

Muslim Democracy

Politics, religion and society in
Indonesia, Turkey and the Islamic world

Edward Schneier

This is a ground-breaking comparative study of the Muslim world's struggle for democracy that transcends the simple cliches and polemics of an oft-asserted 'incompatibility' between the two. The book applies democratization theories to highlight events, factors and solutions explaining 'crucial' cases of Muslim democracy—Turkey and Indonesia—but also broader trends in the nexus between Islam, modernization, and democracy in the Muslim world. Written in an accessible language, the book will provide a valuable guide for students and researchers working in the areas of comparative democratization, Islamic politics, and twilights of democracy, secularism, religion and politics, and human rights in Muslim societies.

Arolda Elbasani, *European University Institute, Florence*

Sometimes it seems like we have shifted seamlessly from ignoring religion's role in politics to overstating it when it comes to explaining the relative dearth of democracy in Muslim-majority societies. In his challenging and provocative new book, Schneier persuasively insists on the re-emphasis of political factors in accounting for the complex relationship between Islam and democracy across the globe.

Timothy A. Byrnes, *Colgate University*

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Muslim Democracy

Muslim Democracy explores the relationship between politics and religion in forty-seven Muslim-majority countries, especially those with democratic experience, such as Indonesia and Turkey, and drawing comparisons with their regional, non-Islamic counterparts. Unlike most studies of political Islam, this is a politically focused book, more concerned with governing realities than ideology. By changing the terms of the debate from theology to politics, and including the full complement of Islamic countries, Schneier shows that the boundaries between church and state in the Islamic world are more variable and diverse than is commonly assumed.

Through case studies and statistical comparisons between Muslim-majority countries and their regional counterparts, *Muslim Democracy* shows that countries with different religions but similar histories are not markedly different in their levels of democratization. What many Islamists and Western observers call “Islamic law,” moreover, is more a political than a religious construct, with religion more the tool than the engine of politics. “Women who drive in Saudi Arabia,” says the author, “are not warned that they will go to hell, but that they will go to jail.” With the political salience of religion rising in many countries, this book is essential reading for students of comparative politics, religion and democratization interested in exploring the shifting boundaries between faith and politics.

Edward Schneider is professor emeritus of political science at the City College of the City University of New York, USA.

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Introduction

Indonesia, Turkey and the Islamic world

There are forty-seven countries in the world in which people of the Muslim faith are in the majority. In the 2013 Freedom House survey of global governance, only one is rated “free.” Twenty-one achieve the ranking of “partly free,” and twenty-five are listed as “not free.”¹ It is not surprising that some observers consider the phrase “Muslim democracy” an oxymoron.

The so-called Arab Spring of 2011, a series of spontaneous uprisings in some of the world’s most authoritarian polities, has intensified interest in the questions of whether, how or when a new wave of democratization, this one centered in the Middle East and North Africa, might be underway. The struggles to replace the fallen dictators in Egypt, Iraq, Tunisia and Libya have rekindled interest in those Islamic countries—Indonesia and Turkey in particular—whose steps toward democratization have been relatively successful. They have also raised the intensity of a more philosophical debate on the compatibility of Islam and democracy. Long the domain of theologians and a handful of area studies specialists, the question literally flew into academic and political prominence in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001 (also known as 9/11) and the subsequent Western responses in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Few areas of political or scholarly dialogue are more polarized. Even before 9/11 a substantial body of literature asserted that the values of Islam were utterly incompatible with those of Western democracy and predicted an inevitable, and probably violent, “clash of civilizations.” The phrase “clash of civilizations” was popularized by the late Samuel Huntington, who used it to describe the displacement of rivalries between nation-states with an emerging conflict between cultures, Islam and a modernized West in particular.² The term seems actually to have been coined in a lecture by Princeton professor Bernard Lewis who describes the conflict in less stark terms than did Huntington. In *What Went Wrong? The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*, Lewis raises the more subtle and deceptively simple question of why a region that pioneered freedom, economic development and science fell so far behind. To “blame Islam as such,” Lewis argues, is not “very plausible”; yet attempts to blame colonialism, Israel, the West in general or the “corruption” of Islam via Western concepts of modernization are equally

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misguided.³ While Lewis's own answer is murky, his short, readable history of the forces that led to the underdevelopment of a civil society conducive to democracy casts a long shadow over the ongoing debate. Lewis himself confines his discussion to the Middle East, an area he knows well. Many reviewers, however, including those quoted on the back cover of the paperback edition, cite the book as a study of the "Muslim world." The largest Muslim-majority countries—Indonesia, Pakistan and Bangladesh (none of which is even adjacent to the Middle East)—are in fact home to nearly two-thirds of the world's followers of Islam; the Middle East is home to less than one-tenth. Yet the metonymical depiction of the Middle East as characteristic of all Islamic countries is common in the literature. "Islamic society" thus "becomes a generality constructed by others to describe Muslims and their cultures. It tells how others imagine what Muslims are and even how they should be. This world view has been perpetuated in part by some Muslim groups (mainly Islamists) who themselves construct a unitary Islamic landscape."⁴ Yet even as a growing scholarly literature grinds away at this perspective, surprisingly little research attention has been given to a rich variety of Muslim-majority countries, especially those outside of the Middle East, regarding their struggles to establish the institutions of democracy.⁵

Since I am neither by training nor inclination a theologian, I approach these questions from the perspective of politics rather than religion. The issue, thus defined, is not about what the Koran and other religious sources tell us about the relationship between faith and politics, but rather what political actors in the world's Muslim countries do. Focusing especially on nearly a decade and a half of developments in Indonesia and nearly a century of developments in Turkey, the purpose of this study is to explore the compatibility of Islam and democracy through the lens of those Islamic countries which have been relatively more successful in consolidating democratic reforms. The secondary source literature on Turkey is substantial, and although scholarly studies on Indonesia have proliferated in both quantity and quality, much of the best work is too new to have been assimilated into the democratization literature. Indonesia's road to democracy, moreover, stands in interesting contrast with less successful efforts in Malaysia and other Islam-majority countries in the region. As a former colony rather than an empire, and as a democracy that has eschewed an explicitly secular constitution, it stands as a useful foil for Turkey in an attempt to develop a map of the roads to democracy in the Islamic world.

