

Radicalism and Political Reform in the Islamic and Western Worlds

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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Conceptions of Modernity: Reform, Reformation and Radicalism

Western modernization theory has long been concerned with the question of why the West has attained a hegemonic position in politics, economy, and science over the last five hundred years, while other parts of the world have lagged behind. After the Second World War, a number of Western authors took the view that the key reasons for underdevelopment could be found in a tendency to cling to traditions and traditional values, not in specific political constellations or the injustice of the global economic order. For the Middle East, renowned theorists of modernization such as Daniel Lerner (1958) and Leonard Binder (1964) recommended the wholesale adoption of the Western developmental model. Modernization theory was applied in a wide variety of ways to political theories about the Middle East, such as neo-patrimonialism (Pawelka 1985; Springborg 1979) and neo-patriarchy (Sharabi 1988). These approaches shared a common orientation: they emphasized the weaknesses of modern state institutions when compared with the traditional loyalties of the tribe, village, and clientele, which seemingly undermine such institutions, covertly reinforcing stagnation.

Despite the justified criticism it has received, modernization theory was no classical colonialist hypothesis in scholarly garb. This key American notion was a marked improvement on the colonialist-racist doctrines that were widespread in Europe for many decades. Even as modernization theory insisted on the necessity of imitating the Western path, it nonetheless held out the prospect of such a process of learning and development in the non-European world. The difference between the old, racist European Orientalism and its new universalist American counterpart thus found expression in modernization theory.

Tellingly, the high point of modernization theory was in the 1950s and 1960s, before Western modernization manifestly came up against its own limitations over such issues as, for example, as environmental protection and economic growth. Alongside internal contradictions, developments on the periphery in Asia, Africa and Latin America stimulated a revision of modernization theory, the effects of which are still being felt. The first major phase of critique was rung in by the neo-Marxist theory of dependency and imperialism. Instead of the internal barriers of traditional cultures, this school of thought emphasized the effects of the world economic system on the developing countries, above all, the exploitation of their natural resources by the West; as an alternative to this system, these critics proposed protectionism aimed at achieving autonomy (see, for example, Galtung 1972).

Meanwhile, a shift in thinking had begun in the international debate on modernization. No longer anchored solely in neo-Marxist ideas, it often rested on a capitalist developmental logic. What was already known from the case of Japan has become a certainty in light of developments in China, namely that economic and social modernization may go hand in hand with the partial preservation and re-evaluation of traditions and may even culminate in forms of political and social modernization other than those familiar in the West (Roetz 2006; Schwinn 2006). One of the leading exponents of this line of thought is Shmuel N. Eisenstadt with his concept of 'multiple modernities' (Eisenstadt 2002).

But the notion of the diversity of modernity also has its opponents, who point out that China, too, is ultimately following the path of Western modernity, while practising 'vulgar Confucianism' (Berger 2006) to provide ideological comfort. There is no doubt that other countries have other customs – but does this mean that they are also characterized by a different model of political and economic modernity? This insistence on the unity of modernity and the challenges to the Eisenstadlian approach are certainly worth considering. They touch on crucial questions: What is the role of tradition in the Middle East and does an Islamic Middle Eastern modernity have any claim to independence? It is implausible to emphasize the Arab contribution to Western modernity in the Middle Ages and Renaissance while at the same time denying the Western influence on the Middle East from the Age of Enlightenment to the present. Is 'modernity' not ultimately something of a challenge cup, won by whoever represents the hub of progress in a given era and opens up new horizons to humanity as a whole?

On the other hand, why do the advocates of the ‘one’ (Western) modernity deny that, a mixing of indigenous traditions and borrowings from elsewhere occurs during such processes, in other words, that new variants of modernity may arise? No one would claim that Western modernity can be derived entirely from medieval Arab models. The modernization of the West proceeded so rapidly over the last two hundred years that we often lose sight of the fact that many aspects of what is now the West are not ‘modern’ at all, but represent local traditions that are by no means universal (we need only think of German federalism and the centralized French state). At no point in time has it been necessary for a territory to conform to the dominant developmental model in any *total* way – socially, politically and culturally – in order to achieve the latest standards of scientific and technological progress.

THE MINIMUM CONSENSUS OF WESTERN MODERNITY

There does, however, appear to be something of a minimum consensus on modernity. Comparative political scientist Fred Dallmayr distinguishes between two currents of thinking about modernity in the West: one is a view of the Enlightenment which places a rationally anchored human autonomy (as found in the work of thinkers such as Habermas) centre stage, which can succeed only if the traditional institutions of society and politics take a back seat and the relationship between citizen and bureaucratic state is founded anew through a democratic alliance (Dallmayr 2002). According to this view, it is the autonomy of the individual that crucially distinguishes the political framework of socioeconomic modernity. For Dallmayr, the other side of the coin is the critics of this model, who counter the radical modernizers by pointing out that it is characterized by the dissolution of traditional social cohesion and loss of values. As the originator of an intermediate position, Dallmayr identifies Charles Taylor, who distances himself from the logo- and anthropocentrism of a philosopher like Habermas and thus facilitates the rediscovery of the community, community responsibility and the religious community (Dallmayr 2002). At the same time, Taylor wishes to salvage the emancipatory achievements of the Weberian and Habermasian legacy by underlining the autonomy of the individual, whose inalienable rights he regards as universal.

As we shall see as we grapple with Islamic fundamentalism, it is above all the idea of the democratic fundamentals – primarily the constitutional state, within the framework of a popular sovereignty that is discursively

founded and secured by electoral procedures – that represents a consensus in mainstream Western thought, though certainly not at its radical margins. Decisions about traditions and modernity should be made within a democratic and constitutional framework; decisions which are by no means, as Anthony Giddens thinks (Giddens 1994), restricted to founding a ‘post-traditional society’, but which may also leave space for traditions as long as these are compatible with the democratic consensus.

If we disregard for the moment the fascist and some other extremist derailments of the twentieth century, there seems at present to be no fundamental questioning of the democratic consensus about Western modernity, at least in the West. Modernity appears in traditionally imbued variants, from French presidential democracy to Swiss grass-roots democracy and from the Swedish welfare state to American liberal capitalism, but fundamental counter-models, such as a neo-authoritarian anti-modernity, find practically no resonance in Western thought. Despite marked regional differences in the emphasis placed on ‘caring societies’, the West supports in principle religious freedom and the equality of the individual and of the genders. These pre-state rights define the autonomy of the individual and stand in stark contrast to fundamentalist counter-concepts of the pre-state nature of a divine law from which human rights may, at best, be derived in appellative contexts and on a case-by-case basis (Kühnhardt 1991). It is possible in the West for communities to form within society (mostly in private, but sometimes assisted and subsidized by the state, even though the state is considered secular and neutral). At the same time, the individual must be protected from encroachment by communities. This dynamic is the basis of permanent, reflexive modernity.

