

Part I

Religion, Culture and Development – Islam between Past and Present

Introductory remarks

Among the hallmarks of our new century is the renewed importance of religion. The distinguished British Journal for International Affairs *Millennium*, published by the London School of Economics (LSE), devoted its year 2000 special issue to the topic of religion and international relations. It was an honour for me to be among the contributors. The background to the surge of religion as an issue in world politics is the fact that the demise of the Cold War did not bring about the hoped-for peace. Instead domestic and regional conflicts imbued with religious and ethnic implications (for instance, in Bosnia, Kosovo, Kashmir and Chechnia) have been flaring up ever since. The diversity of these regional conflicts has replaced the hitherto dominant global bipolarity that divided the world into two spheres. To be sure, at issue in this context is not religion as such, but rather religion in its role as a political ideology. In this capacity it is becoming part of international studies and is increasingly moving to centre-stage. There are only a few scholars and journalists who – owing to the need for interdisciplinary training – are in a position to develop a proper grasp of these issues. It is obvious that familiarity with the phenomenon in the diverse geopolitical regions themselves, in addition to professional knowledge in international and religious studies, are therefore required. Armchair knowledge of scholars and editorialists is not enough.

Certainly, religion is in substance a spiritual belief and an ethics; in this understanding religion can be studied from two vantage-points: divinity studies and cultural analysis. In their respective spheres, these approaches enable us to grasp the intrinsic meaning of religion. The issues dealt with in this book are different because the concern here is rather with the politicisation of religious symbols and their function in society; it is only this politicisation that facilitates making use of religion as an ideological tool embedded in domestic, regional and international conflict. At issue is a global phenomenon that can be observed in all world religions. This is the subject-matter of the present book on the case of Islam. Being an International Relations scholar, I am at pains to make full use of the findings of Islamic studies as they relate to international affairs.

In the following three chapters of Part I I shall establish my understanding of religion as a cultural system. The basic argument is that it is quite wrong to play down the role of religion in political conflicts in contending that it is merely instrumental. I contest the popular view that in religious fundamentalism religion serves as a cover for

providing political legitimisation, thus being simply abused for non-religious ends. The implication of this untenable view is that a religious fundamentalist is a cynical person. In contrast, Islamists throughout the world act as the 'true' believers. I have encountered them as such believers. Nonetheless, I have also seen them as 'political' rather than ethical men of religion. This is the dual nature of politicised religion.

For a proper understanding of these complexities, we need first to understand religion as a cultural system in order to grasp its politicisation in an appropriate manner. Islamists are definitely not cynical people who simply use religion consciously as a cover for their political actions. Only some of them may do. In stating this, I am not overlooking the fact that political Islam is an ideology, and not the intrinsic religion of Islam in which most Muslims believe. The exploration of the political determination of religion will be the next step in the ensuing parts. In acknowledging that the Islamists equate their ideology wholeheartedly, not cynically, with Islamic religious belief, it follows that we need to understand religion, in this case Islam, in an adequate manner. The focus is on the interplay between religion, as a cultural system, and politics in the process of development in a crisis-ridden situation.

With reference to my understanding of political Islam reflecting both a religious belief and a religio-political commitment I am bearing in mind that religion as such is an intrinsic belief and an ethics. This book provides, however, a social-scientific, not a religious study of the oscillation in Islam between culture and politics. My understanding of religion in society is affected by the views of Emile Durkheim and by his definition of religion as a '*fait social*' (social fact). Nevertheless, I am wary of reducing religion to a social context.

Part I introduces the three central themes of the present analysis: culture, the worldview (*Weltanschauung*) of Islam and social change. I develop the understanding of culture employed in this study, of course consistently with reference to Islam. It follows that I am conceptualising Islam as a cultural system in addition to looking at it in the Durkheimian way as a social fact. The reader will clearly find out how much I lean on Clifford Geertz's cultural anthropology, but consistently with an attempt to go beyond his approach. For me, as a student of International Relations, local cultures are parts of regional civilisations. The latter are increasingly becoming pivotal in post-bipolar world politics. Clearly, the study of culture as a set-up isolated from its regional and international environment remains wanting. My

analysis is at pains to be free from this shortcoming and in this sense I go radically beyond Clifford Geertz and his narrow confines.

For a general analysis of Islam there is a risk which includes a harmful flaw, that is, to view Islam as a monolithic entity. It is true that Islam constitutes one civilisation as represented by the West, but it is equally characterised by tremendous cultural diversity. For this reason, I have coined the formula of *cultural diversity within civilisational unity in Islam*. Thus, we are dealing with two levels of the oscillation in Islam between culture and politics. On the domestic-cultural level, political Islam is imbued with ethnicity and sectarianism. On the civilisational level, world politics is at issue and political Islam is the foremost indication of the ongoing 'Revolt against the West' (H. Bull). At this level political Islam provides an alternative civilisational worldview and it presents its own equally universalist concepts of political order.

In the present period of the politicisation of Islam it is amazing to see how Islamic fundamentalists view Islam in a way similar to the presentation pursued by Orientalism. Both Islamists and Orientalists, even though completely at odds with one another, employ unwittingly essentialist formulae, such as the German concept of *Kultur Ganzheit* (cultural entirety) to depict Islam in a monolithic manner. Not only Islamic fundamentalists, but also orthodox Muslims believe that Islam is immutable; they view it as the all-embracing essential culture, valid without further accommodation for all times, places and peoples. I recall with dismay a public debate in March 2000 with a professor of al-Azhar in Cairo. In responding to my argument that only a reform Islam would allow the integration of Muslim migrants into Europe, he stated: 'No, there is only one Islam, take it or leave it, Islam is not a buffet from which you select what you want!' With these harsh words he dismissed my concept of Euro-Islam, that is, of a European understanding of Islam, which I have analogously developed in relation to Afro- and Indo-Islam.

In short, these people essentialise Islam in putting it above history, social and cultural change. On these grounds, the Islamist notion of 'true Muslim' resembles in a bizarre way that of the *homo islamicus* as presented by biased Western Orientalists. Even an uninformed traveller touring through the world of Islam will have no difficulty in observing how diverse is the great number of local cultures of the Islamic civilisation. On these grounds, I keep asking how to honour the existing diversity of Islam while talking about it, in a Geertzian way, as a single cultural system of religious symbols which determine the worldview of

its believers. We need to face this tough question again and again in this book but at different levels of the analysis.

The next step is to ask questions about the ways in which Muslims view the world. This is a cultural issue which compels me to anticipate the criticism that I essentialise culture. My response is that culture is not an essential entity, in as much as it stands under the impact of development in its local, regional and international environment. The difficulties involved in conveying a general definition of culture in cultural analysis are related to the incorporation of cultural patterns in social realities.

The approach employed in the present analysis is opposed to two dominant schools of thought. It is equally directed against economist views, whether Marxist or conservative, and modernisation theory. These theories alike are rejected because they are reductionist; they reduce one constraint of change to another without being able to view the interplay between the elements involved. The economist approach reduces culture to economic constraints, playing down every cultural impact. In contrast, modernisation theory shifts the focus from economy to norms and values; it considers change as a value-change. In arguing against these schools of thought I present the hypothesis that social and cultural change are incorporated in one process of interplay affecting and determining one another. In the present analysis, social change covers transitions in politics and economy and is also intertwined with cultural change affecting values and beliefs.