words, the classical philosophical attitude is no longer sufficient for rethinking, with all the descriptive and explicative adequacy required by globalization, the status of the person, the individual and the citizen in a political, juridical, and cultural space—a space which is no longer only that of the nation-states and still less that of religious communities such as the Ummah which the Islamist movements are trying to set up as a universal model of historical action.

It is to be feared that the call to philosophy, cultural anthropology and critical history of cultures, beyond all the hegemonic frames of realization of human existence, will draw little attention, even less than in the context of the nation-state, from the economic, monetary, and political establishments, from official representatives in large international conferences, and from the vanguard of experts who contribute to the accelerated pace of globalization. All these actors are generally little prepared to accord a just place to the philosophical implications of the responsibilities that they prefer to exercise as effective experts. One follows in them less the historical project of promoting and extending democratic values to all peoples and societies in the world than the conquest of new markets for consumer goods which no longer find enough buyers in glutted markets.

Even if one were to agree to a philosophical and anthropological examination of the problems raised by the expansion of *McWorld*, it would still
be necessary in the first place to work towards an indispensable intellectual overtaking of the frame of thought inherited from classical metaphysics. The latter has long remained a prisoner of recurrent interferences, in spite of efforts at distinction which are always invalidated by polemical tensions between theological themes and philosophical categories. What sociologists call the “return of the religious” contributes, even in the most secularized societies, to the obstruction of efforts to elucidate the stakes peculiar to a theology and a philosophy that can be cultivated without polemics, without mimetic rivalry, in accordance with the new scientific spirit and new cognitive systems proposed by biology, linguistics, semiotics, psychology, socio-anthropology, and the study of historical problems. In other words, the process of economic, technological, and monetary globalization is being deployed in a climate of “disposable thought,” where the crises in the study of man and society stand in sharp contrast to the spectacular advances of technological knowledge which are readily appropriated by the desire for power and profit.

All this shows the need to express clearly the philosophical attitude and the type of cognitive activity which must accompany present-day globalization as a concrete historical practice. Without minimizing, and much less ignoring, either the Greek references of philosophical thought or their journey and expansion in the European historical sphere, one will recognize the distances separating positions linked to precise socio-cultural and political spaces and those related to visions of the world too hastily proclaimed universal. Grammarians, logicians, and linguists have long reflected upon this tension: from the famous disputatio (munazara) between the grammarian al-Sirafi and the logician al-Marrāṭ in tenth-century Baghdad, to the enlightening analysis of E. Benveniste of the Aristotelian categories articulated in Greek and the linguistic categories, one will grasp the idea that a universalizable philosophical attitude is precisely that which cultivates systematically the aporia of tension between the local and the global. The implantation in the local of the sense of the universal is inscribed, in a more or less inconsistent manner, in every linguistic experience. This tension has been cultivated as a speculative theme, like the humanism of the lettered which nourished beautiful literary compositions until World War II. Only modern social and cultural anthropology furnishes the concrete data peculiar to every socio-cultural construction in a precise time and space, while situating every local type in a global context of political, social, cultural, and religious facts. It so happens that, as philosophy and anthropology continue to be taught and practiced as distinct and specialized disciplines, the many incursions of philosophers into anthropology remain incidental and cursory, while anthropologists are not always able to go beyond the ethnographic stage of their scientific practice. We also cover here the important question of the reform of education systems in order to adapt them everywhere to the exigencies of globalization.

Is present-day Islam impervious to globalization?

An American political scientist, Benjamin R. Barber, has recently promoted the Qur’anic and Islamic concept of jihād to the rank of a polar figure of contemporary history, dialectically linked to McWorld, that is to say, to ongoing globalization, viewed from the perspective of the United States and Western Europe. The author is not at all interested in jihād in order to denominate the expansion of Islam through “holy war,” or to propose a new theory of “just war,” a theological concept elaborated long ago by St Augustin. He raised again in the early 1990s by Presidents Bush and Mitterrand during the Gulf War. He considers, correctly, that the violence which tears apart many societies called Muslim (I prefer to use, in contradiction to the custom of all Islamic studies and political science literature, the expression “societies molded by the Islamic fact,” which I shall explain later) is a manifestation of not only serious internal crises, but the protest common to all societies, including those of the West, against the blind forces of globalization called McWorld, characterized by its market economy, monetary system, technology, media, and revolution in information, which affect work and leisure, genetic engineering, etc. This protest opposes the structural violence spread in the world by incomprehensible, anonymous decision makers with ethically irresponsible, murderous, physical violence; it is a radical rejection in the name of traditional and religious values, not exclusive of the means of effective action obtained by material modernity. Jihād and McWorld convey much irrational and semantic disorder which remains to be analyzed within the critical and cognitive perspectives defined above; they confront each other with very unequal weapons, but with different objectives, both succeeding in perverting the democratic project of emancipation of the human condition. In order to defend democracy, Barber forces the opposition between jihād and McWorld: the first wants to reconstitute the obscure forces of the pre-modern world such as “religious mysteries, hierarchic communities, suffocating traditions, historical torpor,” whereas the second goes beyond modernity by insisting upon the promotion of the market over the rights and spiritual aspirations of mankind.