How typical of the Islamic world are Turkey and Indonesia? With one foot, so to speak, in Europe, one in Asia and a border with the Middle East, Turkey is often described as unique. There is a strong implication in Hefner's now-classic *Civil Islam*⁶ that Indonesia stands apart as well; that it is, as one frequently hears, "Islam with a smile," or "disco Islam." Clearly, there is no typical Islamic country. The rigid, socially conservative authoritarianism of Saudi Arabia and some of its Middle Eastern and North African neighbors, which is sometimes depicted as typical, actually has few parallels outside of

the region. Iran's quasi-democratic theocracy is both historically and politically unique. And the Muslim-majority countries of the former Soviet Union (some of which are still rigidly secular) are surely special cases. Is it legitimate then, to study comparative politics in a construct known as the Muslim world? What makes this question particularly cogent is the argument by analogy which suggests that in the absence of studies of the Catholic, Jewish or Hindu world, references to a Muslim world must clearly signal an agenda of hostility, or a form of orientalist stereotyping that inevitably distorts reality.

The most pertinent answer to this question is that the long-standing erasure of religion as a key variable in studies of politics, society and culture has missed a vital dimension of reality. What Hurd argues for students of international relations has broader applicability:

I argue, first, that the secularist division between religion and politics is not fixed but rather socially and historically constructed; second, that the failure to recognize this explains why students of contemporary international relations theory and practice have been unable to properly recognize the power of religion in world politics; and finally, that overcoming this problem allows a better understanding of crucial empirical puzzles in international relations, including the conflict between the United States and Iran, controversy over the enlargement of the European Union to include Turkey, the rise of political Islam, and the broader religious resurgence both in the United States and elsewhere.⁷

It is more than a little ironic that many of the same social scientists who give scant credence to broad generalizations regarding the role of religion in contemporary society continue to cite Max Weber's classic linkage of the Protestant ethic to the rise of capitalism.

A second rationale for focusing on the "Muslim world" is one of comparative methods. The editor of a film journal, reacting to charges that his proposed discussion about Muslim movies was in some sense perpetuating a stereotype, said simply that "to compare is not to conflate."⁸ If Indonesia is not India, and Turkey is not Argentina, the problems of assessing the relationships between faith and politics are more manageable within denominational boundaries, on the one hand, and regional patterns, on the other. To compare a Muslim-majority country in the Middle East with a Catholic country in, say, Latin America, and thereby attribute the differences solely to religion makes little sense. Thus in Chapter 3 I look at what we might call the worst case scenario, the Middle East and North Africa, at once the birthplace of Islam and the worst case in terms of democratization. In Chapter 4 we move on to the other major regions of historic Muslim settlement—sub-Saharan Africa, South Central Europe and Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, and Southeast Asia—and compare countries with similar histories but disparate religions. Chapters 5 and 6 explore the processes,

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prospects and problems of democratization in the Islamic world, and I examine also the divergent but relatively successful transitions achieved in Indonesia and Turkey.

Finally, I don't think it unfair to argue that by and large Islam today plays a bigger role in politics than most other religions do, and that it thus provides a useful focus for a broader discussion of the more general relationship between politics and the trans-denominational rise of faith-based political movements. The rise of a Hindu party in India, of militant Buddhism in Burma, even of fundamentalist Christians in the United States, is suggestive of the growing visibility and importance of religion in politics. Muslims throughout the world are more likely than most contemporary believers to report that religion plays a significant role in their everyday lives. A Gallup survey, whose findings were reprinted in John Esposito's *The Future of Islam*, ascertained that even in the USA Mormons were more likely (85 percent) than Muslims (80 percent) to emphasize the importance of religion. Moreover, according to Kamrava, "beginning in the 1970s, and lasting up to the present day, levels of religiosity have risen in depth and intensity among the Muslim masses all over the world."⁹ Whether these pious proclivities carry over into politics, and what it means if they do, are different questions, but Islamic teachings arguably do reach further into the lives of their followers, or—to put it more succinctly—are more likely to overlap with politics, than are those of other faiths:

Unlike a Christian church, which is separated from mundane activities and devoted only to worship, no activity was excluded from the mosque. In the Quranic vision there is no dichotomy between the sacred and the profane, the religious and the political, sexuality and worship. The whole of life was potentially holy and had to be brought into the ambit of the divine.¹⁰

Many would argue that this paints too bold a picture; that, on the one hand, followers of many religions profess to be guided by their faith in all aspects of their lives, while on the other hand, many Muslims can distinguish clear demarcations between matters of faith and politics. The point is that these distinctions are researchable rather than ordained; Islamic piety is a variable not an axiom.

The term "Islamist" has become almost standard usage to describe those Muslims who are most likely to subordinate aspects of their lives, politics specifically, to their religious beliefs.¹¹ Moataz Fattah's *Democratic Values in the Muslim World* attempts to determine the extent of Islamism in the Muslim world and includes a survey of more than 30,000 literate Muslims globally that provides a useful starting point. Though it does not draw upon a statistically valid sample, the survey, follow-up interviews, and focus groups provide a helpful snapshot of elite opinions. Those who Fattah labels "traditionalists" are close to a majority (46 percent) only in Saudi Arabia, and

average 17.6 percent of the overall survey. Those he counts as secularists, modernists and pluralists, conversely, together form clear majorities in most Muslim-majority countries as well as in the diaspora. The cautionary tale that lurks in Fattah's data is found in the extraordinary range of country-by-country responses that makes generalization difficult.¹² A more recent set of surveys conducted in thirty-nine countries by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public life found similar diversities. The percentage of Muslims who want to make Islamic law the law of the nation, for example, varies from a low of just 8 percent in Azerbaijan to 99 percent in Afghanistan.¹³

