Chapter 1

Marshall Hodgson's Civilizational Analysis of Islam: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives

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Civilizational perspectives, of a more or less consistent kind, are often implicit in area studies; but it is very rare for area specialists to engage in sustained reflection on this background, and to develop their own variations on key themes of civilizational analysis. Marshall Hodgson is perhaps the most outstanding example. His historical analysis of 'Islamdom' and 'Islamicate civilization,' to use his own neologisms, is grounded in a very explicit and sophisticated version of civilizational theory, and the connection works both ways: the civilizational approach throws new light on Islam as a historical phenomenon, and at the same time, it is developed along specific lines that reflect the distinctive features of the case in question.[1] The result is, as far as I can judge, the most ambitious and theoretically articulate Western attempt to understand the Islamic world. If we want to bring Islamic studies and the comparative analysis of civilizations into closer mutual contact, this would seem to be the most promising starting-point. But it has, so far, attracted much less attention than it would merit. There has been no extensive discussion of Hodgson's assumptions and arguments; the current ideological controversies about 'Orientalism' (an overstretched notion if ever there was one) tend to bypass his work, perhaps because it demands a level of historical sensitivity that has now become unfashionable.

The following discussion – a brief and tentative sketch which I hope to develop into a more systematic interpretation – will begin with a glance at Hodgson's conception of civilizations as 'primary units of reference' for large-scale comparative history, and then move on to his analysis of Islam. Within the limits of this paper, I can only deal with a few parts of a vast field. Hodgson's interpre-

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1 'Islamdom' is obviously coined by analogy with 'Christendom,' more precisely with the use of the latter term to describe a civilization rather than a religion which is only a part of it – admittedly a defining part, but not to be equated with the whole. Similarly, to describe a civilizational formation as 'Islamicate,' rather than 'Islamic,' is to stress the general point that a civilization is never educible to its religious premises, as well as the more specific ones that this civilization integrated important elements of other traditions, subordinating them to Islamic principles without dissolving their distinctive contents, and that its history was more discontinuous than a straightforward Islamic identity would allow for.

tation of the formative period will be examined at some length; I will then conclude with some reflections on the broader interrelated questions of unity and diversity as well as continuity and discontinuity in the historical destinies of Islamicate civilization.

Defining and demarcating civilizations

In the "general prologue" to the first volume of *The Venture of Islam*, Hodgson describes his project in the following terms (Hodgson 1974, 1: 90-91):

In this work, we shall speak more of masterpieces of art and dynastic policies, of religious geniuses, and scientific discoveries, than of everyday life on the farm and in the kitchen. Hence we will include in our scope those peoples among whom a few privileged men shared such masterpieces and discoveries, however much those peoples differed among themselves, in farmwork or in homemaking. This may seem like arbitrary preference for the spectacular. I believe it answers to a legitimate human need to understand ourselves. In any case, we must be clear as to what we are doing, and its consequences.

A strong interest in 'high culture,' or rather a rejection of the various attempts to debunk or discount it, is no doubt a defining characteristic of the civilizational approach; it is not to be mistaken for a claim that this is where the ultimate meaning or the fundamental determinants of human history will be found. The point is, rather, that in specific contexts this level of analysis is crucial to the understanding of the social-historical world; there is no suggestion that we should neglect the interaction of civilizational patterns, visible at the level of high culture, with local or popular forms of socio-cultural life. But the shared focus on high culture ('the arbitrary preference for the spectacular,' to quote Hodgson's anticipation of a likely critical response) does not necessarily reflect the same line of reasoning – or the same choice of context – in every single version of civilizational analysis. We must therefore take a closer look at Hodgson's specific reasons for adopting this view.

   To begin with, let us note the most general historical co-ordinates of civilization studies, as defined by Hodgson. Writing in the mid-1960s, he argued (and he would probably take the same view today) that the analysis of 'pre-modern citied societies' – another of his neologisms – had lagged behind the study of non-citied societies on the one hand and modern technical societies on the other. Anthropologists and sociologists had moved ahead, whereas the world-historical framework required for the study of "the periods and areas between – that is, from Sumer to the French Revolution" (ibid., 1: 31) had proved more difficult to develop. One of the most striking features of this long historical period was the constitution of cultural units of a new kind, capable of encompassing a broad va-

riety of local cultures with a more limited reach. These superimposed cultural formations, more self-reflexive and as a result both more clearly demarcated and more dynamic than the subordinate ones, are the civilizations that Hodgson wants to place at the centre of comparative history. Sociologically speaking, they depend on urban centres, literate elites and cumulative traditions. As for the defining contents, they are "constituted by standards of cultural evaluation, basic expectations, and norms of legitimation" (ibid., 1: 93). A civilization is, in other words, an "expression of formative ideals" (ibid., 1: 90) – this is perhaps the best condensed formulation of Hodgson's approach.

