Nahda and even the Salafi thought were more charged with hope, with overtures to intellectual political and juridical modernity, than the Arab Socialist Revolution of Nasser which was too aligned to a communism without critical Marxists, or the present-day Islamic Revolution in Iran which is too dominated by clerics closer to populist religion than to an intellectually demanding spirituality.

Many will reject this proposition because it seems to neglect the colonial domination which weighed until 1945 over all societies with Islamic references. This point is important, because it allows us to measure the responsibility of "organic" intellectuals who, in order to benefit from the privileges of the new Nomenklatura, supported ideologies which were as much foreign to the Islamic tradition—considered obsolete and without political relevance—as to the customary and cultural codes of the rural and nomadic worlds. The "proletariat" were the only driving force of a revolution which one can today only denounce for its horrors without delegating it to the camp of absolute evil, that is, colonialism and imperialism. This politico-Manichaean division, which has long affected the social link in post-war Europe, is being raised again today with more anti-intellectual radicalism by the militants of the Islamic Revolution. That is because the sociological bases of the socialist-communist ideology of the years 1950–70 have been considerably enlarged since then by population explosions, while the uprooting of rural populations and nomads has led to the expansion of cities which were conceived at the beginning of the century, or even in the nineteenth century, for more limited urban classes. The rapid development of a populist social force is explained by the conjugation of these factors, to which must be added the system of education conceived and imposed by party-nation-states.

The separation between the sciences of the engineer and the sciences of man and society has been more radical and even more harmful than in the model systems of the West. If engineers trained in the new faculties of sciences commit themselves more readily to Islamist movements, it is because they are even more deprived than their peers at the faculties of law and social sciences of the tools of thought which are indispensable for receiving or producing the reasoning of a historian, sociologist, linguist, psychologist, or anthropologist. These domains of reality are lived and interpreted through the categories of beliefs and non-beliefs taught by religion, with the ideological re-appropriation effected by scholarly discourse, which is itself modelled by the official discourse of national construction (the ministers of education work with their colleagues at the ministries of interior, "national orientation," religious affairs, and information in the line fixed by the party-state). Thus the populist ideological Maquis find themselves spread in all strata and sectors of society; but it is in the great urban centers that they manifest themselves with the greatest political potency and social pressure. That certain regimes succeed better than others in regulating, diverting, and containing these forces of protest and change is undeniable; the fact remains that populism is a structural, sociological phenomenon generated during the course of the years 1960–80 in all societies of the former Third World. This fact conditions the demagogical discourse of the states, weighs upon the manipulation of religious "values," and reduces the chances of diffusion of critical and disalienating modes of thought.

I have remarked on the scientific distances, the psychological postures, the objectives of meaning and power, which separate present-day Islam from the historical Islams which the critical historian tries to reconstruct. The most valuable lesson of this brief journey concerns not only Islam and its faithful; it also touches the status of meaning and of what makes meaning in human society. One will recognize, however, an important difference between, on the one hand, the situation of Islam as a model of historical action and those Muslims who lay claim to it today, and, on the other hand, modernity, its producers, and its users. In the first case, at least since the thirteenth century, generations of social actors allowed an immense unthought to accumulate, generating unthinkables which have become more and more burdensome to handle today; in the second, one makes perilous jumps beyond the values, stakes, words, signs, and symbols which one has not taken the time to evaluate and integrate into the successive "paradigms" which only political battles have made to prevail. These paradigms are from then on possessed of philosophical contingency and political arbitrariness; they go even as far as favoring the consumption of what Pierre Bourdieu has recently called "discordable thought." Will one take the time to rethink it and eventually reintegrate it in the more complete, legible, and enriching map of the cultures of the world? In other words, modernity has also generated unthoughts and unthinkables by putting the quest for meaning at the service of the will-to-power, whereas it ought to be careful not to bind human destiny to short-lived effects of meaning. Julia Kristeva spoke of "the destructive genesis of meaning" at a time when semiotics cultivated the ambition of introducing more effective cognitive strategies for better mastering the conditions of production and consumption of meaning.