In qualifying negatively the two poles, the political scientist stays in the epistemological frame of the reason of the Enlightenment, whereas globalization obliges us to revise the cognitive systems bequeathed by all types of
reason which respect the rules of critical historical epistemology. Thus the qualifications applied to the pre-modern world are pertinent if one sticks to the discourse of contemporary fundamentalist movements, but historically incorrect if one refers to the humanist culture (adab) of the urban milieu of the Islamic world in the ninth to eleventh centuries. The reason at work in this culture anticipated many critiques and cognitive postures, which developed much later the humanism of the Renaissance and subsequently amplified the reason of the Enlightenment in Europe. The latter instrumentalized the Persians, Turks, and the Muslims in general, not for enlarging significantly their cognitive field, but in the first place to lead its battle against the main enemy of that time: clericalism. The colonial nineteenth century developed a historiography, ethnography, sociology, and psychology, largely marked by an epistemology which present-day anthropology depicts as an ideology of domination. The argumentation of jihad vs. McWorld, although seductive in its resolute option for a universalizable humanist democracy, cannot be retained for the project of a critical history of thought in the Mediterranean space, encompassing the stakes-of-meaning and the will-to-power which became manifested there since the first emergence of the Islamic fact in Arabia in 610–32. Present-day Islam, in effect, needs to go beyond the sterile and often dangerous protestations of jihad to integrate at the same time the positive gains of modernity and the new opportunities of political, economic, social, and cultural emancipation opened up by globalization—the latter to be understood as an extension of the historical project of modernity and also a correction of its errors and injustices.

If modernity is an incomplete project consisting of a determination to push back ever further the limits of the human condition, it must orient globalization towards a better integration of values made discordant by the systematic opposition between the visions of traditional religions and the ideological categories of secular religions. As a result of this conflict, the secular voices of the prophets, saints, theologians, philosophers, artists, poets, and heroes have been relentlessly marginalized, disqualified, and driven back to a past relegated to erudite historiography or to definitive oblivion. Our societies produce great captains of industry, bankers who work in secrecy, sports champions and stars who generate ephemeral enthusiasm, and highly specialized scientific researchers; but these people have neither the time nor the sources of inspiration necessary for generating intellectual and spiritual values to mobilize at the level where the economic system of production and exchange engages the ecological future of the planet and the quality of human life. I have deliberately refrained from mentioning politicians here because everywhere they continue to disappoint the people they are supposed to lead—not to mention the corrupt and corrupting leaders, bloodthirsty tyrants and oppressors, obscurantists and absolutists, who enjoy the honors and consideration due to "heads of state."

In these observations there is neither a desire to moralize nor nostalgia for a past to be compared with the present in developed or developing societies; they are meant, rather, to define with precision the new functions which the irresistible forces of McWorld assign to present-day Islam. The latter continues to guarantee to the social masses, excluded from the liberties and comforts reserved for limited privileged groups, a hope mixed with the traditional expectation of eternal salvation, the possibility of attaining moral dignity in intimate encounter with the Just and Merciful God of the Qur'an, a belief in a promise of imminent justice to be accomplished by their charismatic leader, a "modern" substitute for the ancient Imam-Mahdi. Or it demands obedience to the divine injunction to eliminate by a just and holy war (jihad) all the "Pharaohs" who sow disorder and corruption on earth.