Implicit in the present study's focus on governance in general, and democracy in particular, is the notion that Islamic political thought—to the extent that there is a single coherent body of such thought—is filtered through diverse cultural and political contexts that shape its political implications. The question of whether or to what extent Muslims in these varied settings are willing to embrace the institutions of democracy, or, more importantly, the values of a democratic polity are, as Salwa Ismail puts it, “historically and materially grounded.” While there may be a core of shared beliefs, “Muslims occupy differing and multiple positions in various social and national formations that shape how they relate to each other and to their government.”¹⁴ The relevant questions are about the ability of Islamic ideals, culturally and politically refined, to sustain democracies. Decades ago, Clifford Geertz argued that to develop the kind of civic culture congenial to democracy it was not essential to displace the “primordial sentiments” of religion and ethnicity but only to produce “an adjustment between them.”¹⁵ These “adjustments” are at the core of this book. To explore the relationship between Islam and democracy, at the same time, requires some reflection on the cultural lenses through which the question is being examined. One of Geertz's main contributions to the study of anthropology is the notion that the key to understanding the real meaning of many rituals comes through studying not the rituals themselves but how their audiences use and interpret them. In the same spirit, it is worth exploring not just the relationship between Islam and democracy, but also the ways in which European and American observers of this relationship have used and interpreted it; and, more importantly perhaps, how it has been used and interpreted in the Muslim world. Elizabeth Hurd makes this point with regard to the question of Turkish admission to the European Union (EU):

The Turkish case is ... controversial in cultural and religious terms not only because it involves the potential accession of a Muslim-majority country in an arguably, at least historically, Christian Europe, though this is important, but also and more fundamentally because it brings up long-dormant dilemmas *internal* to Europe regarding how religion and politics relate to each other. Turkey's candidacy destabilizes the European secular social imaginary. It involves unfinished business in the social fabric of the core EU members, including what it means to be secular (both in Europe

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and in Turkey) and how religion, including but not limited to Islam, should relate to European life.¹⁶

If this book is about Islam and democracy in Muslim-majority countries, it is thus by implication at least about religion and politics more generally; and, to be somewhat more specific, about various concepts and practices of secularization. It is also, and this more directly, about the process of democratization in general; and, more specifically, about how religious variables figure into that process.

My primary focus, as noted, is on the more successful cases of democratization in the Islamic world, Indonesia and Turkey, in particular, with passing references to such interesting cases as Mali and Senegal. Setting these roads to democracy as paradigmatic, the test of the models is in those countries where democratization has, in one sense or another, foundered or failed. Brutal repression aside—as in Iran and Algeria at the height of the Cold War, or Syria and Bahrain more recently—the question of particular interest in countries like Albania, Malaysia, Pakistan and the Sudan is whether there is something in Islam itself that stands as an impediment to democratization. Here the answers clearly involve the issues of secularization already described, but they also wind through another very important theme in the literature of democratization: the relationship between modernization and democracy. To oversimplify a more nuanced debate, the argument is that a certain degree of modernization, defined largely in economic terms, is a prerequisite to democratization, and that there are aspects of Islamic beliefs and practices that inhibit modernization. However, while there is an intuitive logic to the argument that modernization is difficult in a society that seeks answers to twenty-first-century problems in the teachings of a sixth-century prophet, it begs the question of what it might be in Islam itself that distinguishes it in this regard from, say, Christianity, which has its own ancient texts. A growing body of literature suggests that the conceptual linkages between various definitions of “modernity” and “democracy,” if they are not pre-packaged to fit a Western European or American model, are not as clear as they once appeared. Not only have some societies leapt the stages of development, there are a number of countries—the oil-rich rentier states of the Middle East in particular—in which the primary effect of modernization has been to give more tools to authoritarians. Many of the supposedly less “modern” movements in the Islamic world, moreover, most notably Al Qaeda, have shown themselves quite comfortable with a broad variety of sophisticated new technologies:

“Islam,” “democracy,” and “modernity” are all contested terms. In many discussions, it is assumed that there is a fixed and single definition of each term. ... In the old standard format of the debates about the relations between Islam and democracy, the answers were simple and depended on the definitions rather than the analysis. However, the more recent conceptualizations of the issue can recognize that while Islam as defined by

radical reactionaries may not be compatible with democracy, Islam and democracy are compatible in the faith and aspirations of most Muslims in the contemporary world.¹⁷

Fifteen years ago a doctoral candidate studying political Islam could reasonably have been expected to have read everything of significance written on the topic. In 2010, when I was asked to write a review essay on “Islam and Democracy,” it was difficult to narrow the selection of general books to the sixty most pertinent titles.¹⁸ Since then dozens of books on Turkey and Indonesia alone have been published, and there are specialists doing research in every one of the world’s Muslim-majority countries. At a conservative estimate, the number of peer-reviewed, scholarly journals on topics related to Islam has doubled. The emphasis in most of this growing literature is theoretical and focused less on the politics of democracy than its sociology, more on political theory than practice. Prior to my brief residence in Jakarta, Indonesia, as a Fulbright fellow in 2001–02, my research interests were confined largely to political institutions in the United States. Working with Walter Murphy at a National Endowment for the Humanities summer seminar in 1996 helped push me in a more comparative direction and resulted ultimately in my 2006 book on constitution making.¹⁹ However, the real roots of both that book and this present one can be traced to my experience of working with the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance as a consultant to the Indonesian parliament’s Commission on Constitutional Reform where the focus was what kinds of institutions and processes work best in what kinds of environments.²⁰ Throughout the many conference discussions and formal hearings on the constitution of a new democracy, Islam was ever present and probably informing much of the dialogue, but the dialogue was about governance not faith. So is this book.