Having said all this, it is necessary to elaborate further the concept to avoid reinforcing the idea, already too widespread, that Islam is a substantial entity which generates itself from its founding texts and imposes its brand upon societies and cultures which have accepted it. Present-day Islam,
like classical Islam and the nascent Islam of the Qur’an and the actions of Muhammad, is the evolving and changing product of social actors so diverse and under historical conditions so complex through time and space, that we prefer to speak of a hypostatized Islam of texts and believers rather than one molded doctrinally and ideologically by concrete forces. Today these forces are termed populism, the uprooting of rural populations and nomads, the disintegration of urban mercantile and cultured milieus—in the sense of the learned written culture11—under the combined pressures of demography, the influx of unemployed rural populations, the destruction of cultural codes and systems of traditional solidarity, party-nation-states more concerned with monopolizing legal violence than constructing modern legitimacies, social and economic disparities between islets of suprano-cultural modernity; the middle classes maintained below their most legitimate ambitions, and the masses doomed to uncertainty, frustration, exclusion, and unemployment, that is, to the constitutive situations of the imaginaire of revolt. I speak of revolt rather than revolution because I prefer to reserve this latter concept for popular uprisings supported and legitimized by an ideology heralding imminent and lasting emancipation. That was the case of the Qur’anic discourse which accompanied the concrete organizing action of Muhammad while opening horizons of meaning which would allow future generations—particularly those who produced classical Islam under the great Abbasid caliphs—to construct the ideal sacred figure of the mediating-prophet and of a founding Revelation as the indispensable reference for the actions and conduct of the faithful.

The Qur’anic discourse has neither the same cognitive status nor the same discursive strategies as that which I call the prophetic discourse. The latter is not to be confused with the sayings of the Prophet collected in the great “closed official corpus” of hadith; for in the orthodox belief the hadith cannot be identified with the Qur’anic discourse which is divine. The prophetic discourse is that which is memorized, perceived, mediated, commented upon, and put to advantage in a vast semantic expansion through sacralization, transfiguration, mythologization, transcendentialization, and ontologization of the interpreting community in the course of centuries. It is the product of the collective imaginaire of various social groups; in return, it nourishes, galvanizes, stirs up, and inflames this very same imaginaire which believers call faith. By its enunciation, every believer liberates himself from his ordinary individual self, and from profane time and space, to make himself a contemporary of the Prophet, a witness to the descent of the Word of God; the pious ancients transfigured like the Prophet as models of faithfulness, transmitters by word and action of all the teachings which come to inflate the living tradition and enrich the efficacy of the prophetic discourse. The latter is a homogenous space of articulation of a necessarily true intangible meaning, which applies to all times and places but is itself independent of time and place. It combines the citations of the Qur’anic verses, the hadith, the edifying accounts of the lives and deeds of other recognized prophets, and saints who have attained proximity to God with the intercession of the Prophet, and the founder-imams of schools acknowledged as orthodox. It excludes, on the other hand, all other human discourses which are not authentically derived from the source-definition-discourse. The recurrence of this discourse in the most diverse socio-cultural milieux and diverse historical conjunctures is explained by its mythical structure, paradigmatic nature, and its power of intercession, purification, and spiritual elevation of the believer. This definition applies, of course, to all monotheistic religious traditions which link all their discursive productions, and their conducts orientated towards salvation, to their foundational sacred texts (Bible, Gospels, Qur’an)12 and to their expansion in the living tradition, through complex mechanisms of integration, selection, and rejection.

