Part II

The Context: the Politicisation of Islam in the Global Age

Introductory remarks

Among the findings of the chapters in Part I is the insight that culture is not an essential entity in that it is subject to change itself; it can be affected by developments in its local, regional and international environment. The difficulties involved in conveying a general definition of culture are related to the incorporation of cultural patterns in social realities. I have highlighted the 'symbolic dimensions of social conduct' as the focus of my theme and I am operating on the assumption that religion creates a 'cultural system' consisting of corresponding symbols that converge to form a model for reality. This is the background for an understanding of what Islam is. Yet, the politicisation of Islam is underpinned both by social realities and by the use of religio-cultural symbols for political ends.

The next step of my analysis is the enquiry into the cultural accommodation of change as pursued in the Islamic civilisation. By now, it must have become clear that Islam constitutes the model for reality provided for Muslim adherents, from whom 'submission' to its religious content is demanded. The very word *Islam* is derived from the verb 'to submit oneself'. To be converted to Islam is expressed in Arabic as *aslama*, literally 'he has surrendered'. The politically active Muslim switches this 'submission' into a selfless political commitment.

The first question to ask is: What are the constraints and what are the ingredients of the politicisation of Islam? This is a very complex question which equally touches on local, regional and global realities none of which could alone provide a proper and satisfactory answer. We need to see these realities in their mix with the culture of Islam and its religious symbols, in pursuit of the search for a convincing answer!

Islamic cultural symbols are twisted between religious beliefs, the revolt against the West and globalisation which is believed to be launched against the world of Islam. For understanding these complex issues we need to explore the process by which contemporary Islam as a cultural system is being politicised. It would seem appropriate to address the politicisation of religio-cultural symbols and then to place this process into the international environment of Islamic civilisation.

The outstanding feature of the 55 states with an Islamic majority population in the modern international system of states is that their societies are in most cases subject to extremely rapid and uneven social change. Unfortunately, the current politicisation of Islam is not a promising prospect for developing an innovative and path-finding

vision for the future of the Islamic civilisation. The existing cultural system has not yet adapted to changed conditions, nor have new elements been created to smooth the way for new perspectives. Instead, there has been a political call for the suppression of all development that is considered to be a deviation from Islam, that is, that does not conform to the ideal cultural system. Underlying contemporary political Islam, therefore, is the fundamentalist demand for a return to 'true' Islamic symbols which are to be kept immutable against external, that is, Western and global impact. The perceptive reader will recall the concept of religion as a model for reality, developed in Chapter 1. The political programmes derived from this cultural system are motivated accordingly. Again, political Islam provides no innovative prospects for the future but solely an understanding of the future as a restoration of the past, obtained from the 'good old ways' (*salaf*), although to be distinguished from *salafiyya*. This worldview is at odds with the fact that Islamic fundamentalism is absolutely not a traditionalism, it is rather an Islamic dream of (semi-)modernity!

Despite its modern implications, political Islam may – with some restrictions – be interpreted as a backward-oriented utopia. This demand and reality nevertheless continue to clash. The Islamic past is perceived as the primeval source of political rule, that is, a government regarded as a divine order. This is clearly not a traditionalist view of politics. Modern concepts (for example *nizam*, or system) are projected back into Islamic history and culturally understood or perceived as authentically Islamic.

In Islamic studies, the question is often asked whether a political form of government was developed in parallel with the foundation of the Islamic religion. In fact, the claim to authenticity of contemporary political Islamic integrists is also related to this question in that Islamists believe they are restoring the primordial Islamic order. In exploring this question, the available works by Orientalists of the old school have unfortunately also proved of little help, as they seldom go beyond the confines of textual philology. The study of reality cannot be pursued with the aid of exegesis of classical sources. The study of the political structures of the time are beyond philological concerns. Historical reality is not a text, however, and cannot be adequately grasped simply through research into sources. In contrast to this approach, the social historian Reinhard Bendix has been able to produce profound insights into this question in his magnificent work *Kings or People*. In his view, the classical Islamic order was based on 'royal authority', and yet this is not the religion of Islam as reform-Muslims like Said Ashmawi argue.

In my earlier work *The Crisis of Modern Islam*, I have shown that the founding of the Islamic religion was accompanied by an Islamic civilising process in the sense meant by Norbert Elias, during the course of which a central authority was established out of the 'regulated' anarchy of the pre-Islamic Arab tribes. Thus, the work of Norbert Elias is another source of inspiration in my study of Islam. His theory of civilisation is among my sources for interpreting the foundation of Islamic civilisation.

When it comes to political rule it was from the 'conjunction of pre-Islamic tribal traditions' with the religious message, according to Bendix, that the Islamic interpretation of royal authority, that is, the caliphate, emerged. Within Islam we have different Sunni and Shi'ite traditional interpretations of the charismatic prophecy of The Prophet Muhammed. In Sunni Islam the 'caliphate of the patriarchs' is the legitimate form, the caliph being a 'king', a successor to The Prophet. The prophecy is unique and cannot be either passed on or repeated. The Shi'ites, on the other hand, with their notion of the imamate (the succession of the imams), insist on the passing on of charisma. Until the time of the Safavids (1501–1722) and Khomeini's Iran in modern times, Shi'ite Islam remained primarily underground, whereas the royal tradition in Islam was of a Sunni character being the established political rule in Islamic history.

In his masterpiece *Kings or People* Bendix argues that the conflicts in Islam pertained to the 'legitimation of royal rule' derived from historical events. The caliph was an absolute ruler, whose duty was to be the guardian of the people, and if necessary to force them to obey the law. Muslim jurists imposed on men the duty of complete obedience to the ruler. The Muslim sacral jurist (the *faqih*) possessed no autonomy *vis-à-vis* the ruler, as a result of which law was generally interpreted in conformity with the existing form of government. Sunni-Islamic rule was characterised as a sultanic form (*al-hukm al-sultani*) of government. The prescribed dogmatic combination of religiously legitimised rule and law thus remained ineffective in Islamic history. Islamic fundamentalists today, aided by the politicisation of cultural symbols, contest absolute rule in the context of the existing crisis of meaning arising out of a situation of rapid change by means of the projection of modern concepts into the past.

In this, the politicisation of Islam – as a religion and culture, that is, system of meaning – is dealt with in three steps and on three levels: first, globalisation, second, a defensive-cultural response to an external exposure, and third, fundamentalism as a response to cultural and secular modernity.