The historian-sociologist-anthropologist will not enumerate, as I have just done, all these psycho-socio-political components of what one no longer calls hope, but representations of the social imaginaire. For the politico-religious vocabulary familiar to the believers of yesterday and today, one substitutes that of the critical analyst for whom societies produce religions like ideologies which, once systematized in normative codes, act in their turn upon societies. This epistemological postulate doubtless allows one to deconstruct a joint psychological configuration of the rational, the imaginaire, and the remembered truths, which are for the most part memorized but not written and are confused in the expressions of belief and conduct. However, insofar as such explicative analysis does not reach the actors to the point of provoking in each of them a better reconstruction controlled by the psychological configuration bound to religious systems through beliefs and non-beliefs, the "scientific" theory of religion will merely act as a mental, cultural, and political frontier in societies where it is erected implicitly (as in secular republics) or explicitly as a doctrine of state (as in socialist and popular atheist republics). One understands, consequently, why the liberal secular state loses in philosophical flexibility that which it gains in juridical neutrality, whereas the religious state despises both. The exclusion in French public establishments of all teaching of the comparative history of religions and theological thought illustrates clearly what I mean by philosophical and scientific flexibility. It is significant that this question of philosophical and political essence is not yet being discussed within the European Union with a view to proposing new academic programs to reflect, simultaneously, the
needs of multi-cultural societies and the exigencies of scientific knowledge adapted to the progress of globalization.

But the perverse effects of the latter must not distract us from the historical advances founded upon the positive experience of intellectual modernity. If the great religions and philosophies have long taught that man is spirit, one must not forget that spiritualism, ontologism, transcendentalism, theologism, essentialism, and substantialism are as much rationalizing derivatives or dangerous imaginaires as those of present-day globalization, on the real nature of mankind. Drawing on contemporary Islam, I shall attempt to show that the work prescribed by the historical conjuncture of globalization consists in going philosophically, ethically, juridically, and institutionally beyond all the systems of beliefs and non-beliefs inherited variously from the past, towards a better mastery of powers available to man for changing man.

Rethinking Islam: facing its traditions

Raising the Islamic concept of *Jihad* to the rank of a historical figure of resistance to *MeWorld* cannot be the basis of present-day Islam if it is to fulfill, as it claims, the role of an alternative model to that of the West for producing more just regimes and better-integrated societies. The claim of the West to remain the unique model of reference for all contemporary regimes and societies is equally not acceptable so long as the conditions defined above are not strictly fulfilled to the point of creating, among all the observers and actors of our world, the feeling of a restraining *debt-of-meaning*. Now, one can contract a *debt-of-meaning* only towards the social actors who, like the prophets, saints, heroes, thinkers, and artists, are able to demonstrate in their behavior, and articulate in a discourse accessible to the greatest number, the existential paradigms which encourage free emulation by others. In the democratic and secular Western milieu, the individual, protected by the state of law coupled with a welfare state, tends to be his or her own model, increasingly incapable of recognizing a *debt-of-meaning* to a religion, philosophy, nation, community, hero-liberator, thinker, or poet. In Muslim contexts, the *debt-of-meaning* towards the Qur'an as the word of God, towards the Prophet as the messenger of God, and towards the "pious forefathers" (*al-salaf al-salih*) who have ensured the faithful collection and transmission of the founding messages of all truths, of all valid thoughts and all correct norms, continues to play a role so preponderant that there remains no place for the adoption of, or even the mere respect for, an idea, institution, innovation, or personality that cannot be integrated into the system of identification and evaluation through which the *debt-of-meaning* is perpetuated.

The social and political dialectic which has prevailed since independence from colonial rule has, despite the interlude of the years 1950–60, reinforced the psychological configuration postulated by this *debt-of-meaning*. The politics of traditionalization and the celebration of Islam as a component of national identities have thwarted the possibilities of modernizing tools of thought and institutions for the benefit of a religion which is cut off from both its historical origins and contemporary scientific contexts. It is not rare, therefore, to encounter "intellectuals," academics, and managers of large enterprises, banks, and complex administrations, who shelter from all critical intervention in the "sacred" and sacralizing domain of founding texts and beliefs of this *debt-of-meaning* without which social order would collapse.

The critical analyst will explain that all discourse is the bearer of the will-to-power because it seeks to share with others the proposition of meaning that every interlocutor articulates. The more my proposition infringes upon the sphere of meaning already occupied by other social actors, the more the conflict will become rough and lead to violence; and if I enter the mythical and symbolic sphere of their foundational accounts, then a "holy," "sacred," "just," "legitimate" war becomes inevitable. Consequently, even the most secular republics have their foundational accounts, their symbolic politics, their "places of memory" constructed by historiography, which are officially and periodically celebrated. It is in these collective representations sacralized by time that national identity takes root; it is here that the "values" which legitimize patriotic fervor, supreme sacrifices, and heroic conduct take shape. I deliberately use this ethico-political vocabulary, from which sermons and official discourses are woven, to recall that at this level of production and consumption of meaning, the interferences between the religious and the political, the sacred and the profane, the spiritual and the temporal, are so constant, so inescapable, that it is misleading to stick to the juridical and institutional theme of the separation between church and state.