What I would like to think most distinguishes this book from others on the general topic of Islam and democracy derives from a subtle but important shift in the way the question is phrased. Instead of asking what there is in Islam that makes it compatible (or incompatible) with democracy, the question here is what features of democratic institutions and processes work in specific Muslim-majority countries? It is perhaps an exercise in what Euben calls “comparative political theory” that:

entails the attempt to ask questions about the nature and value of politics in a variety of cultural and historical contexts. This presumes an understanding of political theory as defined by certain questions rather than particular answers. ... This approach builds on the possibility that disparate cultures are not worlds apart, morally and cognitively incommensurable, but exist in conversation with one another, even if they have serious moral and political disagreements.²¹

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To professional political scientists it will be clear that my approach is largely institutionalist. What this means in less esoteric terms is that, “Different patterns of institutions today are deeply rooted in the past because once society gets organized in a particular way, this tends to persist.”²² Cultural forces, including religion, while not trivial are not determinative: they are filtered through political institutions that strongly influence both the nature and extent of their impact.

The organization of the book is straightforward. Chapter 1 provides a brief history of governance in the Islamic world from the days of the Prophet to the Arab Spring. Chapter 2 attempts to examine the general determinants of democratization, with particular reference to the role of religion in the process. Chapter 3 reexamines these basic issues with special regard to the actual politics and institutions of the Middle East and North Africa, with particular reference to what became known as the Arab Spring and the long, hot summer that it seems to have presaged. Chapter 4 covers the rest of the Muslim world, briefly comparing and contrasting problems of democracy in countries which are largely Islamic but not in the three major regions. Chapters 5 and 6 present case studies of Indonesia and Turkey and the countries’ endeavors to build and sustain democratic polities. We conclude in Chapter 7 with an attempt to tease what lessons we can from these experiences as they relate to the ongoing relationships between faith and politics in the Islamic world and beyond. Each country’s road to democracy must follow its own terrain, but implicit in this approach is that there are discernible patterns that determine democratization. Religion is part of this terrain. And I cannot help but acknowledge the persistent ringing in my head of my friend and former colleague Tim Byrnes’s insistence that social scientists who think that religion has been rendered irrelevant in our secular world are, quite simply, wrong.

Notes

- 1 For the percentages of Muslims in independent countries here and throughout the book, we use the figures compiled by the Pew Research Foundation, available at www.pewresearch.org. The Freedom House ratings for 2013 are available from Freedom House at www.freedomhouse.org; and Arch Puddington, “The Democratic Gap,” *Journal of Democracy* 25 (April 2014), 82–83.
- 2 Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).
- 3 Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? The Clash between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 156–57.
- 4 Asef Bayat, *Making Islam Democratic: Social Movements and the Post-Islamist Turn* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), 2.
- 5 Interestingly, the term “Muslim democracy” does not seem to have appeared in the literature before a 2005 article by Vali Nasr introduced it as useful in describing a growing group of pragmatic leaders seeking to implement Islamic values through democratic elections. Vali Nasr, “The Rise of ‘Muslim Democracy,’” *Journal of Democracy* 16 (April 2005), 13–27.
- 6 Robert W. Hefner, *Civil Islam: Muslims and Democratization in Indonesia* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

- 7 Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 1.
- 8 Ali Nobil Ahmad, "Is There a Muslim World?" *Third Text* 24 (January 2010), 8.
- 9 Mehran Kamrava, ed., *The New Voices of Islam: Rethinking Politics and Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).
- 10 Karen Armstrong, *Islam: A Short History* (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 14–15.
- 11 It is interesting how difficult it is to find meaningful yet neutral terms for describing the belief systems of people who derive their political priorities directly from their religious convictions. If an "Islamist" is a Muslim whose political ideology is shaped by his or her faith, there should be—but interestingly there aren't—comparable terms such as "Christianist" or "Hinduist." "Islamic radical" or "Jewish radical" doesn't help very much since many of the most fervent religious ideologues are more conservative than radical. Moreover, terms such as "fundamentalist" and "Zionist" are so specific to particular sects of particular faiths that they transfer poorly. Hence, the term "Islamist," with the suggestion that maybe we should start talking about "Christianists" and "Hinduists" as well.
- 12 Moataz A. Fattah, *Democratic Values in the Muslim World* (Boulder, CO; Lynne Rienner, 2006).
- 13 Pew Research Center, *The World's Muslims: Religion, Politics and Society* (Washington, DC: Pew Center, 2013). Available at www.pewforum.org/Muslim/the-worlds-muslims-religion-politics-society/exec.aspx.
- 14 Salwa Ismail, *Rethinking Islamist Politics: Culture, the State and Islamism* (New York: I. B. Taurus, 2003), 5.
- 15 As cited in Robert B. Hefner, *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 49.
- 16 Hurd, 8. Emphasis in the original.
- 17 John O. Voll, "Islam and Democracy: Is Modernization a Barrier?" in Shireen T. Hunter and Huma Malik, eds, *Modernization, Democracy, and Islam* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2005), 94–95.
- 18 Edward V. Schneier, "Islam and Democracy," *Choice* 49 (September 2011), 27–37.
- 19 Edward Schneier, *Crafting Constitutional Democracies: The Politics of Institutional Design* (New York: Routledge, 2006)
- 20 Edward Schneier, ed., *Continuing Dialogues towards Constitutional Reform in Indonesia: Report of a Conference held in Jakarta, Indonesia, October 2001* (Stockholm: International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, 2002).
- 21 Roxanne L. Euben, *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999), 9–10.
- 22 Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity and Poverty* (London: Profile Books, 2013), 44.