Hence, two key questions arise when comparing the political thought of the West with that of the Islamic-Middle Eastern world:

- Which political traditions and structures can the Middle East retain if it wishes to join the Western minimum consensus on modernity?
- When retaining its own traditions, must the Islamic Middle East ultimately limit itself to moving towards a Western model of political modernization? Or is there a sustainable vision of a political modernity which, though not breaking entirely with the Western consensus, challenges, or even extends, it?

This assumption of a minimum consensus in Western political culture leaves out of for the time being problems of practical implementation. Since the attacks of 11 September 2001, these threaten to undermine democracy, the key terms here being ‘Guantánamo’ and ‘Big Brother

state'. Yet the main contradictions of the democratic consensus today lie, not in the relationship between theory and practice, which is characteristic of Western democracies' *domestic* policies, but rather in the imbalance between pacified domestic politics and belligerent *foreign* policies (see Chapter 6). Our next step, however, is to compare political ideas within Western society and the Islamic world.

SECULARISM AND POLITICAL ISLAM: IDEOLOGICAL DUALISM

A systematic view of political thought in the Islamic Middle East has become firmly established that distinguishes following currents: secular modernism, liberal reformist Islam, conservative reformist Islam and Islamic fundamentalism. This list, however, leaves out the largest single grouping, orthodox Islamic scholars, merely paying attention to the liberal, neo-conservative or fundamentalist 'offshoots' of this 'Establishment' Islam. This is justifiable in that it is impossible to refer straightforwardly to coherent 'political thought' among Islamic scholars who specialize in the casuistic interpretation of the law.

Francois Burgat is right to say that the historical 'Islamic state' was in fact always virtually secular in character. Contrary to appearances, religion was no more fundamental to the political systems of the 'East' than to those of the West (Burgat 2003, 132 f.). Along with the French Orientalist Jacques Berque, he points out that it was worldly dynasties and other social forces that dominated Islamic polities rather than Islamic legal scholars. The Ottoman sultan ruled by decree, though he allowed an Islamicized penal and marital law and occasionally took legal counsel.

Then and now, the Western view of Islam has clearly reflected an unenlightened mindset. Solitary figures such as the American Islamic studies scholar Bernard Lewis – who, like Samuel Huntington, is largely isolated in expert circles and has fallen out with the influential Middle East Studies Association (MESA) – has managed to get on to the *Time* magazine's list of the one hundred most important contemporary thinkers. In contrast to earlier Western Oriental studies, analyzed so impressively by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (Said 1978), mainstream scholarship no longer passes sweeping judgements, particularly with respect to the old dictum of the Islamic world's 'inseparability of religion and politics' still being expounded by Lewis (see, for example, Lewis 2003).

There are grounds for the assumption that the dualism of secularism and religious fundamentalism has been a core dynamic in the Islamic world that has followed a different path than in the West in terms of

historical timing, but which has unfolded in a manner far more similar to Western developments than is often thought. Modern Islamic fundamentalists are *not* traditionalists. They do not wish to re-establish an old, non-secular order but to invent entirely new political systems by drawing on selective elements of Islamic teachings and aspects of the past to produce new political theories, as exemplified by the supremacy of the top Islamic legal scholar in the present-day Iranian constitution.

In Iran, the state and the parliamentary-democratic sphere are subordinated to Islamic law in the name of religion. But this has not been the universal model of government and society in the Islamic world over the last few centuries. The *umma*, as the community of the faithful held together through divine law, is indeed anchored in the Koran as the fundamental source of social order. Historically, however, from the time of the successors to the Prophet Muhammad onwards, Islamic legal interpretation and political rule were separated institutionally. A political order such as the one headed by Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran was entirely new in Iranian history and not based on any historical model. In theory, it was the ruler's obligation to see to it that practice conformed as closely as possible to Islamic law. This nonetheless demonstrates that worldly and spiritual power were not the same thing. The origins of the notion of 'religion and state' (*din wa dawla*) do not lie in any Koranic principle. Since the time of the successors to Muhammad, political organization has de facto been left to worldly forces and dynasties, which could neither be appointed nor toppled by legal scholars, but merely advised by them (Ayubi 1991; Crecelius 1980; Hurd 2008, 128 ff.; see also Karsh 2007, 33, 46).

This de facto secularism differs markedly from the anti-secular politics of Islamic fundamentalists, who demand clerical supremacy in the Iranian Shia case and, at least, the precedence of Islamic law over worldly positive law and discrimination between religions in the Sunnite case. Fundamentalist visions are a clear break with Islamic traditions of clerical coexistence with the rulers. At the same time, this secular history of the Islamic world bolsters the cause of contemporary secular liberals, left-wing or conservative governments and opposition forces, who can hark back to an Islamic tradition of secular political organization when advocating further and more consistent secularization of Muslim states and institutions.

A party such as the National Progressive Unionist Grouping (NPUG) in Egypt, for example, despite its strong neo-Islamic tendencies, nonetheless sees itself as champion of the secular legacy of Arab socialism

propagated by former Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser. It supports a laicist social order and rejects an 'Islamic state' (Koszinowski 1999, 101 ff.). The same goes for the economically liberal Wafd party, which has a secular orientation in part because this brings it votes from the Coptic Christian community – who, after all, make up 10 percent of the population. In recent years, however, some of these parties have entered into electoral alliances with the Egyptian Muslim Brothers, the oldest fundamentalist organization, in an attempt to profit from the neo-Islamic upsurge. Many see this as a weakening of the secular parties' ideologies, prompting factional disputes and resignations. But these very conflicts reveal a cultural dualism of secular and Islamic political justifications. While secular ideologies have been on the defensive since Nasser's death, they have not disappeared. The weakness of the secular opposition parties is rooted less in their secular orientation than in the internal encrustation of both personnel and structure, something which is particularly off-putting to the young (Hegasy 2000; Koszinowski 2005, 118; see also Chapter 4 of this book). In short: even though the performance of many secular parties is poor it would be too simplistic to conclude that secularism in general is finished in the Islamic world, now or in the future.

The history of the Islamic world may be told quite differently. Not only was it mostly ruled by worldly dynasties and other forces, but the full-fledged secularization of the legal system began as early as the nineteenth century. The Ottoman empire proclaimed that all subjects (excluding women and slaves) were equal before the law in 1839, marking the beginning of law-making by the state alone (Haarmann 1994, 384 f.). The policy of reform (*tanzimat*), influenced in part by Europe, kicked off a similar separation of religion and state as had taken hold in Europe, stimulated by the Peace of Westphalia of 1648 and the retreat of the Inquisition. The roots of the modern-day politics of states, such as Morocco, Egypt or Kuwait, in which Islam is the state religion but Islamic law has been almost entirely replaced by a secular legal system, lie in these early attempts to secularize the state. Countries such as Bangladesh and Malaysia have followed a similar trajectory. These countries do not see themselves as 'Islamic states' in the style of Iran or Saudi Arabia. It is clearly impossible to speak of a homogenous political culture with respect to the position of religion in an 'Islamic world' that is so often viewed as a single entity; we may at most refer to a long-standing dualism of secular and Islamic views on the status of religion, which coexist and, at times, conflict with each other.