This deconstructive analysis of current terminology also shows another piece of evidence, hardly familiar even to cultivated minds, about what is called truth in the functional trilogy of violence, sacred, and truth. In the ordinary sense, truth is an immediate sentiment of perfect equivalence between words and deeds, between a statement and its objective referents, or more generally between current language and the empirical experience which everyone has of reality. Religions and metaphysics represent this truth as unique, intangible, transcendent, and divine. But for the critical analyst, truth is defined as the sum of the effects of meaning which authorizes for every individual or collective subject the system of connotations represented.
in its language; it is the totality of representations retained in the living tradition of a group, confessional community, or nation which is more or less unified by a common political and cultural history.

These two definitions of truth draw an increasingly distinct mental cleavage between two postures of reason itself: the classical metaphysical posture, amply described by historians of philosophy, continues to resist the rise of the new posture of the so-called exact sciences, the biological and social sciences, which are themselves put in disarray by the information revolution. Historians have clearly distinguished between several postures of reason in past epochs which continue to coexist in contemporary discourse without the knowledge of their authors. Clerics, essayists, ideologues, sermonizers, and experts, highly specialized experts in activities which do not require know-how grounded in historical culture, express themselves on general problems without regard for the postures of reason and cognitive systems which they use. One finds in them a confusion between theological attitudes and philosophical reasoning, between ideological argument for the invocation of a belief and the historical fact, an ingenious striving to find in the founding religious texts (Bible, Gospels, Qur'an) or the medieval exegeses consecrated as orthodox, teachings on human rights, social justice, democracy, human dignity, etc. Inversely, the pressing needs for ethical principles to regulate, in however small a measure, the confusion and anguish brought about by discoveries in the life-sciences, force us to speak again about the status of the individual, the spiritual vocation of being human, and the inalienable values which underpin the ethics of conviction and responsibility. One thus perceives that the reason of the Enlightenment has opened up horizons which it had practically abandoned or badly explored, and that theological reason seeks to regain credibility in a context of a generalized crisis of thought. On the other hand, rather than harnessing itself to the conquest of an epistemological status adapted to the pressing challenges of history at the threshold of the third millennium, the reason which claims to be post-modern even indulges in a do-it-yourself kind of individualism and militantism.

All this distances us from the definition of present-day Islam. To approach the latter, I want to break as radically as possible from the epistemological attitude and the so-called scientific practice which treats Islam as a domain apart from the history of religions, cultures, and civilizations. One cannot deal with present-day Islam by simply repeating the linear chronological account of its historical spread, the theologico-juridical frames of its articulation as a system of beliefs and non-beliefs fixed by God, dedicated to the pious observance of the faithful, and the no less conformist and repeti-

tive transcriptions of the Islamicists which have been adopted by political scientists to describe present-day Islam. It has been shown to what extent Islam is subjected, like all living traditions of thought, culture, and beliefs, to the irresistible hurricane of globalization. There is no need to reinforce ritual expressions extended to an impressive number of the faithful; no need to mobilize and inspire armies of young militants, ready for all sacrifice; no need to retain the attention of all the political strategists who are themselves surrounded by experts more or less sagacious, or by charlatans. The fact remains that the historical test through which Islam has been passing as a religion since the 1970s has already created an irreversible situation which affects all living religions, and beyond religions, the conditions of production, transmission, and consumption of meaning in human societies. One understands, therefore, why I have devoted such a long preamble to the question of the metamorphoses of meaning and of what continues to be called the truth under the pressures of globalization.

To encompass the historical situation of what I call present-day Islam, chronology has its importance. Innumerable works, dating back to the nineteenth century, have dealt with Islamic modernity, modern Islam, and Islam facing modernity. Under these titles, the authors are interested, in fact, in the intellectuals and researchers who have tried to apply to the history of societies shaped by the Islamic fact decontextualized fragments of modernity from the classical age as they were translated especially in the historiographical and philological works of the nineteenth century. The Orientalists then praised the relative successes of their pupils such as Taha Hussein, Zaki Mubarak, Bihr Pâris, Salama Musa, and others, who reproduced their methodologies. But Islam and its tradition have been very little affected by those initial, modest essays, even when they gave rise to violent condemnations on the part of the guardians of an obscurantist orthodoxy: the examples of Taha Hussein and 'Ali Abdel Raziq are repeated today by other authors with writings no less soothing. Present-day Islam would not have turned to fundamentalist excesses at the end of the twentieth century if modernity, even of a historicist and philological kind, had really succeeded in penetrating the frames of traditional thought as it did for Christianity.