1 A brief history of the Islamic world

In 612 AD, two years after first hearing the voice of God, an Arab businessman, Muhammad ibn Abdallah, decided to devote his life to the articulation of an Arab monotheism based on the Abrahamic traditions of Judaism and Christianity. His worldwide following is now second only to that of Christianity. Expelled from Mecca in 616, Muhammad was welcomed as a prophet in nearby Medina, and was soon able to form a religious and political community that, for the first time in the Arab world, transcended tribal loyalties. In less than a decade, Muhammad and his followers had retaken Mecca and spread the faith throughout much of the Arab peninsula. The Prophet, however, left no instructions for his succession, resulting in multiple claimants and conflicting interpretations of his will that divide Islam to this day. In 632, Abu Bakr, Muhammad's friend and father-in-law, was chosen by most of the Prophet's close followers to be the head of the Muslim community. Bakr overcame the argument—advanced by the faction now known as Shi'ites—that Muhammad's mantle should pass through a direct line of descent to his cousin and son-in-law, Ali. Although Abu Bakr ruled for only two years before being assassinated, his successors—later known as Sunnis—extended Muslim rule across the Arab world and into North Africa. They established the caliphate system which soon became the paradigmatic pattern of Muslim political rule.

The caliphate

The traditional caliph, from an Arabic word, variously translated as “successor” or “representative,” combined temporal and spiritual authority. Though never a prophet, because divine revelation ended with Muhammad, the caliph was expected to observe and defend the faith. Most of the early caliphs were generous in funding religious schools and building mosques, but their primary interests were more profane than sacred. Under their rule the Islamic world expanded rapidly and gave rise to a sophisticated civilization, culturally and scientifically the most advanced of its day. It superimposed on a society of nomads a growing network of cosmopolitan urban centers:

In the government offices, private salons, and marketplaces of such towns, as well as of the imperial capitals of Damascus and Baghdad, a new Islamic literary culture in Arabic began to crystallize—all the more remarkable because before the rise of Islam, Arabic had no tradition of written literature. Poetry, grammar, Quranic studies, history, biography, law, theology, philosophy, geography, the natural sciences—all were elaborated in Arabic and in a form that was distinctively Islamic.¹

The caliphs were not religious proselytizers and Islam has no missionary tradition. Their conquests were only inadvertently Islamic; their exploitation of the tribal wars and conflicts between the Persian and Byzantine Empires was “entirely pragmatic: they wanted the plunder and a common activity that would preserve” their emerging community.² Largely through the establishment of schools, the conversion of previously polytheist tribes, and the sense among the conquered that there were advantages in being on the winning side, the spread of the Islamic faith followed on the heels of both conquest and trade. And it was incredibly swift:

By the mid-650s the Believers ruling from Medina had loose control over a vast area stretching from Yemen to Armenia and from Egypt to eastern Iran. And from various staging centers in this vast area, the Believers were organizing raids into areas yet further afield: from Egypt into Libya, North Africa, and Sudan; from Syria and northern Mesopotamia into Anatolia; from Armenia into the Caucasus region; from lower Mesopotamia into many unconsolidated districts in Iran and eastward toward Afghanistan and the fringes of Central Asia.³

The most extensive and long-lived caliphate, the Abbasid Empire—in power from roughly 750 to 1250—developed an elaborate bureaucracy and a professional army, but remained relatively removed from religious activism. Followers of other monotheistic religions—Zoroastrian, Christian and Jewish—were often taxed at higher rates, but tolerated. With the caliph and governing bureaucracy in Baghdad and the center of religious scholarship in Mecca, an implicit separation of powers was developed. So long as its members did not challenge state authority, each religious community was allowed to enforce its own civic code. Non-Islamic traditions of marriage, family and property law were generally applied within their communities as Islamic law applied to Muslims. Although the caliphs claimed the authority to make religious rulings, in practice:

the tendency to separate political and religious authority seemed unavoidable. As conquerors and emperors, the caliphs increasingly became political leaders with only a symbolic form of religious authority; the authority to promulgate or discover law, to make judgments on matters of belief, and to instruct ordinary Muslims devolved on the ulama and

the holy men. By the time of the Abbasid Empire's collapse, political and religious authority thus belonged in practice to different people, although this was not yet recognized in theory.⁴

The early caliphates ruled almost exclusively in lands dominated by Sunnis. In Sunni Islam, the caliph "functions as the political and military leader of the community, but not as their prophet. In Shia Islam, the Imam (leader) ... is not only the political but also the religious leader of the community. Though not a prophet, he is considered the divinely inspired, sinless, infallible, authoritative interpreter of God's will as formulated in Islamic law."⁵ If the Sunni caliphs claimed no such role, and seldom interceded in the interpretation of sharia law, neither were they entirely neutral in their relations with the ulama. The leading ulama, from the Arabic word for scholarly wise men (sometimes written in English as ulema), though not an institutional clergy, as in Catholicism, nevertheless presided over substantial agglomerations of mosques, schools and other institutions. Their trained expertise in interpreting the Koran and applying its wisdom to contemporary problems gave them an especially important role, particularly in setting the standards of orthodoxy in schools, courts and mosques which were often coterminous. Financial support for these complexes generally came from private donors and communicants, but elaborate patronage systems also emerged, which favored Sunnis over Shias and particular sects, movements and individuals within Sunni groups.

As the caliphate expanded, both the bureaucracy and the professional army were stretched too thinly to govern a huge and diverse empire and at the same time protect its flanks from Christian crusaders from the north and Mongol invaders from the east. The growing complexity of the empire as well as its increasing reliance on paid mercenaries and slaves/soldiers simultaneously weakened it from within. The great Islamic scholar, Ibn Khaldun, acknowledged by many as the father of modern sociology, described North African and Middle Eastern society as an arena for ongoing conflict between the sophisticated urban centers of the caliphates on the one hand, and the more war-like, less sophisticated, tribes of the nomads on the other. As the former became larger, more complex and diverse, they lost their social cohesion and became increasingly vulnerable to the more compact, unified cultures of tribal nomads. Power founded in military might and royal authority would slowly lose out to the more intense loyalties of regional tribes. As the new leaders were assimilated in turn into the civilizations they had vanquished, they too would lose their solidarity and appetite for war. Other forces were at work, as Khaldun acknowledges, but the basic cyclical pattern of rise and fall which he described held at least until the advent of European colonialism, and in some cases even beyond that.⁵