The revolutionary secularist discourse in the English, American, and French Revolutions of the age of the Enlightenment breaks totally with the postulates and religious representations of the prophetic discourse; but it retains with the latter several common traits. It also presents itself as the founder of a new departure of existential code; it sets up a principle of hope for all mankind, paradigms, and definitions which inform and govern all productions of human existence. At the same time, it detaches ethics, law, and spirituality from explicit references to a living God, revealing Himself to men in history; and it confines to a sovereign and responsible reason the task of defining and evaluating all legitimacies. The rupture with the metaphysical vision of spiritual theologies is therefore not total: there is a substitution of a secularist spiritual power for the power of divine law—it is in this sense that I speak of secularist (laic) discourse. The rivalry between the two discourses has continued until our day; and although the second has had a shorter life span and fewer instances of application than the first, one must recognize that the existential fecundity and promises of emancipation of both have not yet been exhausted. The destiny reserved by history to the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917 confirms a contrario the validity of the comparative analysis which I have outlined here for better evaluating the status of what is called today, since the rise of Khomeini to power, the Islamic Revolution. One cannot, in fact, speak of present-day Islam without reflecting on the significance, scope, and limits of this great event.13
Before examining the case of the Islamic Revolution, it is useful to insist upon the ideological derivatives of the two discourses I have just presented as two existential codes which are, at the same time, discontinuous, rival, and intricate. The passage from prophetic discourse to theological, juridical, and political codifications is comparable to the passage of the revolutionary discourse of the Enlightenment to the philosophical, juridical, and institutional codifications which still function in the democratic societies of the West. The believers speak of degradation of the divine Revelation in the perverse usages which men make of it in societies; the laïc citizens speak of crises, corruption and infidelity to the principles of 1789 (in the French case). It is a fact that the Christian empires of Byzantium and the West, the Muslim empires under the caliphate and then the Ottoman sultanate developed oppressive clerical systems which obliterated the emancipatory visions of the prophetic discourse and action. There is progress and a new departure of code with the reason of the Enlightenment because it liberated the intellectual field from false knowledge, as well as arbitrary political and juridical orders, accumulated by the clerical institutions of all religions. But in its turn, this liberating reason quickly exhausted its ethical and spiritual ethos by becoming conquering, dominating, and dogmatic. Particularly in France, the anti-clerical struggle, which was so necessary and fruitful but also violent and radical, engendered a secularist religion that reveals its dogmatism and incapacity to manage cultural pluralism after two centuries of rich and powerful experiences.

Present-day Islam is engaged in demonstrating the intellectual and cultural limits of the revolutionary discourse initiated and nourished by the Aufklärung. I do not mean to say that present-day Islamic thought launches intellectual challenges, hitherto unknown, to the reason of the Enlightenment. The Christian counterpart has already made the most of all types and degrees of resistance, rejection, and claims which can emanate from a religion of the Book before the rise of modernity in Europe. In any case, the Islamic thought of today is too unprepared in the face of modernity to serve as a fruitful dialectical partner in the ongoing debate on the functions of religion in the context of globalization. The challenge of present-day Islam to the societies of the West resides essentially in its semiotic and sociological presence, which is visible enough to bring forth reactions of fear and rejection in populations reputed to be educated by the Enlightenment. It is a fact that in France the declaration of the rights of man and of the citizen was not followed by women's right to vote until 1949.

Can it be said that the Islamic Revolution, which sustains the political audacities and claims of jihad vs. McWorld, has introduced new elements to enrich the typology just outlined by a third type? In the absence of any intellectual challenge on the part of Islamic thought, there would thus exist a historical challenge of paradigmatic scope which would imply stakes-of-meaning not only for the reason of the Enlightenment but, more decisively, for a new, emerging reason.

This question returns under a more programmatic form, but always with a radical and comprehensive critical intention, as I have already said, on the irreversible situation created for Islam and its tradition by the historical test of the 1970s. This time, Islam will not be able to elude, as it did with the excuse of liberation struggles, the major intellectual revolution which bears upon the conditions of production, transmission, and consumption of meaning in human societies. At this point in our analytical and critical journey, it is necessary to introduce the problems raised by the attitude of present-day Islam towards its tradition.

The approach of tradition in the Islamic context

For this part of the exposition, I shall content myself with resuming a long study which I devoted to tradition in 1984 and which was published in 1985 under a title resembling the one I have adopted here by integrating the new data of globalization and taking into account jihad as an ongoing figure of history. One may notice that the critical and constructive objective of my earlier reflections imposes itself with more pertinence and urgency in the present-day context of political and social tensions culminating in the Algerian Civil War.

At this juncture, I would like to introduce some key notions by defining more clearly concepts which have become indispensable tools for any serious contribution to the project of a critique of the Islamic reason, which I have been developing for some 40-odd years. I distinguish between two frames of the cognitive activity of this reason, corresponding to two moments in the history of thought: the frame of the intermediate civilization as S.D. Goitein has defined it, and the frame of modernity as presented historically and philosophically by F. Braudel and J. Habermas. In the first frame, we have the closed sphere of a reason which is at once theocentric and logocentric but whose sovereignty is exercised in the limits fixed by God; in the second, the open sphere of modernity, an incomplete project in which reason remains logocentric but arrogates to itself a sovereignty whose limits are fixed or raised by its own decisions alone. Between the two frames, there is neither a chronological partition nor an impervious cognitive partition. It is, therefore, very important to be able to identify in the first frame certain postures already anticipated by pre-modern reason, which
will be fully deployed only subsequently; inversely, the postures peculiar to pre-modern reason continue to resist all the disappointments raised by modern critical analysis. One witnesses even the failure of this latter before political progress and the social expansion of an aggressive, obscurantist religion because it ignores even the elementary critical preoccupations of pre-modern reason.