With the advent of the Muslim Brotherhood movement in the 1930s, intellectual modernists rushed to make concessions to apologetic tendencies such as those manifested in the writings of al-Aqqad, Hussein Haykal, and even Taha Hussein.

After 1945, the political movements of liberation were able to harness to their advantage the mobilizing power of Islam, while maintaining a general secular and social orientation, because of the presence of militants inspired
by communism, or converts to the political philosophy of the Third French Republic such as Bourguiba, Ferhat Abbas, and their disciples. The nationalist fervor, the priority of political freedom, and the geopolitical strategies used by the two superpowers of the time (the United States and the Soviet Union) to attract the emerging nation-states to their spheres of influence, succeeded in maintaining Islamic militancy in a subsidiary role. One had to wait for the great defeat of the Arab armies in 1967, the failure and death of Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1970, the first symptoms of the demise of Soviet hegemony, the demographic growth which upset the social frames of knowledge and political expression, the revelation of the limits of oil as a weapon, the fallout of the euphoria generated by the independence that had been so dearly achieved, and the subsequent erosion of ill-founded legitimacies, for there to emerge on the scene what is today called radical Islam, Islamic radicalism, political Islam, Muslim rage (these are typical titles of books or articles on the subject) which assumed power spectacularly in Iran in 1979, and has since then pursued a devastating struggle, ill-adapted to the magnitude and the real scope of the challenges of modernity complicated by those of globalization, as has been demonstrated.

Present-day Islam is witnessing the end of secular messianic ideologies and the certitudes of a conquering science; it also witnesses the disarray of the legitimacies constructed by and for the nation-states and the concomitant awakening of peoples, ethnico-cultural minorities, and regional communities long marginalized and oppressed by centralizing religious or secular states. It refuses nevertheless to record the numerous, repeated disappointments which the internal history of all societies called Muslim has inflicted upon the Utopia of a “revealed divine law” (Sharia), which continues to be proclaimed and imposed by clerics while political regimes are lacking in legitimacy and there is an upsurge of populist Islam claiming to be “revolutionary.” To understand the reactivation in contemporary Islamic contexts of a contradiction common to all great religions, we must pause here to reflect on the internal history of the Islamic Utopia and the sociology of its current expressions. But how can one proceed without repeating the many expositions which rehash relentlessly the frozen data, lacking critical objectives or explicative intentions?

If one aims to be exhaustive, informative, explicative, and critical, one would require a proper frame for further research in a domain as vast and complex as the map of the world. One can obtain an idea of this complexity and its extent by going through the chronological and genealogical survey of the dynasties in the land of Islam, recently published by C.E. Bosworth. The author enumerates some 186 dynasties scattered over the globe from the Philippines to Morocco and from Central Asia to South Africa. I do not mean, of course, that it is sufficient to go through the chronological history of the dynasties from their origins to our days in order to understand present-day Islam. I propose, rather, to begin with a sociology of contemporary expressions of this Islam to show how, in every socio-cultural and political context, the history of Islam has been solicited and interpreted according to the needs of ongoing struggles. This procedure allows us to distinguish clearly the imaginary productions of contemporary societies, with their manipulations of a multi-dimensional object which all the actors confusedly call Islam, from the critical, scientific knowledge of the different domains (spiritual, ritual, theological, juridical, political, artistic, etc.) which make up the historical realization of the same object. There is no question here of conflicts, in the manner of defensive or apologetic theologies, between an ideally constructed “true Islam” and an imaginary Islam manipulated by actors and therefore false. The objective of our analysis remains scientific in both cases. In effect, religions, like all great mobilizing ideologies, structure the imaginative of all social groups and thereby contribute to what C. Castoriadis has aptly described as “the imaginary production of society.” In the case of present-day Islam, the projection of its “values” and salutary hopes towards an inaugurating age, not just as part of an Islamic era but of a universalizable existential paradigm, takes on a psycho-social and political significance in the horizons opened up by the liberation struggles of the years 1950–60. The strong recurrence of the paradigm of historical action put in place already by the Qur’an, together with the teachings and normative conduct of the Prophet, are in themselves a fact which lead us to think about the links between religious and political hope in the historical evolution of societies.

To bring together all these data, I shall now introduce the concept of the dialectic of the local and the global, richly illustrated in the works of Clifford Geertz, which from 1967 inaugurated, in contrast to the writings of the Islamicists, an anthropological problematic that has been insufficiently exploited.