The Bertelsmann Transformation Index (see [Chapter 3](#)) shows that a number of countries have made great progress on the path to secularization, especially Syria, Turkey, Tunisia. However, like countries which have anchored themselves in Islam (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Sudan, etc.), secular states, such as Tunisia and Syria, are among the most authoritarian in the Islamic world. In part, and crucially, this has something to do with the fact that their regimes have attempted to end the dualism of political cultures, that is, the competition between Islamic and secular political legitimation, by favouring one or the other aspect in an artificial and repressive way. If we can learn anything at all from recent Islamic history of the Islamic countries, it is that, with the possible exception of Turkey, attempts to impose a radical ‘catch-up’ secularization by force have been as unsuccessful in creating democratic orders as they have been in attempts to achieve revolutionary Islamization.

Again, this observation implies that secular modernization and democratization, free competition between secular and Islamic parties, rather than revolutionary Islamization or authoritarian secularization, would be the true cultural reflection of any ‘just’ politics in the Islamic world. Such a compromise would facilitate a constructive approach that mediates between the goal of the Islamization of the state, on the one hand, and the total laicization (on the Turkish or French model), on the other. Hence, it may be that exemplary compromise solutions will arise neither in Islamic fundamentalist states (such as Iran or Sudan) nor in ‘secular’ states (such as Tunisia or Syria), which differ greatly on the question of secularism but are very similar in their authoritarianism, but in the broad centre ground of the ‘soft’ authoritarianism seen in states such as Morocco or Egypt or in electoral democracies such as Indonesia, where Islam is the state religion but does not define the legal system.

Finally, critics of Western pressure on the Islamic world to secularize rightly point out that in the West, too, secularism generally exists in a far from pure form. Blasphemy laws in the United Kingdom, which have for centuries primarily protected the Christian religion; the levying of the church tax by the German state; religious education in state schools; creationist influences on the laws of numerous US states: these are just a few of many examples which show that Western states would rarely achieve the highest score on the Bertelsmann secularism index (Webster 1990). Western societies that had long since been described as democratic were basically half-secular entities in which Christian religious groups, because they formed democratic majorities, laid down the rules of the political and social game for smaller religious groups. The political

system itself was not fundamentally religious in nature, but traditions of Christian hegemony evolved at the sub-constitutional level. The fact that, in countries such as Germany, Islam is moving ever closer to achieving recognition as a public organization with the same rights as the Christian churches, shows that democratic systems are capable of self-correction. A democratic system can belatedly secularize itself. In a fundamentalist system, on the other hand, the legal gap between Muslims and non-Muslims remains unbridgeable.

Empirical research on political culture has produced some interesting findings on the character of Islamic political culture, located as it is at the tense intersection of secularism and Islamization. Research on political change generally assumes that civic democratic values develop within a society very slowly, indeed, only after the introduction of a democratic system that crucially facilitates corresponding processes of political education (Merkel 1999, 143 ff.). But obviously, this does not apply in the same way to the fundamental question of secularization or the relationship between politics, state and religion. Mark Tessler's thorough empirical surveys in countries such as Morocco, Algeria and Turkey have shown that Islam has an astonishingly small influence on the formation of political opinions. A comparison of political attitudes among those with a strong or less strong religious orientation showed no significant divergence (Tessler 2002, 2003; Tessler and Altinoglu 2004, 34).

Is it not possible, therefore, that the actual political ideas of Islamization and the fundamentalists' hostility to secularization do not arise from the broad political culture but are the concern of a minority of Islamic fundamentalist devotees who wish to achieve a general legal privileging of Muslims and to force Muslims to practice their religion devoutly? Would the religious basis of politics be contested in a free democratic society if it were up to the Islamic public? There is a significant difference between the popular re-Islamization of the last few decades and Islamic fundamentalism. After the Iranian Revolution of 1978–9, Duran Khalid pointed out that, while organized Islamic fundamentalism 'feeds' on the general process of re-Islamization (the neoconservative trend towards public prayer, the building of mosques, the wearing of veils, and the like – developments that have been with us for three decades), it has remained a 'foreign body' within the movement (Khalid 1982, 21 f.). Religious fundamentalist forces use Islamization as a token ideology without representing a thoroughly Islamic political culture.

The fact that religion has played such a major role in the politics of the Islamic world for a number of decades thus has less to do with long-term

political attitudes, values and cultures than with the fact that secularism remains a live issue. The Islamic world has seen nothing comparable to the Peace of Westphalia. Further, secularism was often imposed by authoritarian leaders, provoking a quite logical counter-reaction from an opposition which deployed Islam against the existing regime. The inseparability of religion and state is no uniform cultural model in the Islamic world, but an ideological alternative to secularization on the margins of global society, a process which is associated with Western interference and exploitative indigenous elites. Anti-secularism thus defines a new anti-elite ideological battlefield, not least because secularization and early attempts at democratization in the Islamic world were always in part processes of social repression (see [Chapter 2](#)).

While history allows many comparisons, it does not unfold in unchanging patterns. Parallels between temporal phenomena by no means imply any metaphorical claim to totality on the part of explanatory models. What matters for the moment is merely that neither the ideological models nor the political cultures of the contemporary Islamic world can be reduced to a state of unity between politics and religion. ‘Thirty years’ wars’ in Sudan occur side-by-side with processes of secularization in Turkey. The Islamic countries do not share the secular consensus of the West, but on the issue of democracy they have already undergone the kinds of developments which occurred in Europe only in the twentieth century: female suffrage, constitutionalism and parliamentarism. Secularism, too, is nothing new; it is but the current pivot for ideologically charged turf wars.

LIBERAL REFORMIST ISLAM: REFORMATION WITHOUT MODERNITY?

In his deprecatory view of Islam, Max Weber took no notice of the cyclical reform movements that have always distinguished it (Salvatore 1997, 102 f.). Interestingly, the current of liberal reformist Islam seems to flow with both the Western consensus on modernity and Middle Eastern secular modernism, though in the Islamic tradition there is a very different ideological point of departure. Despite the separation of natural and human rights in this school of thought, however, the method of religious-text interpretation deployed in liberal discourse seems to display certain fundamental democratic qualities. How else can we explain the fact that no thinker in the liberal reformist camp would reject the political modernity of the West – the legal autonomy of the individual, protection from the arbitrary exercise of state power, etc.? Another phenomenon is taking

hold within reformist Islam: rationalism as an epistemic point of departure conceived of, not as a philosophical act of individual self-creation, as for example, in the case of Descartes (*cogito ergo sum*), but as a symbiosis of faith and rationalism.