Even as the caliphate succumbed to centrifugal forces, the cosmopolitanism of the region persisted, if only at times through the transmission of religious knowledge, and in the institutional structures of religious life. Although Islamic law pervaded the region with increasing uniformity and sophistication,

held together in no small part by scholars like Khaldun, who was born in Spain, migrated to Tunisia, studied in Fez, moved to Algeria, and passed his last days in Egypt, the emergence of a distinctive Islamic religion took centuries to evolve. While the early caliphs facilitated the spread of Islam, they also became the targets of an emerging religious piety that both absorbed and transcended tribal divisions.⁶ Even as the decline and eventual disintegration of the Abbasid Empire decimated the number of Muslims living *dar al Islam* (in territories governed by Muslims), the Islamic world community continued to spread, particularly along the trade routes opening and expanding into Africa and Asia. Increasing contact with this wider world stretched and divided the empire and left it vulnerable to conquest.

Unlike Christianity, which is heavy on doctrine, Islam—like Judaism—lays emphasis on law. The idea “that to be a Muslim is to accept Islamic law” applies both to those living in Muslim-majority countries and to those outside of its formal jurisdiction.⁷ The Koran is the foundation of that law, but just as the Prophet was called upon to interpret and apply it to everyday problems, so there is a continuing need to interpret it. Thus, as the Islamic world grew and diversified and while the coherence provided by the caliphates declined, the gap between Shi’ites and Sunnis widened, minor sects proliferated and the importance of those defining and applying the details of Islamic law, the *ulama*, increased as well. There were both centrifugal and centripetal forces at work that tended to decentralize the faith as it accommodated new cultures, yet making it more uniform as the scholars interacted with one another. A system of connected schools, or *madrasas*, increasingly standardized training. Freed from the commercial and personal ambitions of state actors, the mosques turned in upon themselves providing a coherent set of doctrines and laws on the one hand, and insularity on the other: learned in the language of Koran, they were often unfamiliar with the native tongues of the citizenry or—to an increasing degree—with other cultures.

While there is no widely accepted theory as to why Islam lost its dynamism, there is a general consensus that the golden age, during which the Islamic world was at the center of science, learning and culture, began to turn in upon itself some three to five centuries after the death of the Prophet. What had been the foremost economic, military and scientific force in the world lost much of its edge. Medieval Europe, which had been “a pupil and in a sense a dependent of the Islamic world”⁸ became the engine of economic, military and intellectual change. In the Middle East, a new cadre of “traditionalist” *ulama* claiming that “Islam is the solution,” and suspicious of ideas not founded in the scriptures, came to the fore. Revelation displaced reason as the medium of inquiry.

Turning inward

There was, arguably, too much diversity in the Islamic world to label the period after the demise of the caliphates a dark age. As with a comparable

period in Europe, scholars continue to disagree as to how much really changed (or failed to) from the tenth to the fourteenth centuries. On the one hand, Muslim scientists continued their research through much of what some scholars call “the Middle Period”; vigorous religious and philosophical discourses continued, particularly in fields tied to religious issues. On the other hand, a growing number of ulama harbored deep suspicions about intellectual traditions whose roots were pre-Islamic. Lacking access to the material resources of the caliphs, the ulama and the madrasas in which they studied and taught increasingly focused on those issues cutting most closely to the bone of theology. A growing number of hadiths—sayings attributed to the Prophet—were issued that limited rational inquiry in favor of religious injunctions. Many of these hadiths hardened Islamic law, but were less about real tradition than “the projection of the customs and values of the medieval Orient back to the Prophet.”⁹ Contemporary reformers argue that these hadiths, rather than the true teachings of Muhammad, are at the core of many of contemporary Islam’s more conservative injunctions. Mustafa Akyol argues, for example, that in the Koran’s retelling of the story of Adam and Eve it is Adam rather than Eve who is the deceiver:

But in the Qur’anic commentaries written in the third century of Islam, Eve started to receive the blame. This occurred at the same time that dozens of new Hadiths appeared, defining women as cunning, insidious, and immoral creatures. No wonder that Islamic feminists of our times often uphold the Qur’an in order to challenge misogynistic Hadiths, which they see as products of the male-dominant ideology.¹⁰

Mongol conquerors, and other increasingly secular caliphs, were generally content to leave the interpretation and enforcement of the civil code to the ulama, provided that—like the caliphs—they did not challenge central authority. Thus, although Islam has no formal religious hierarchy:

by the end of the fourteenth century the *ulama* had transformed the pluralism of the Quran into a hard communalism, which saw other traditions as irrelevant relics of the past. ... The trauma of the invasions had, not surprisingly, made Muslims feel insecure. Foreigners were not only suspect; they could be as lethal as the Mongols.¹¹

In a pattern that recurs, reformers, usually calling for a “return” to lost values, blamed the incursions of the Mongols and the Europeans for the failure of Muslims to follow the “true” faith. In a broad sense:

intellectual concerns shifted from innovation to preservation. Philosophy in particular was forced to give way to conservative theology. In the narrowing field of political freedoms, illuminative rationalist movements, especially Sufism, emerged as alternative forms of social inquiry without

explicitly declaring a political intent. In short, social and historic uncertainties and threats created a defensive intellectual aura.¹²

None of the Islamic reform movements produced splits comparable to those of the Reformation in Europe. At the same time as Aquinas and Christian rationalists in Europe were challenging the view that enquiry beyond the Gospel was superfluous, the opposite trend manifested itself in Islam. External threats from crusading Christians and Mongols provoked a turning inward that would last five centuries. The schisms in Europe that “almost compelled Christians to secularize their states and societies in order to escape from the vicious circle of persecution and conflict” never challenged the Muslim world.¹³ This at least partially explains why the Islamic world was slower to develop strong nation-states. Thus as the Islamic world was fragmenting into shifting alliances of military kingdoms, and major migrations were disrupting cultural patterns throughout North Africa and the Middle East, Turkish warrior clans were expanding out of Anatolia and consolidating control of what were to become more potent Islamic empires. For nearly five centuries, the Muslim world would be dominated by the Moghul Empire of Delhi in the east, the Safavid Persian Empire centered in what is now Iran, and the Ottomans in the west.