To illustrate these quick historical glimpses, it would be appropriate to resume here the analysis of concepts which I have often used elsewhere in the perspective of a critique of religious reason on the basis of the Islamic example. I shall mention the following concepts and say a few words about the first: Qur'anic fact and Islamic fact, societies of the Book/books; holy, sacred, sacrilege, sacrifice; orthodoxy and heresy; exegesis, interpretation and critique of discourse; existential; myth, mythify, mythologize, mystify; ideation, ideologization and critical relation.

The concept of the Qur'anic fact has been generally understood by my readers as the expression of a fideistic view to preserve the dogma of the divine authenticity of the Qur'an from the reach of modern critique; one can, on the other hand, concentrate upon the Islamic fact which is more directly the product of the ideological strategies of social actors. This common misunderstanding informs us more about the cognitive system of the readers who close themselves in positivist historicism than the epistemological posture which I am trying to apply in a new critique of religious reason from beyond the example of the Qur'an and its theological expansions. Lately, Malek Bennabi has used the expression phénomène corrosique (Qur'anic phenomenon) in an apologetic perspective which assures great success for his book in the Islamist circles of today. That is why the conquest of a critical operational concept regarding the Qur'an is doomed to failure, for opposite reasons, from the Islamic side as well as from the side of the historians, guardians, and administrators of the positivist historicist orthodoxy.

By the Qur'anic fact I mean the historical manifestation, at a time and in a precise socio-cultural milieu, of an oral discourse which accompanied, for a period of 20 years, the concrete historical action of a social actor called Muhammad ibn Abdullah. One sees that this concept aims not to defend or discard the religious dimension of the discourse, but to fix the attention, within a first methodological time-period, on the linguistic, cultural, and social conditions of articulation of the discourse by an interlocutor and of its reception by various, explicitly targeted addressees. There is in it a project of investigation which claims to be simultaneously linguistic, semiotic, sociological, psychological, and anthropological. All these dimensions are, in fact, present in all units of the discourse which exegetical literature and modern philology have tried to identify. Separating these dimensions, under the pretext of respecting the independence of various disciplines as they are defined by university scholars, amounts to imposing a first choice-reducing agent which is no less dangerous than that of the theologians, jurists and, even more so, the fundamentalist militants of today who only know the arbitrary projections of the oral discourse into text (the famous Mushaf, which I call the Closed Official Corpus).

The linguistic and historical jump from the stage of the oral discourse, articulated in changing situations in the course of 20 years, to that of Closed Official Corpus has been considered until now neither by the literature on the juridical objectives of the discourse (the ashab al-nusul, circumstances of the Revelation), nor by the historiist and applied philological scholarship which shares with traditional exegesis the reading of the discourse as a sacralized and transfigured text as believers do. I have never come across the concept, however essential, of the Closed Official Corpus in the works of any of the most eminent "modern" Qur'an scholars. The traditional term Mushaf is unanimously accepted without commentaries, other than those of textual philology. Under the circumstances, one understands that the concept of the Qur'anic fact is not only disdained but interpreted in a "scientifically" disqualifying sense.