Muslim liberal reformist thinkers are a heterogeneous group of intellectuals and authors who wish to devise a modern Islamic society. In line with their great popularity and numerous books, speeches, essays and media appearances, the arguments they put forward are far from uniform. Yet, they share a core conviction that identifies a coherent school of thought, namely, the assumption that every interpretation of the key Islamic texts, the Koran, the Hadith (reports of Muhammad's deeds) and Sharia (Islamic law), is influenced by historical conditions. Every understanding is subjective and arises out of current circumstances. Rational interpretation of the sources (Arabic *ijtihad*) facilitates a permanent modernization of the faith that dovetails with the modernization of state and society.

The Egyptian philosopher Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, for example, stresses the need for a new, contemporary interpretation of the Koran and underlines that processes of interpretation are always subjective, drawing primarily on the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer (Abu Zayd 2006; Abu Zayd and Nelson 2004). From the same starting point, Muhammad Shahrur of Syria is moving towards a critique of Sharia when he asserts that, if all interpretation is subjective and time-bound, then Sharia cannot function as law (Mudhoon 2006, 141). Abdullahi Ahmed an-Na'im comes very close to this position when he calls for a revision of the Sharia and its adaptation to international legal norms and human rights (An-Na'im 1996). An-Na'im argues that the originally humanistic and enlightened idea of the Sharia must once again become recognizable. Medieval Islamic law was, after all, an early attempt to establish a constitutional order, not unlike the contemporaneous endeavours embodied in the Magna Carta, at a time when monarchical and feudal despotism still prevailed across much of Europe. But according to An-Na'im, if Islamic law is not to degenerate into dictatorship, it must be open to reinterpretation. Farid Esack also advocates religious pluralism. He criticizes the scholarly Islamic orthodoxy as quietist for failing to engage with processes of modernization. Esack wants an Islamic theology of liberation which is compatible with democracy (Fix 2006).

But the reformist thinkers' privileging of reinterpretation does not take into account the fact that subjectivism alone is incapable of qualifying the validity of religious laws (which is necessary in order to ensure

the acceptance of the individual's autonomy, irrespective of religious affiliation) because the religious sources are retained as the basis of textual interpretation. Compared with the Western consensus, what is still missing is the anchoring of the law in humanitarian human rights. Many reformist thinkers have therefore gone a step further, showing a tendency to decouple Sharia from jurisprudence (*fiqh*), in other words, to move away from the juridical components of the Sharia; this ultimately reconciles reformist Islam with the secular constitutional state (Jacobs 2006) as the Sharia is now no more than one possible *source* of law – we might also say ‘inspiration’ – but not the law itself.

Soheib Bencheikh takes the argument further by stating that the Sharia, Catholic canonical law, and the Jewish Talmud are not compatible with positive law. Rather, only the Koran is holy, but not the prophetic writings, let alone Islamic law. For Bencheikh, the guidelines they contain, such as the prohibition on changing religion (apostasy), are thus null and void (Jacobs 2006, 15, 19). The Iranian reformist thinkers Abdolkarim Soroush and Mohammad Shabestari both reject the idea of divine sovereignty expressed in Islamic law for human beings can never obtain divine truth (Shabestari 2003; Soroush 2000). It is thus no surprise that Fred Dallmayr regards thinkers like Soroush as the direct counterparts of Western intellectuals like Charles Taylor: they are attempting to find a middle path between rational and religious, individual and group-oriented modernism on the basis of human rights (Dallmayr 2002, 102–4).

Islamic liberal reformists refute the Western modernization theorists who view Islam as an obstacle to development. They represent a virtually paradigmatic attempt to create a kind of ‘Islamic Protestant ethic’ and thus demonstrate the compatibility of Islam and modernity. Reformist Islam is entirely compatible with the Western political consensus on modernity because it denies the supreme authority of religion and rejects interpretations of Islam that overemphasize its legal aspects. Its intention, however, is to improve on a Western modernity that it regards as being to some extent bereft of meaning, criticism also heard from Western authors. Even Jürgen Habermas, one of the leading interpreters of secularism, has rediscovered the significance of religion as a source of meaning and guidance for the West. A secular society, as he concluded in his acceptance speech on receiving the Peace Prize of the German book trade in 2001, is not completely without religion, but religion loses its coercive character through the process of secularization (Habermas 2001).

Reformist Islam's quite self-conscious aspiration to improve on Western modernity through religion is apparent in the work of Fazlur

Rahman, a contemporary reformist thinker, when he expresses his view of the relationship between human beings, nature and community:

It is true that earlier societies were much more dogmatic in certain respects and therefore exposed themselves to dangers, while modern sophistication means less dogmatism, overtly at least. But this competence of modern societies to adjust to necessary change is often like a doctor who treats symptoms rather than the disease. (...) It is to be feared that modern civilization, while sophisticating means and methods to almost no end, has developed cardinal deficiencies in basic insights into human nature. (...) There is a considerable body of what might be called social thought in the Quran, which talks incessantly about the rise and fall of societies and civilizations or 'the inheritance of the earth', of the function of leadership, of prosperity and peace and their opposites, and especially of 'those who sow corruption on the earth but think they are reformers' (Rahman 1982, 161).

Again, in this respect reformist Islam continues the Islamic tradition of integrating and developing other religious ideas and world views, as the Koran does when it identifies Christianity and Judaism as predecessors. This attempt to close the gap between faith and rationality is thus the wellspring of a global ecumene and a harbinger of a future cosmopolitan culture of modernity. Is this not what the evidence suggests?

However, an orientation towards indigenous Islamic sources seems ill-suited to spreading reformist Islamic modernity beyond the boundaries of Islam. The universalist appeal of Western political modernity consisted above all in its success in dealing with the question of power and creating stable orders. The retrogressive reform of a religion, geared towards its own particular traditions and texts, such as being attempted by liberal Islamic reformists, can scarcely be considered exemplary, in part because the basic texts do not adhere to any scientific form. Their analysis belongs to the field of theology, and it requires special knowledge of a stock of linguistically complex traditional sources (Koran, Hadith, Sharia) which are distributed unequally across the globe and concentrated primarily in the Arab world. It is hardly possible to approach this project of reform with the tools of the modern humanities and social sciences.

Hence, liberal reformist Islam is concerned with a kind of reformation which represents a significant, even essential, but not a sufficient element of modernist political thought. It is a particular form of the traditional arguments for political modernity – but is it modernity itself? This would be like claiming that the Protestant Reformation itself established the thought that is characteristic of Western modernity, though it was, in fact, just one stage of a chain reaction of modernization. In light of

the controversy surrounding Max Weber's emphasis on the role of the Protestant ethic within modernity (Weber 2006), to overemphasize the role of Protestantism in modern academic thinking would in any case be a particularly dubious notion. It is certainly justified, therefore, to recall Johannes Berger's distinction between local inflections and the preservation of a cohesive (Western) modernity (Berger 2006). In this view, liberal reformist Islam is certainly evidence that it is possible to revitalize an Islamic tradition of progress, a tradition that is of the utmost importance to Muslims' identification with modernity. But this would not be a future-oriented, independent modernity beyond the Western constructs of human rights and the democratic constitutional state.