The age of empire

At its peak in the sixteenth century the Ottoman Empire extended over all of the old Byzantine Empire in what is now Turkey and Greece; the Balkan peninsula and even north of the Danube into much of what is now Romania, Moldavia and Hungary; the Middle East, including the holy cities of Mecca and Jerusalem; and most of North Africa. Its capital, İstanbul, was the largest city west of India, and its army was the largest in the world. For over 400 years it governed the Balkans, whose indigenous population was Christian, the core Islamic areas of the Arabian peninsula, and mixed provinces and peoples ranging across North Africa. Although the sultans were Muslim, and defined themselves as protectors of the faith, they were remarkably tolerant of religious minorities, serving as protectors of the Orthodox Church and providing a haven for Jews fleeing the Inquisition in Spain. Under its “millet” system, various religious communities were granted substantial power to set and enforce their own laws, collect taxes and—in varying degrees—to govern themselves. The empire’s very size and diversity were emblematic of both its greatest strength and weakness. Paradoxically it was imperiled both internally by separatist forces of rising nationalism and externally by the rising imperialism of its European neighbors.¹⁴

To the east of the Ottomans, the Safavid Empire was less diverse but no less troubled by separatists, imperialists and hostile neighbors. Bordered on the north by tsarist Russia, the Ottomans to the west, Moghuls to the east and growing British and Portuguese interest in the port cities of the Persian Gulf

and Arabian Sea, the boundaries of the empire were in near-constant flux. Its Shi'ite rulers tended to be less tolerant than the Ottomans, and sectarian rebellions were more frequent. East of Persia, the Moghul Empire ruled most of what is now India, Pakistan and the surrounding mountain areas that together contained nearly a quarter of the world's population. Muslims, the ruling minority, were sometimes more, sometimes less, tolerant of their largely Hindu subjects. Indeed the Moghul rulers themselves, especially Akbar (1557–1605) and his immediate heirs, considered themselves “above the parochial prejudice of narrow sectarianism.”¹⁵ As Hinduism was not among the religions in the Abrahamic tradition protected by Islamic law, the “rulers of India faced the insoluble problem of either embracing India's non-Muslim majority and thereby offending their strict Muslim followers, or else offending the non-Muslim majority in order to satisfy strict Muslims.”¹⁶ For roughly two centuries Akbar and his successors played this balancing act rather well, until the later emperors sought to enforce Islamic rules more strictly and to expand the empire to the south. The Moghul Empire collapsed under the weight of these efforts.

At their peak in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the three great Muslim empires between them ruled over nearly half the peoples of Europe and Asia, controlled the Silk Road and other overland trade routes between Europe and Asia, and, as in the courts of the great European monarchies, amassed enormous riches. The magnificence of the palaces and mosques in Istanbul and India's Taj Mahal remain as monuments to both their high culture and their excesses. Ibn Khaldun's theory of cycles, can, with certain caveats, be applied to them as well as to the early caliphates. The very ethnic and religious diversity that made these regimes beacons of affluence, culture and the arts contained the seeds of conflict between the sophisticated and cosmopolitan centers of society and the more cohesive and violent cultures of the periphery. The new forces of decentralization were nationalistic and ethnic rather than tribal, exacerbated by a growing willingness of outside powers to side with internal dissidents, Russia with fellow Serbs in the Balkans and Iran, Britain and France in Egypt, for example, and of course Britain in India. It was a long time, however, before the Ottoman Empire became known as “the sick man of Europe,” the Moghul Empire faded into the sunset of the British Empire or the shahs of Iran lost effective control. Ironically, it was, in part, their growth as world powers and involvement with Europe that, in an increasingly globalized world of finance, precipitated their downfall. In order to maintain their armies, bureaucracies and lavish lifestyles, the sultans and shahs became increasingly dependent upon the European money markets. Empires proved expensive to maintain; their histories, moreover, as with the Ottomans, were “of almost unbroken warfare, first as the Turks fought to capture territory in Europe and then as they fought to keep from losing it. In the more than six centuries between the coronation of the first Ottoman sultan around 1300 and the fall of the last one in 1922, the longest period of peace lasted just twenty-four years.”¹⁷ In the throes of its decline, as much as

40 percent of the Ottoman Empire's budget was allocated to supporting its army, navy and internal police. "Seven years of almost uninterrupted hostilities (with Italy, 1911–12; in the Balkans, 1912–13; and in the First World War) brought the Ottoman Empire closer to being a garrison state than it had perhaps been at any time since its infancy."¹⁸ Moreover, despite the sophistication of their urban centers the three great Muslim empires remained, in a sense, economic backwaters. The overland trade routes they controlled were bypassed and superseded by the more efficient naval routes to the Orient that were increasingly dominated by corporatist Europeans.

The most durable of these empires was the Ottoman. Despite periods of significant reform, the empire kept one foot firmly planted in the past. The rise of the nation-state and what Anderson calls the "imagined communities" of nationalism left the core of the empire neither Turkish nor Ottoman.¹⁹ The idea of the nation-state presupposed a collective memory that the empire's decentralized system could not provide. For the old empire to become a modern state it needed either to bring Islam into the equation or bypass it entirely, as Atatürk was later to do. The sultans, however, were never entirely able to do either. The elaborate, quasi-patrimonial system they had constructed left large pockets of independent power, such as that which lay with the ulama, whose relations with the sultans were both pillars of their claim to rule and challenges to their authority. In effect, by leaving the educational system entirely in the hands of the parochial madrasas, no Turkish, Serbo-Croat or other vernacular language was taught in the schools, which were almost entirely devoted to Arabic-language studies of religion. Children who spoke no Arabic memorized passages from the Koran, a few prayers and perhaps some math, but gained few practical skills or training in their own language. The mosque and their ulama were the cultural glue of the empire, providing cultural links to its otherwise diverse community. Its largely uniform role in education, the judiciary and the civil service gave the clergy a key, albeit unofficial, role in the state.²⁰ Particularly in the Arab parts of the empire, these ties gave the empire legitimacy even as they impeded modernization and discouraged training in the mundane skills of running an increasingly complex society.