The dialectic of the local and the global

The Islamic fact emerged in the most circumscribed locale: the modest city of Mecca, which after ten years was replaced by the yet more humble agglomeration of Yathrib/Medina. Receiving support, successively, in these two centers, a Meccan, Muhammad ibn Abdullah, with some disciples, was able to activate the most pertinent elements of a social, political, and cultural dialectic which was sufficiently intense to generate an existential paradigm.
whose expansion raised the unrelenting hostility of some, and the fervent adhesion and inexhaustible hope of others. The Christian fact began in the same manner with Jesus of Nazareth. The passage of the two religions from the local to the global recognized neither the same rhythms nor the same vicissitudes; but in both cases, the same distinction asserts itself between a prophetic moment and an imperial moment. I reserve the case of Judaism which also inaugurated a prophetic function, but was not linked to an independent state before the creation of the state of Israel.

I call the prophetic moment the conjunction of a local historical dialectic with a discourse of mythical structure which transfigures ordinary actors and channels in educative spiritual tensions between man who is called to the exercise of a responsible freedom, and a God who is given to interiorize as a living counterpart, transcendent, demanding judge, merciful, protector, benefactor, etc.

This definition has no theological objective; it is programmatic in the sense that it introduces tools of analysis and understanding for the linguist, historian, psychologist, psycho-socio-linguist, and anthropologist for the purpose of interpreting mythical accounts and identifying the evolving structures of the social imaginaire. I have demonstrated elsewhere, with the example of Sura 18 of the Qur'an, how three ancient accounts—the Seven Sleepers or the “People of the Cave” (ahl al-kahf), the Epic of Gilgamesh, and the Romance of Alexander—illustrate the following three equally programmatic definitions of language, myth, and scientific activity:

Language is in the first instance a categorization, a creation of objects and relations between these objects (E. Benveniste).

Myth is an ideological palace constructed with the rubble of an ancient social discourse (C. Levi-Strauss).

Scientific activity is not a blind accumulation of truths; science is selective and seeks truths which matter most, either by their intrinsic interest or as tools for confronting the world (W. Van O. Quine).

The type of thought and the epistemological engagement of reason required by these definitions remain inaccessible to all those who have not made the methodological and conceptual journey peculiar to every discipline invoked. The difference between a mental object created by language and a physical object, whose existence does not depend either on the perception or the name given to it, remains unthinkable for all those who perceive, think, and express themselves in the cognitive frame established by this verse of the Bible and reiterated in the Qur'an: “God taught Adam all the names.” Naming possesses not only a power of existentiation (ijad) of the named objects, but also an ontological guarantee included in the names taught by God. This ontico-psycho-linguistic mechanism is a main characteristic of what I call the prophetic discourse as embodied in its linguistic manifestations in the Hebrew Bible, the discourse of Jesus of Nazareth articulated in Aramaic and later transcribed in Greek, and the Qur'an, together with their respective expansions in living traditions. The reconquest of the prophetic discourse as linguistic fact contextualized by the historian-anthropologist is in itself an educative operation that is difficult to achieve, even politically impossible in certain cases, because of the pressures exercised by religious orthodoxy, which is the basis of the legitimacy of power and of the representations which the community of the faithful itself gives to the founding moment of its religion. In the case of Islam, the work of misrepresentation is seen in the transfiguration of the historical actor Muhammad into the prophet-mediator of the “Word of God,” which is conceived as transcendent, normative, and immutable Revelation, uncreated according to the “orthodox” position that eliminated the Mu'tazilite theory of the created Qur'an.

These observations have nothing theoretical or speculative about them; they result from my personal experience with the most diverse Jewish, Christian, and Muslim groups. The most patient pedagogical procedures and the most simplified explanations come up against either the opposition of the dogmatic minds, or an unthinkable linked to two diametrically opposite formations but leading to the same psycho-linguistic blockage. The orthodox religious formation uses a strategy of refusal to rid itself of all the attitudes of thought which would compromise the ideal knowledge of what, without any critical examination, is called faith. In the democratic context, where every citizen is perfectly entitled to his own “different” view, particularly when it is connected to the sacred region of faith, we are witnessing, in Europe notably, an intellectually exasperating and dangerous use of this strategy of refusal. No less exasperating and dangerous is the attitude of minds trained in the culture—which is termed modern and secular—of unbelief; the dogmatic cult of “the death of God,” the rejection not only of the dogmas and catechisms perpetuated by all types of “church,” but more seriously of the religious dimensions of all the cultures manifested in history. In this connection, the word of Voltaire is still very enlightening today: to those who were already worried about the void, nay the ruins, caused by the success of the battles fought by the reason of the Enlightenment, he would reply, “I deliver you from a ferocious beast and you are asking me with what I shall replace it.” Assuredly, the reason worrying about its autonomy in relation to external dogmas could not fight against
an all-powerful and obscurantist clericalism and at the same time construct
values of substitution. But it is a historical fact that the nation-state, represen-
tative democracy, universal suffrage, and political philosophy managed
by the state, are today showing their exhaustion, just as religious regimes did
prior to modern revolutions.