Islamic liberal reformers claim that they contribute to and supplement (Western) modernity arises less from the universality of their message than from the exemplary quality that their particular fusion of rationality and religion, were it ever to take hold in the Islamic world, might have for other regions. While religious and other critics of modernity have always existed in the West, they are few and far between, and they are at present clearly more at home in the Islamic world, at least when it comes to political thought (having had, at any rate, little effect on the expansive dynamics of Western modernity that have led to environmental destruction, catastrophic climate change and global poverty). This may justify Islamic reformers' claim, if not to universal validity, then certainly to the status of the role model for those aspiring to renew other traditional religious and cultural discourses of modernity.

CONSERVATIVE REFORMIST ISLAM: A LUTHERAN LOGIC

More successful and popular in recent years than the liberal reformist school is that of the conservative Islamic reformers, who may be described, with certain qualifications, as treading a middle path between liberal reformist Islam and fundamentalism. This school is referred to as 'centrism' (*Wasatiyya*) by some scholars (Baker 2003). However, like the liberal reformers and in contrast to the fundamentalist organizations, it is characterized by a very limited number of fixed organizational and group structures, although the relevant thinkers frequently refer to one another and see themselves as an intellectual school. This school finds reflection in a number of organizational forms, such as the Egyptian Wasat party (*Hizb al-Wasat*). The conservative reformers are interesting not only because, as in all other schools of thought, they are open to technology and progress, but because they aspire to a more flexible interpretation

of traditions of political and social doctrine, one that is not liberal but modern conservative, and often highly contradictory.

One of the best-known conservative reformers is Islamic studies scholar Tariq Ramadan, whom the USA's *Time* magazine has identified as one of the most influential contemporary thinkers. The grandson of Hassan al-Banna, founder of the Egyptian Muslim Brothers, he lived in Switzerland for many years before moving to France and the United Kingdom. In 2004, he was refused entry when he went to the United States to take up a chair in religion and conflict resolution at the University of Notre Dame in Illinois. The American authorities gave no official explanation. Today, Ramadan maintains contact with a number of academic institutions, such as St. Antony's College, Oxford, but he is essentially a freelance author and leading thinker. For Ramadan, next to the Koran, the Hadith and the Sharia are the most important foundations of social order; in principle, he takes the view that everything that is not forbidden is allowed. Unlike the liberal reformers, Ramadan does not want to reduce the Sharia to a non-binding moral code, but argues instead in favour of a new interpretation of the law. For the 'layman' Ramadan, who did not attend a religious school, it is important that this new interpretation be achieved, not only by orthodox Islamic scholars, but also by the entire community of Muslims. And, in the final instance, it should depend on the conscience of individual Muslims (Ammann 2006, 28 f.).

While this may appear to constitute a significant shift away from orthodoxy and the orthodox teachings of the Sharia, Ramadan's system of thought still has an extremely tense relationship with the demands of the constitutional state in which the (religious) conscience of the individual is subordinate to (trans-religious, positive) law. On the one hand, Ramadan encourages the reinterpretation of and debate on Islamic rules, and underlines the human character of Islamic law, as well as the fact that the essence of the Islamic law of the Sharia is the internal process of embracing an Islamic ethics: this idea may promote the integration of Muslims into secular society because in interpreting the law Ramadan distances himself from the fundamentalist loyalty to the text. On the other hand, he does not adopt an unambiguously critical stance towards Islamic law as a legal system that is in competition with secular orders but criticizes the liberal reformers for submitting to the Western dictum of the privatization of religion (Ramadan 2004; see also 2006, 67 ff.). This undecidedness may be quite deliberate, and it has earned Ramadan much criticism when, for example, he merely demands a moratorium on *Hadd* punishments (including the stoning of women for adultery) rather

than their abolition.¹ In his attitude towards the legal character of the Sharia, Ramadan is at least close to the positions of the fundamentalist mainstream (though, as we shall see, this mainstream often tacitly ignores Islamic law through a selective and passive approach to the Sharia; see Chapter 3).

The ambiguity of Ramadan's thinking is captured by Ludwig Ammann: 'Within the cultural struggle of the two reformist velocities that is going on in the Islamic world [Tariq Ramadan] sides with the people, overwhelmed by change. This makes him a conservative reformer, but not a reactionary' (Ammann 2006, 31). Ramadan appeals most to middle-class Muslim circles in Europe who are socially established but lack cultural recognition by the West. Ramadan's assertion of the independence of Islamic modernity lends them a new self-confidence. But we should not overlook the lack of consistency that characterizes this kind of thinking. Ramadan calls for the acceptance of Western laws but not for the abolition of the legal character of the Sharia. He provides no way out of this dilemma.

This is also true of other thinkers within the conservative reformist grouping. Yusuf al-Qaradawi is considered the founder of *Wasatiyya*, which propagates neither simple adherence to Islamic norms nor their fundamental interpretive openness, but rather, in the case of Al-Qaradawi, a process of reinterpretation and modernization led mainly by Islamic scholars (Baker 2003). The fact that teachings such as those of Ramadan or Al-Qaradawi are unlikely to endure over the long-term, and that these thinkers represent transitional phenomena, becomes clear the moment we recognize that their ideological production is largely anchored in their personal situations. Ramadan is leading an intellectual revolt against the interpretive monopoly of the traditional learned Islam of Al-Azhar University in Cairo as did his grandfather Hassan al-Banna. Al-Qaradawi, former student at Al-Azhar, the key stronghold of Sunnite teachings, uses the mass media to reform the world of Islamic legal scholarship, placing it at the forefront of a process of intellectual and social modernization. Here, among other things, Al-Qaradawi is certainly considering the possibility that legal scholars might have a monitoring function vis-à-vis state power. This may be interpreted positively in that he emphatically criticizes the existing Arab regimes. But it also recalls the claim to power characteristic of clerical rule in Shia Iran and demonstrates the limits of

¹ Martin Beglinger, Bruder Tariq [Brother Tariq], in: *Das Magazin* 1/2006, <http://www.dasmagazin.ch/magazin/magazin.php?MagazinID=GMM4RY> (12 January 2007).

Qaradawi's vision of democracy. Religious rule cannot, for example, be squared with the equality of religious minorities before the law inherent in secularism.

Al-Qaradawi sounds almost like Jürgen Habermas and Hannah Arendt, emphasizing that Islamic society must be remade through discourse and social communication (Salvatore 1997, 205 ff.). But he balks at the prospect of a radically open dialogue for fear that Muslim unity would collapse. He pinpoints 'encrusted' aspects of Islamic law and wishes to carry out reforms, but does not want to lose control and deploy Islamic scholars as the custodians of a new consensus – a markedly different position from that of liberal reformist Islam, which Al-Qaradawi, like Ramadan, rejects as a 'Western' import. Conservative reformers refuse to follow the path of the liberal reformers. For them, this would mean giving up the means of making Islam an agent of social and political renewal. From the point of view of conservative reformers, liberal pluralism and the abandonment of the mobilizing pressure of Islamic law make liberal reform an intellectual movement of great cultural importance over the long term but with negligible short-term political significance.