The concept of oral discourse, transformed into written discourse and then consigned to a Closed Official Corpus by a long series of complex manipulations—which philological inquiry clarified within the limits of its own problematics—is all the more fruitful as it allows us to open up a site of theoretical analysis where all the founding religious texts, and in the first place the Bible and the Gospels, can be taken into account. And one will no longer aim to inquire separately about the authenticity of textual fragments, or even words in a given corpus, which was the object of philological critique. What is at stake in the passage from the oral discourse to a Closed Official Corpus (one will note that I never say just "corpus" because then I would be disregarding, as with the term Mushaf, all the problems relating to the notions of corpus, official and closure) is the cognitive status of meaning produced at the linguistic and historical stage of the oral discourse, taking into account all the real situations of discourse and the effects of meaning constructed by the successive exegetes in ideologically difficult contexts, and particularly the exclusive status of a Closed Official Corpus resulting in an irreversible fact which can be dated to the orthodox "Commentary of al-Tabari (d. 923)."
Islam and its tradition have until now encountered modernity as a cultural aggression (al-ghazu al-fikri), not as a historical phenomenon local and universal at the same time. It remains to be explained why the intellectual, scientific, cultural, and economic advances of the area molded by the Islamic fact from the seventh to the thirteenth centuries have given way to the set of regressive forces which have detached the southern and eastern shores of the Mediterranean from all the historical activities of modernity to the point that at the end of the current century, the rejection of the West has assumed the dimensions of a pole of contemporary history and the rank of a symbolic figure dialectically opposed to the rival figure of McWorld in the new historical stage opened by the failure of international communism and the triumph of unbridled libertarianism. Although McWorld and Jihad translate the eternal dialectic of the dominators and the dominated, they are now united in fettering the very spirit to works which alienate and destroy it.

While sharing the arguments of B.R. Barber on the subject of political, economic, and juridical strategies of McWorld and the phantasmical proclamations of Jihad, I would like to go further than him by taking into account the stakes-of-meaning and culture engaged in the irrational, suicidal confrontation of the two monsters of our contemporary history. I find a theoretical advantage in reflecting upon present-day Islam facing its tradition no longer only from within this tradition, which has been tried too often since at least the Ihya 'ulum al-din of al-Ghazali, but from the forces which subvert, for the first time in its history and in an irreversible manner, this very interior, this resistant nucleus upon which Jihad is believed to lean, and even to seize many tools of McWorld, while declaring them to be satanical in its dialectical opposite. In this confrontation with unequal arms, Islam-Jihad, like yesterday’s nationalist discourse of liberation, presents itself as an innocent victim and a savior-depository of divine law and promise before an atheistic, materialistic, dominating, and radically immoral West. The colonized peoples were promised only civil liberties and social justice in the frame of scientific socialism perfected in popular democracies, the inheritors of the revolution of the Enlightenment. In the confrontation between Jihad and McWorld, one returns to the Manichaean struggle between light and darkness after the apparent defeats and irremediable disqualifications of theologies, theocracies, empires, and monarchies, as much as that of modern revolutions founded upon the secular cult of sovereign reason.

Who will take charge of all these sites in ruin? Who will inaugurate the new history after the proclaimed end of a certain history? Will it be religious reason, purified of the errancy, false hopes, and oppressive violence of the scientific atheistic reason, at last re-enrowned as in Iran, Afghanistan, and the Sudan, in its rank and function of the “vicar of God on earth” (khalifat Allah f’l-’araq)? That is the ambition set into motion by Jihad. Or will the reason of the Enlightenment, correcting its excesses, contradictions, false knowledge, and theoretical dogmatism, restart on bases more solid and principles better mastered? That is the thesis of the more or less competent and convinced defenders of post-modern reason. But once again, thought as it is exercised in contemporary Islamic contexts is too caught up in semantic disorder, as generated and widely perpetrated by the conjugated violence of Jihad and McWorld, too handicapped by the unthoughts accumulated since the sixteenth century, to contribute to the great open debate on a world scale, other than through the violence of the poor and the excluded, and the support extended to McWorld by a greater number of consumers. Participation in the debate at the more essential level of intellectual responsibility is, to a large degree, conditioned by the orientations of philosophical thought within the crisis which molds McWorld.