One understands in these circumstances why the rare, innovating works
on the major questions handed down by the prophetic discourse and its
diverse articulations, piously collected and transmitted in every community
under the name of a living tradition, do not have any target public capable
of understanding it and making any contributions to it through fruitful
debates. Look at the electoral campaigns in democratic societies: the prob-
lem of the production, management, and functions of meaning and of the
effects of meaning are never on the agenda. To say that the average elector
would not understand anything of it is incorrect and unjust; the blinding
and more frightening socio-cultural truth is that in their great majority, the
"representatives" of the people themselves do not have any interest in engag-
ing in such debates. In the case of societies which claim affinity to "Islam,"
researchers, thinkers, writers, and artists who would think of transgressing,
however little, into the orthodox living tradition, are simply forbidden to
delve into religious questions. I know a significant number of "intellectuals"
and colleagues who contribute to the maintenance of such taboos.

Considering everything that has been said so far, it will be noted that
the prophetic moment does not escape the burden of history; it represents
the stage of emergence, the socio-political and linguistic construction of a system
of beliefs and non-beliefs not yet fixed in ritual, ethical, juridical, and institu-
tional codes which will intervene in the subsequent stage of the imperial
moment when a state apparatus brings religion under its control. In the early
Qur'anic stage, the relationship between men who hear the call and God is
expressed in the context of an oral culture, outside the intervention of clerics
who exercise a power of interpretation in favor of, or in opposition to, the
state. Besides, what will later become the Mushaf or Closed Official Corpus
and the orthodox collections of hadith, set up equally in the Closed Official
Corpus, exist and function in this stage only as a form of oral statement
open to the questioning and immediate reactions of the actors. I insist upon
these historical data, which the normative discourse of belief will efface very
quickly by projecting on the prophetic moment of the inaugurating age
all the operations of sacralization and mythologization effected during the
imperial moment.

I call the imperial moment the period of formation and rapid expansion
of the caliphal state which institutionally lasted from 661 to 1258, despite
the political vicissitudes it witnessed from the intervention of the Buyids
(932), and then the Saljuqs (1040). The caliphal state is characterized by the
construction and maintenance of a politico-religious legitimacy accepted
by the Sunnis, but rejected by the Kharijits and the various Shi'a branches.
The entire Muslim historiography, following Orientalist scholarship since
the nineteenth century, has maintained these political and doctrinal facts
without burdening itself with the problems raised by the passage from the
prophetic moment to the imperial moment; and of the mythical construc-
tion of the former by the latter, on the one hand, and by the constant
dialectic between the stakes-of-meaning and the wills-to-power engaged in
theologico-political debates and confrontations for power in all the spaces
administered by the caliphal state, on the other. I am not overlooking the
contribution of modern historians to the critical analysis of ancient texts,
particularly since the Orientalists are more open to the inquiries of the social
sciences. But the fact remains that the prejudice of rationality continues to
prevail over considerations of the role of the imaginaire in the construction
of legitimacies, the formation and expansion of orthodoxies, the representa-
tions of religious truth, and the discursive strategies of Islamic thought to
cover with a sacred divine veil the ethical, juridical, political, and economic
norms which bring into relief all the activities and profane struggles of the
social actors.

It is thus that past and present historical writings, reinforced by the
literature of political science, have imposed a rigid, immutable, artificially
sacralized image of a hypostatic Islam which ignores the local, historical,
sociological, psychological, linguistic, and mythological factors and assigns
a legal status of divine essence to all thoughts, initiatives, and productions
of men in society. One rarely finds in the most critical writings—in the
sense of the social sciences—about this Islam, written with a capital letter,
the concepts of state control over religion, sacralization, transcendentali-
ation, spiritualization, ontologization, and mythologization of religion. All
this has made it necessary today for the analyst to undertake the reverse
process of de-sacralization, etc.—in other words, unveiling, deconstruction,
de-historization; laying bare the reality which has been constructed by and
for the social imaginaire, under the cover of a discourse formally critical
and rationalized such as that of the usul al-din and usul al-fiqh; a critique of
hadith (the "authentic" collections including the asbab al-nasal), and more
generally the akhbar, the history of the Qur'anic text and Qur'anic exeg-
esis, the elaboration of juridical norms (istinbat al-abkar), the putting in
"historical" form of the Sira of the Prophet, Ali, the Imams, etc. That is the
entire history of Islamic thought and the imperial context where it fulfilled,
simultaneously, functions of ideation and ideologization/mythologization—a history that must be rewritten for two main reasons: to acquire a better descriptive and explicative understanding of a domain that is still badly included in the tasks of theoretization undertaken by the social sciences; and to respond to the vital intellectual and cultural needs of all societies which today depend on false representations and illusory beliefs conveyed by the state-controlled and ritualized Islam, dangerously manipulated in the new contexts of flourishing populism and the disintegration of popular as well as urban cultural codes.