Whether the desired new Islamic consensus should include the normative supervision of the state and its laws, or is merely a unified but not legally binding moral canon – in other words, a kind of modernized Islamic Catholicism – is unclear. However, Al-Qaradawi seems at least to distinguish between societies with Muslim majorities and minorities. He calls on Muslims to respect French law, which prohibits the wearing of headscarves in schools, because in his view the education of girls takes priority (Gräf 2006, 113). Fahmi Huwaidi takes a similar view, demanding compliance with French laws, despite the fact that wearing the headscarf is a fundamental duty (Baker 2003, 98). It should be emphasized, however, that it remains unclear whether these authors would declare wearing the headscarf a legal obligation in Muslim-majority societies. Such a provision would place religious practice under the dictatorship of the majority, in Al-Qaradawi's case, perhaps even the dictatorship of scholarly opinion alone. The reach of the state would extend into the private sphere beyond any reasonable remit, to say nothing of religious minorities, whose legal equality would not be assured in such a state. At all events, any 'two worlds' doctrine formulated by conservative Islamic reformers (unavoidable adaptation to temporal law in Western democracies, a religious belief-based state in the Islamic world), were it to take hold among conservative reformers, would differ markedly from the Western consensus on political modernity.

Fetullah Gülen, the key Turkish figure in a worldwide movement for educational reform, is generally highly conservative. Influenced by the Turkish tradition of the secular state, however, he highlights the importance of the individual conscience – a motif also present in the work of thinkers such as Tariq Ramadan – and comes close to acceptance of the secular state. The individual Muslim, states Gülen, may not question state law. Islamic activities should be focussed on the improvement of individual rather than state action (Agai 2006, 59). His conservative reformism is coupled with a secular position that seems to lie fully within the Western consensus. But Gülen is not typical of the conservative reformist school in which thinkers such as the Moroccan Nadia Yassine or Egyptian star preacher Amr Khaled exhibit a mode of thought similar to that of Al-Qaradawi or Ramadan. All are prepared to make Islamic law more flexible but shy away from acknowledging the secularism of the law and downgrading the Sharia to the status of moral code. It is this proximity to Islamic fundamentalism that nourishes Western criticism of the centrists. However, when Andreas Jacobs argues that the conservative reformers' main aim is not so much the 'modernization of Islam' but rather the 'Islamization of modernity' (Jacobs 2006, 8), he implies that this school of thought is a case of 'old wine in new bottles', as if the reform and modernization of Islam are merely ploys intended to rescue old Islamic values and concepts of law in the context of modernity. This is wrong, at least in part. Conservative reformers, like their liberal counterparts, are unquestionably concerned with both: Islamization and modernization. More than the liberals, however, conservative reformers continue to assert the unity of Islamic traditions of thought within modernity, avoiding a consistently pluralist credo. Yet they undoubtedly seek modes of transition to, and elements compatible with, Western technological, socioeconomic and political modernity.

It is tempting to compare liberal and conservative reformist Islam with Catholicism and Protestantism. At first glance, the conservatives seem to have much in common with Catholicism and the liberals with Protestantism. While the liberals aim to break radically with the idea of the supreme validity of Islamic law, which has held canonical status since the thirteenth century, the conservatives tread very cautiously here, taking a step-by-step approach. The Catholic Church, too, never entirely stagnated with respect to doctrinal development – it was as a rule merely the last societal force to embrace the social changes brought about by modernity and, thus, proved to be a restraining force. The Catholic Church provided support to many precisely because it became

the autonomous stronghold of stocks of tradition. But on closer inspection, such comparisons between developments in Islamic and Christian thought are misleading.

In the West, liberal reformist Islam is often thought to be a carbon copy of the Christian Reformation, an answer to the search for an 'Islamic Luther'. But there are differences as well as common ground. It is true that Martin Luther, like the Islamic liberals, represented a profound challenge to canonical positions, but European Protestantism did not profess a faith in pluralism. On the contrary, it was often highly intolerant and radical. Luther was a confessed opponent of an arbitrary approach to matters of faith and to the humanism exhibited by the likes of Erasmus of Rotterdam, as this humanism was anchored not in faith but human life itself (Gronau 2006). Luther was not the liberal he is often portrayed as, although Protestantism developed a tremendous heterogeneity and variety in the centuries after him, such that today it is indeed pluralist in some ways and gives the impression of being liberal (though in the United States, for example, this has provoked counteracting fundamentalist forces). Luther and the other reformers of his time, such as Calvin, Zwingli and Thomas Müntzer, certainly challenged the omnipotence of the Pope in matters of faith. But they also established new doctrines, which they considered irrefutable and, in the case of Zwingli and Müntzer, disseminated by force or, in the case of Luther, championed in a profoundly radical way. We need think only of the dispute between Zwingli and Luther over communion. How illiberal Protestantism can still be was laid bare by the Protestant Church in Germany, which in 2006 produced a document entitled 'Clarity and Neighbourliness' which asserts that Christianity is superior to Islam (Micksch 2007).

Francis Fukuyama draws direct parallels between the Christian Reformation and Islamic fundamentalism, and his argument can undoubtedly be applied to other illiberal forces, such as the conservative Islamic reformers, as well:

Many Westerners have lamented the absence of a Muslim Luther. But they forget that the historical Luther did not preach pluralism and liberalism but unleashed a wave of religious fanaticism that played out in very intolerant forms such as those found in the Geneva of John Calvin. It was only by smashing the existing connections between traditional religion and political power, and by exercising actual power in a pluralistic political space, that Protestantism laid the groundwork for modern secular politics and the separation of church and state. In Europe, this process took several centuries; we can only hope for a more accelerated timetable for Muslims today (Fukuyama 2006, 78).

Does Islam need its own ‘Luther’? This question admits of no easy answers. Contemporary liberal Islamic reformers are often significantly more advanced with respect to the fusion of reformation and humanism than was the historical Luther. Their insistence on the interpretive sovereignty of the individual – which de facto culminates in humanistic-individual solutions, even if they are religiously derived – highlights how processes of modernization occur at different points in history. The liberal Islamic thought of our time is being formulated against the background of worldwide processes of democratization. While Luther and his contemporaries were unfamiliar with concepts of human rights and democracy, this is not true of the Islamic reformers, for whom they serve as a model of a deeply pluralist approach to the interpretation of religion. The question is whether any Muslim liberal reformer would come up with the idea of formulating a new ‘catechism’ or, like Luther, of going into battle against ‘enthusiasts’ (*Schwärmer*), spiritualists, Jews, or any other group that might favour a different interpretation than his own.