Recognizing the poor skills of its officer corps, the military established as early as 1773 special training academies in what became a wider top-down effort to reorganize the system of education. Military reforms became the opening wedge for a series of often Western-modeled changes in everything from the civil service to land laws and the courts that collectively became known as the Tanzimat (reforms) implemented largely between 1839 and 1877.²¹ Those aspects of the Tanzimat that limited the arbitrary powers of the Sultan and adopted the principles of legal equality and proportionality between crime and punishment were well received. More controversial were those that tended to undermine the status of the ulama. Although their schools and other institutions remained untouched, the parallel tracks of civil schools and courts gradually eroded the power and prestige of the religious

establishment. The ulama were not without their own resources, but the recurring cycles of reform that began with the Tanzimat combined with a rising middle class to produce, and, at the same time, reflect a growing wave of secularism.

The Tanzimat came too late and with too little impact to stem the forces of decentralization or solve the empire's growing financial problems. Deeply in debt to the British and the French, "the leaders did not realize, or realized too late, that economic and financial subjection to the great powers was no less a threat to political independence than defeat on the battle front."²² And things had not gone too well on that front either. Napoleon's occupation of Egypt in 1798 displayed the weaknesses of the Ottoman armies and brought European balance of power politics into the region. Saved by the British from a disastrous defeat in the Crimean War, the empire lost no territory and, for better or worse, gained admission to the European diplomatic system. However, it was forced to concede control over the Balkans and the Black Sea. By the turn of the century, the British and the French had carved out spheres of influence in North Africa that left much of it under only nominal Ottoman control, and the Italians completed a sweep of the region with their invasion of Tripoli and Libya in 1911. The Balkan wars that followed were devastating in military terms and transformed the region. Hundreds of thousands of Christians and Muslims were deported, massacred or displaced between the two Balkan wars and World War I, which was to deliver the final blows. By the time of the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, the once massive empire had been reduced to the core of the country we now know as Turkey, a country without a solid identity of its own.

The shortcomings of reform

In 1877 the sultans had been forced to share power with an elected parliament. Dissolved a year later, it was soon "gone but not forgotten."²³ The Ottoman parliament would meet sporadically over the next half century when first the "young Ottomans" and later the "young Turks" used it as both a forum for and a target of their reform agenda, neatly summarized in the title of a popular book by Ziya Gökalp as "Turkicization, Islamization, Modernization."²⁴ Thus, "Although the parliamentary phase lasted only for a short period, the fifteen months of constitutional rule marked a turning point. ... The genuinely modern forces of the bureaucracy, the army and the intelligentsia were breaking away from the traditional claim to power of the Ottoman dynasty."²⁵ Of particular importance was how the military emerged as a prime mover in the process of modernization. Together with elements of the bureaucracy and a rising urban middle class it was the social force that had struck the modern world before the arrival of imperialist Europeans. The collapse of the empire—not just in the Ottoman world but across North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia—left the emerging new nations of the region politically fragmented and divided within themselves between the

secularly trained elites and the traditional pre-modern cultures of the countryside.

The Tanzimat reforms had clearly extended the life of the empire. If nothing else, they created a new class of Muslim intellectuals, educators, bureaucrats and career military officers who were at once comfortable with European ideas and an evolving Islamic nationalism. The social networks thus created were in a parallel universe to the ideological world of the ulama with their continued control over large parts of the educational system, particularly in more rural areas:

As a result, no broadly held notions of citizenship comparable to those of Europe could be institutionalized. ... [T]heir highly centralized and militarized bureaucracy proved neither capable of fully eradicating provincial state-subverting nationalism nor of institutionalizing a “national” civil society. In contrast to the European dialectic of militarism versus representation within a delimited nation-state, the Turkish state continued the Ottoman tradition of despotic autonomy with decentralizing opposition still largely centered around peripheral religiosity.²⁶

As the Tanzimat reforms took hold, the Ottoman Empire in fact became more rational and capable of effective governance. Faced with European encroachment—in North Africa, the Balkans and the Middle East—it was fighting a rearguard action, but did not disintegrate, as did its counterparts in Iran and India. Yet as much as the reforms required “a determined attack on traditional power-sharing arrangements” and a “radical rethinking of the relationship between ruler and ruled,” the Ottoman “solution” was more symbolic than substantive. “Its response was very similar to that of other modernizing empires, such as Austria, Russia, and Japan, in the pressure cooker of the nineteenth century. The ‘invention of tradition’ dramatically increased the pomp and circumstance surrounding the sultan and all activities of state” without fully becoming a viable nation.²⁷ And thus, just as the major industrial powers were creating powerful democratic states, the sultans were circling the wagons in defense of the relics of absolute monarchy.

The two other great Muslim empires, the Moghuls in India and the Safavids in what is now Iran went through cycles of rise and decline which roughly coincided with those of the Ottomans. The Safavids had a more tenuous grip on power and were forced to negotiate their authority with local nobles, foreign influences, wealthy merchants and the ulama, who Azimi describes as “the most politically consequential and the least vulnerable subjects of the state.”²⁸ From its peak in the 1700s, by 1850 the empire had lost its grip on Georgia, Armenia and the North Caucasus to Russia, and been forced to accept British control over much of Afghanistan and the Persian Gulf. More interestingly, in retrospect, its nineteenth-century monarchs also lost control of their own base and became the Islamic world’s second (albeit short-lived) representative democracy in 1906.