How do we think about this crisis that includes the radical changes which science and technology impose on all societies as well as the problems peculiar to societies dominated by Islam, be it dogmatic and ritualistic, conservative and traditionalist, or liberal within the non-transgressible limits fixed and supervised by the managers of orthodoxy? The politics of religion pursued in a large number of societies called Muslim make too many concessions to the forces of traditionalism, while favoring the adoption of all the benefits of material civilization. This results in dangerous mental cleavages, increasing backwardness in the systems of education, fruitless self-censorship, and the impoverishment of creativity in various domains of intellectual and cultural life. Whereas divisions, contradictions, and conflicts, individual and collective, become the common lot of numerous populations, there remain few workers capable of assuming the indispensable tasks of an emancipation which is always aspired, always deferred and sometimes openly rejected (I think of the condition of women and the rights of children). Who is concerned with mastering the frames and tools of thought of the hegemonic powers that set all the agendas of historical outcome, as well as the modes of interpretation of the various epochs, so as to avoid being trapped again by false knowledge, false conscience, mental objects (such as the East, the West, Islam, development, the rights of man, the right to self-determination, etc.), constructed by and for the centers of atomization of “true” knowledge and meaning which support their will-to-power? Where are the institutions for training researchers and teachers
who would widen the fields of investigation of the human and social sciences, and radicalize their critical questioning of the problems bequeathed to us by the unknown, mutilated, and unthinkable pasts and presents, which blur or smash our visions of the future?

I have long shared the prevailing opinion which claims the elaboration of a "modern theology" of Islam, after the manner of what the Catholics and Protestants have continued to do in the Western milieu since the beginning of what historians call the "modernist crisis." The collapse of all ideologies, added to the challenges posed by experimental sciences to the political, juridical, ethical, and philosophical reason, have surely increased the demand for solutions in the direction of traditional theologies; but these remain too imprisoned by medievalist cognitive frames and tools to assume with any success the delicate tasks imposed by the ongoing exit of the religious imaginaires. With regard to Islam, the discourse of jihad has practically reduced to silence, or struck with derision, every voice which attempts to reactivate theological, philosophical, ethical, and juridical thinking, capable of integrating in the same critical movement all the tasks prescribed by the specific historical development which I have called the exhaustive Islamic tradition. A historical outline is necessary here to render more intelligibly these observations on the adventures of meaning in Islamic contexts.

1. The system of thought elaborated in the Islamic context during the phase of emergence and the classical period (661–1258) is totally closed in the antique and medieval cognitive, or pre-modern, space.

2. The long period which extends from the thirteenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century has long been passed over in silence, superficially evoked in school textbooks under the headings of decadence, lethargy, oblivion, conservatism, and return to popular superstitions. The Turks can pride themselves on the initial success of a vast empire, but they are obliged to lower the tone in view of the irresistible rise of Europe after the defeat of Lepanto in 1571. Now, it was during this crucial historical phase that we programmed the factors, politically, sociologically and culturally important, of the crises, tensions, explosions, state formations, and ruptures which characterize the contemporary evolution of all the societies subjected to hasty, arbitrary, and uncontrollable reconstructions. It was then, in effect, that two major ruptures were accomplished in these societies which prescribe specific tasks for us today: the internal rupture of Islamic thought with regard to doctrinal pluralism, ethno-cultural cosmopolitanism, and incipient humanism, which constituted the richness of the classical period; and the rupture with the outside, that is to say with Europe, where the great changes and constitutive discoveries of modernity occurred.

3. When the intellectual and cultural movement of the Nahda engaged in the work of reactivation of the precious legacy of the classical period under the names of Turath, the golden age of Islamic civilization, the two ruptures just mentioned had already created a profound gulf between the revolutionary, euphoric Europe of the Enlightenment and the societies which could no longer benefit either from the tools bequeathed by classical thought, or still less from those proposed in the nineteenth to twentieth centuries (1850–1940) in Europe by the practitioners of historicist historiography and the philological reading of the major texts. Thus the promising efforts of three generations of intellectuals, researchers, writers, and artists have instigated since the 1920s a rejection leading to more radical political battles during the wars of liberation (1945–70) and today to Jihad vs. McWorld. Since the 1960s, demography has upset the sociological conditions of political expression, dissemination of learning, and manipulation of social imaginaires. One can speculate that in these circumstances an unforeseen substratum evolution will operate towards the worst or the best. The visibility of the nearest horizon, the year 2010 for example, remains blurred, so much so that the social sciences confine themselves to the almost journalistic description of superficial events by depending upon the discourse of the most active actors, most directly engaged in the conquest of political and religious power.

I shall end with these brief observations. I know they demand more clarification, critical examination, and debate; but this is not possible so long as the great tasks involved in the general history of thought, of all the traditions of thought which seek to take their place and appointment with the generalized quest for one reliable, lasting, and universalizable meaning, mobilize only a limited number of exceptional researcher-thinkers.