In many ways, Luther resembles the conservative Islamic reformers more than their liberal counterparts, as the conservatives challenge old certainties but also aspire to produce new collective interpretations. It is this dualism that provides the conservatives’ recipe for success, a grouping which in the West – to some extent quite rightly, as we have seen – is lumped together with the fundamentalists. While liberals such as Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd are deconstructivists, who are imparting an approach to the holy texts rather than conceiving a new doctrine, we can discern the outlines of a new doctrinal system among conservative reformers. It is interesting to note that the conservative reformers of Islam draw on models of conservative renewal deployed by the Western world itself when it began to modernize during the Christian Reformation. These helped break through stagnant habits of thinking and feeling and helped people adapt to the changes occurring in a modernizing society without having to abandon everything they had known. Luther, as Fukuyama correctly states, saw that it was essential to do away with the traditional way of thinking. At the same time, he strove to discover new certainties. It is precisely this model of action that characterizes the conservative reformers. If a thinker such as Ramadan is sometimes called an ‘Islamic Luther’, there is undoubtedly some logic in this. That the principle of illiberal reinterpretation had not only positive but also negative consequences, in the shape of the Thirty Years’ War for example, is well-known and should not be forgotten within the context of any comparison with the Islamic world.

Whether we wish to see the Martin Luther of the sixteenth century as a role model for the present Islamic world in the first place is a question of perspective. The liberal reformers seem already to have overtaken him with respect to pluralism, individualism and humanism; conservative reformers are striking a considerable chord with a Lutheran-style combination of reform and intolerance. But Luther is also an exemplary figure in other ways, with respect to his clear profession of faith in secularism for instance. While Tariq Ramadan declares the private and the public, as well as the political and the religious, inseparably linked and leaves open the question of whether a (reformed) Islamic law should have the character of law (Kamrava 2006, 68), Luther submitted to worldly power (Gronau 2006, 74). This he may have done, not out of conviction, but because the authorities protected him from papal attacks. Other reformers, such as the socially revolutionary Thomas Müntzer or Ulrich Zwingli, took a different view. They were frequently ready to use violence and strove to achieve political change. Liberal Islamic reformers have already learnt this lesson. Conservative reformers, who otherwise have so much in common with the basic patterns of Luther's thought, are still wrestling with the idea of the separation of state and religion, though their political intentions remain unclear. (As we shall see, Islamic fundamentalists reject the idea of secularism more firmly than conservative reformers. The fundamentalists also differ from the conservative reformers in rejecting the idea of religious renewal, for which they see no need, though in reality they are no longer traditionalists.)

In making such comparisons it is important to understand the prevailing historical conditions. The liberal Islamic reformers, who often live in the West, all endorse secular law because it protects them. In many cases, they had to flee from persecution in authoritarian Islamic states. Many conservative reformers live in the Islamic world. For reasons of legality, conservative reformers and revivalist preachers steer clear of the fundamentalists' open opposition to the state and instead work within the states' legal framework as supporters of popular mass movements. Returning to the points made above about secular notions of modernization, we should note that the secular state in the Middle East not only had an emancipatory function, but also aided the rise of the authoritarian state. Conservative reformers see themselves as part of a religious mobilization against a state they regard as corrupt. But in contrast to the fundamentalists, they formulate no political programmes, let alone instigate revolutions as in Iran. It must therefore remain an open question whether, despite their professions of faith in the unity of Muslims,

in a new orthodoxy, new collectivism and anti-liberalism, they can be more than a straightforward neo-religious revivalist movement and will become politically important or, on the contrary, perpetuate the political status quo (see [Chapter 2](#)).

In sum, conservative reformist Islam clearly embodies an interesting synthesis. It underlines the potential for the modernization of Islamic norms while assuaging a widespread fear of social change by proceeding at a slow developmental tempo and calling for a new social unity on values to counter the alleged decline in values in the West. At the same time, this school carries a form of latent political aggression. Though it does not threaten violence, neither does it entirely abandon the notion that Islamic law is the only valid public law, which has a politically challenging effect. Because it pursues no political programmes, however, it exerts no direct pressure on authoritarian regimes, which therefore largely tolerate conservative reformist movements, even as they often make life difficult for the leading figures of these movements. This school maintains an open but ambivalent relationship to the Western consensus on individual autonomy and secular democracy. Only real-world practice will reveal whether it classifies Islamic law as a symbolic moral code or as law, the latter being a sign of fundamentalism.

THE UNINTENTIONAL MODERNITY OF ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM

What is the relationship of Islamic fundamentalism to modernity? Many of the questions posed by fundamentalists are asked in nearly identical ways by Western critics of modernity. The key terms here are anonymization, the decline of community, the decline of values, social justice and the growing chasm between human beings and nature. However, in recent decades at least, a consensus has prevailed in the West that any form of modernity must be democratic and, by and large, secular, which cannot be said of Islamic fundamentalists (see [Chapter 3](#)).

Yet, even the relationship of Islamic fundamentalism to Western modernity is multifaceted and often paradoxical. There is unanimity within the scholarly literature that at least the fundamentalist mainstream, in other words the major Islamic fundamentalist organizations, have no objections to the scientific and technological modernity of the West. In the view of Bassam Tibi, what fundamentalists demand is thus 'semi-modernity' (Tibi 1993). Only a vanishingly small minority of fundamentalists envisage a return to the original pre-modern Islamic society of the Prophet

Muhammad. Many opponents of semi-modernity make the standard argument that this is unrealistic because the dynamics of permanent modernization are nourished by social and political freedom. However, examples such as Prussia's development in the nineteenth century and China's present-day path show that social forms that do not dovetail with Western notions of the autonomy of the individual, human rights and democracy may be capable of far-reaching processes of scientific, economic and social modernization. Though 'experiments' such as the Islamic Republic of Iran cannot be considered successful examples of such modernization, Iran has undoubtedly achieved a good deal with respect to the integration and social mobilization of its underprivileged classes (see [Chapter 2](#)). Elements identified as central to human well-being in contemporary research on 'happiness' – a modest but reliable income and functioning family and social relationships – are also core features of Islamic fundamentalist ideology (Grimm 2006). The notion that the actions of fundamentalists are directed solely towards the hereafter and that their organizations are indifferent to temporal happiness is wrong, nourished by ideas disseminated at most by small missionary Islamic sects.²

But the greatest bone of contention is respect for the individual's pre-state 'human rights'. These seem far from assured in any Islamic state of the kind to which fundamentalists aspire. The price to be paid for Islamic fundamentalist modernity is clearly a kind of 'dictatorship of the commonweal' over individual freedom in both matters of faith and on many other vital issues. What is at issue here is not the procedures of democracy, such as elections, division of powers, parliamentarism and many other aspects, which are often quite acceptable to fundamentalists (see [Chapter 3](#)), but the subordination of the individual to the idea of the religious state. This also applies to the state fundamentalism of states such as Saudi Arabia, one of the few countries in the Islamic world, to mention just one example, whose code of journalistic ethics does *not* protect the private sphere; in fact, it does not mention it at all (K. Hafez 2002b).