Present-day Islam provides neither the educative and cultural resources nor the political and sociological liberties which are indispensable for dealing successfully with the immense edifice of the "orthodox" Isams bequeathed by the imperial moment; the great historical ruptures with their exhaustive traditions and geopolitical and geohistoric environments (the Mediterranean world and modern Europe); and the increasingly more decisive challenges of science and technology, and of economies linked to the revolution in information technology. The long historical period which extends from the thirteenth to the end of the eighteenth century is described by historians in terms of decadence, lethargy, and the retreat of underdeveloped societies, in contrast to the European societies which, from the same thirteenth century, commence an irresistible, uninterrupted march towards modernity with its still ongoing developments under the name of globalization. If we come back to our dialectic of the local and the global, one can speak of the revenge of the local upon the global after the gradual weakening and final demise of the caliphal state. Doubtless, one must take into account what is called the Ottoman Empire. In the frame of analysis which I have chosen—the dialectic of the local and the global, the stakes-of-meaning and wills-to-power in the Mediterranean world, including the most dynamic part of Europe, from the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries—one can speak of a shrinking of the intellectual and cultural horizons of scholarly Islam, of its ritualization, its immersion in symbolic and customary local codes with, notably, the wide proliferation of religious brotherhoods to compensate for local deficiencies in different political centers which are too far away or too weak to exercise an effective control upon all ethno-cultural groups and regions. The depredation of meaning and intellectual diligence, the insignificance of literary creativity and scientific innovation, the disappearance of doctrinal pluralism and the humanist attitude (philosophical adab of the tenth century), are linked to several facts which dominated the Ottoman period: the imposition of a single official juridical school (the Hanafi) throughout the empire, the total elimination of philosophy, the widespread emergence of a subervient scholastic class which glossed indefinitely over some classical manuals selected to serve their orthodoxy, the absence of doctrinal disputations (munazara) between scholars belonging to different schools, and the obliviousness to currents of fruitful thought as well as significant works and authors of the classical period. On the other hand, the Ottoman state always favored certain works and institutions, such as architecture and the army, which were more directly linked to the glory of the empire, the deployment of its power, and the maintenance of its legitimacy. One will note, however, an instance of resistance by the ulama who refused to grant to the sultans the coveted title of caliph.

Can one then speak of a "renaissance" (Nabda) as have the "Arabs"—the Arabic-speaking domain of the Ottoman Empire—who suffered a rehabilitated domination afterwards, notably in Algeria, to extol the Turks as the "protectors of Islam" against the colonizing enterprises of Christian Europe? This question has introduced a huge problem of historical knowledge: we are, in effect, far from an objective definition of the role and place of the Ottoman period in the wider perspective of a global history of peoples, cultures, religions, and hegemonies in the Mediterranean space. This objective implies the renunciation by European peoples and nation-states of a unilateral, self-centered historiography which mentions the Muslims in general and the Turks in particular as negative forces opposed to their expansion. Similarly, the colonized peoples and the party-nation-states which have taken charge of them after independence must cease to write and teach their history in terms of moralizing, apologetic, and militant categories, which explain their historical stagnation in relation to modern Europe and all their present-day difficulties as a product of savage colonial domination, thus dispensing with the need to examine much older structural mechanisms.

There was a renaissance from the nineteenth century, to the extent that there was a reactivation of the intellectual field, an opening up of cultural creativity and sensibility to the material progress of civilization on account of a mode of knowledge ignored until then in Islamic contexts. The scientific curiosity for the classical period (the imperial moment) welcomes for the first time the methods of philology and the frame of historicist inquiry; one is interested in the critical edition of ancient texts after the manner of the European Renaissance of Graeco-Latin texts. The modern political and juridical institutions are subjected to scrutiny, but not to the point of triggering a current of critical revision of the methodological and cognitive foundations of Islamic thought. Albert Hourani rightly designated this period as the liberal age. But from the perspective of present-day Islamist discourse and the return to a disguised locality under the pretext of universality, the