From the perspective of ideological critique, we might conclude that Islamic fundamentalism is at best compatible with semi-modernity. But there is another way of looking at fundamentalism. Historical comparison reveals that while fundamentalist ideologies certainly preach traditionalism and have no wish to be ideologies of modernity, in reality they are modern ideologies in traditional garb. Classifications of Islamic

² We shall be examining the division of contemporary Islamism into political, missionary and Jihadist currents throughout the following chapters.

fundamentalism placing it within the spectrum of neo-traditionalism, of the kind so common in the scholarly literature (Bennett 2005), pay no heed to the fact that the political ideology of Islamic fundamentalism is based on elements that arose only in the twentieth century.

The most prominent example in this respect is surely the notion of the hegemony of the supreme spiritual leader over the state in Iran, the principle of *velayat-e faqih*. The origins of this constitutional construct, which grants to this supreme leader the permanent right of veto in all affairs of state, lie in the era of revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini and is unprecedented in Islamic history. Khomeini was as little rooted in the Shia tradition of government as was the late medieval monk Girolamo Savonarola in Catholic traditions when he established his 'divine dictatorship' in the Florence of the late fifteenth century, creating an unprecedented form of theocracy (Piper 1979). This comparison is all the more fruitful given that the Khomeini and Savonarola revolutions were both supported by urban merchant and artisan classes and opposed the profligate tendencies of an authoritarian monarchy (the Shah of Persia and the ruling Medici family). Both figures aimed to further the interests of these classes under the cloak of religion. Savonarola's rule marked a conscious shift from traditional to modern rule at a time when the middle ages was giving way to the Renaissance. Savonarola was at once a reactionary and a social revolutionary, and thus in any case a product of modernity who devised entirely new types of policy (such as a police force consisting of children tasked with monitoring public manners).

A similar role may be ascribed to the Islamic fundamentalists, who are fighting against the Islamic tradition of clerical coexistence with Middle Eastern dynasties of every type rather than consolidating old forms of government. Even in Iran, where theocracy has endured for the last thirty years even as the internal opposition to it has grown, there is a possibility that despite its ambiguous attitude towards democracy (see [Chapter 3](#)) fundamentalism may be furthering the 'unintentional modernization' of the Middle East's political foundations. Islamic fundamentalism injects dynamism into societies by throwing social conflicts into relief. This is certainly a dangerous process, entailing the ever-present risk of civil war. However, it also creates the need for a new political consensus that accords with modern Western political thought in the sense that Western democracy facilitates peaceful competition between differing notions of legitimacy. The fundamentalists' modernization of political ideology is a contribution to a new diversity of political thought of the kind that ushered in European modernity.

A COMPARATIVE LOOK AT NOTIONS OF MODERNITY: THE TIME-LAPSE OF CIVILIZATIONAL PROGRESS

Overall, what stands out when we compare Middle Eastern and Western thought on the political foundations of modernity is that, at present, the greatest disagreement exists at the margins of the ideological spectrum, among secularists and fundamentalists. Islamic fundamentalists do not accept secularism. Secularists accept the equality of religions and genders before the law, but in the Islamic world only some secularists are democrats and many either represent or sympathise with the authoritarian state (see [Chapter 3](#)). In reformist religious thought, above all that of the liberal modernizers, and to a certain extent that of conservative modernists as well, there is clear common ground to the extent that both Western and Islamic political thought largely rejects models of authoritarian rule. The reformist project of reinterpreting Islamic sources and legal foundations to modernize Islamic societies does not, therefore, conflict with human rights, the autonomy of the individual and the democratic state any more than – at times authoritarian – Middle Eastern secularism, at least not inevitably.

There is no consensus on individualism, autonomy and democracy among contemporary Islamic religious modernists, but there are numerous points of contact with Western modernity. Can there be multiple modernities in the sphere of political culture? Even Fred Dallmayr rejects this notion, for constitutionally guaranteed pluralism is a key characteristic of modernity that breaks down old ideas before reconciling them again politically. On this view, the repositioning of an Islamic law restored to its former status would be incompatible with the necessary basic consensus, in contrast to a reformist Islamic liberalism, which might, in ideal typical fashion, bridge the gap outlined by Charles Taylor between secular modernity and the religious critique of modernity, which some thinkers believe to exist in the West as well.

Some Western critics expect modernization in the Islamic world to proceed at a tremendous pace. They want a ‘fast-forward’ version of civilizational progress unprecedented in the West itself; a development in time-lapse. Religious reformation, secularism and humanist enlightenment – all are supposed to occur simultaneously. This is an impossible task. Had the Christian Reformers known about the Reformation’s future social marginalization during the Enlightenment, it might never have taken place. It is hard to imagine that any society would take reformation seriously if it failed to do what conservative Islamic reformers

have done, namely, place itself at the centre of societal development, ‘playing’ with ideas of religious legality and maintaining the idea that the new idea of religion reformed by the community enjoys binding force, as did the Christian Reformation. It is culturally paradoxical for Western critics to call for an Islamic Reformation which, before it has even got off the ground, should make way for an Enlightenment.

Conservative Islamic reformers have understood this, and it is they more than any other group who currently embody this paradox. They are a centrist movement important to religious thought in the Middle East, a movement that challenges the ossified dualism of secularists and fundamentalists. Is not Tariq Ramadan – grandson of key early fundamentalist Hassan al-Banna – in effect laying the ground emotionally for an eventual Western-style modernity, not only in terms of science and technology, but also social and political affairs? The conservative reformers certainly imply an adherence to Islamic traditions, but in reality facilitate a process of adaptation to the West with respect to all key values. They cater to an emotional need for an independent identity and a cultural process of coming to terms with social change. In fact, they are transforming Islam into a conservative component – one that is largely unproblematic because it is becoming an object of public discourse – of the ‘one modernity’, a modernity in which the West and the Islamic Middle East can come to terms with one another.

This modernity certainly entails feelings of independence and Islamic commonality, feelings underpinned by national and religious factors. These are in fact elements in a striving for autonomy which can obviously affect not only individuals but also communities. But temporary processes of decoupling from global trends do not necessarily rule out for ever the possibility of establishing a consensus on modernity. Arab socialists such as Samir Amin, a theorist of dependency very well known in the West, have pointed to the need to facilitate attempts to attain national independence on the periphery of the world system (Amin 1978). Calls for a community with shared Islamic values, one that combines old and new, by no means inevitably contradict the Western minimum consensus on political modernity. Such calls may be constructing a conservatism which is compatible with democracy, as has already occurred in Turkey. Whether Islamic fundamentalism will tread this path of ‘Christian democratization’ will be discussed later (see [Chapter 3](#)).