Among formative ideals, religious ones stand out in virtue of their strong and comprehensive claims: "A religious commitment, by its nature, tends to be more total than any other" (ibid., 1: 94). Here it is necessary to say a few words about Hodgson's definition of religion, which is crucial to his understanding of Islam, and it seems best to begin with a quotation: "Properly, we use the term "religious" for an ultimate orientation (rather than 'philosophical' or 'ideological'), so far as the orientation is personally committing and is meaningful in terms of a cosmos, without further precision of what this may come to" (ibid., 1: 88). As Hodgson notes in passing, this emphasis on a person's "ultimate cosmic orientation and commitments and the ways in which he pays attention to them" (ibid., 1: 88) leads to the inclusion of Buddhism among religions (atheism is not an obstacle), whereas Marxism does not qualify ("the relation person-cosmos plays a relatively slight role there"). The cosmic orientation can turn towards a sense of cosmic transcendence and human dependence; this is, of course, particularly pronounced in Islam (although Hodgson does not quote Becker's description of Islam as the 'most Schleiermacherian' of all religions, it seems clear that he agreed with it).

There is thus a close affinity, but not an invariant relationship between religious and civilizational orientations. Religious commitments tend to figure prominently among the formative ideals that constitute a civilizational pattern, but some religions are more civilizational than others, and some civilizations are more religion-centred than others. At this point we may note some distinctive features of the Islamic case, as seen by Hodgson. First and foremost, Islam has – more than any other religion – tended to make the 'kind of total demand on life' that is potentially inherent in a religious commitment as such. A comparison with the other monotheistic world religion underscores the point: "The reader will find that Islam, rather more than Christianity, tended to call forth a total social pattern in the name of religion itself" (ibid., 1: 89). The internal totalizing logic translates into external unity. Hodgson speaks of an 'Islamicate civilization,' almost coextensive with the spread of Islam as a religion (although he notes the existence of Muslims – e.g. in China – whose religion does not entail much participation in a broader civilizational pattern). He does not think that there is a comparable pan-Christian civilization: the mutual isolation of Ethiopia and Western Christendom is cited as a case in point. He also rejects – without further discus-

sion – the idea of a Buddhist civilization. In short, Islam stands out as the only world religion associated with – indeed embodied in – a single civilization.

On the other hand, "even Islam could not be total" (ibid., 1: 89). The religious vision could more easily put its stamp on some cultural spheres than others; "in many other spheres, such as trade or poetry" (ibid.), it had to grant significant autonomy to extra-religious values and meanings. Moreover, "Islam is unique among the religious traditions for the diversity of the peoples that have embraced it" (ibid., 1: 85). Civilizational unity was superimposed on this diversity, and that could not happen without complex adaptive and transformative processes. Hodgson concludes: "When we look at Islam historically, the integral unity of life it seemed to display when we looked at it as a working out of the act of *isl?m* almost vanishes" (ibid., 1: 85). Almost, but not quite. For one thing, the aspiration to integral unity remained alive in pious minds and was intermittently activated in more practical ways. The question of unity and diversity is thus posed in very stark terms. It will be reconsidered below.

But first we need to take another look at Hodgson's case for the civilizational approach. He is keenly aware of the limits to its validity and utility: as he stresses, it is sometimes – depending on the context of inquiry – more appropriate to analyze history in terms of regional boundaries and continuities. We can thus think of the Near East (or the lands from Nile to Oxus, to use Hodgson's preferred term) or of India as regions with a history of their own, before and after the emergence or intrusion of Islam; and in some contexts, a European region (in a broad sense that includes Anatolia) may be a more meaningful unit of reference than the civilization of Western Christendom. Some specific cases will always prove difficult to fit into a civilizational framework; Hodgson refers to the Georgians and the Armenians as peoples that cannot be subsumed under one civilization. (It is tempting to elaborate a bit further on these two cases: in the first instance, Hodgson is obviously thinking of their borderline position between the Eastern Christian and Iranian worlds, but it might be added that they responded to this situation by developing particularly distinctive and resilient collective identities – somewhat resembling civilizational patterns in miniature, but the restricted scale and scope set limits to the analogy).

Notwithstanding such qualifications, Hodgson insists on the centrality of the civilizational approach to the study of world history 'from Sumer to the French Revolution,' and we must now try to clarify his reasons. This will entail some reconstruction: *The Venture of Islam* is an unfinished work, and basic assumptions are not always stated as clearly as they might have been if the author had lived long enough to put the finishing touches to the text. It seems to me that five main points can be distinguished.

The first has to do with Hodgson's conception of traditions and their role in history. His reflections on this topic read like a radical critique of the impoverished concept of tradition that had prevailed in the orbit of modernization theory (the University of Chicago was obviously a place where direct contact with this

intellectual current was unavoidable). For Hodgson, growth, change and development are essential to a cultural tradition: "the more so, the broader its scope" (ibid., 1: 79). As we shall see, the reference to a broad scope is important for his civilizational perspective. But before going on to consider that point, the dynamics of cultural traditions should be defined in more specific terms. Hodgson's key statement on this subject is worth quoting at length: as he sees it (ibid., 1: 80),

we may describe the process of cultural tradition as a movement composed of three moments: a creative action, an occasion of inventive or revelatory, even charismatic encounter: for instance, the discovery of a new aesthetic value; the launching of a new technique of craftsmanship; a rise to a new level of social expectation, one man of another; the assertion of a new ruling stock or even the working out of new patterns of governing; or, in the case of religion, an occasion of fresh awareness of something ultimate in the relation between ourselves and the cosmos – that is, an occasion of spiritual revelation, bringing a new vision.

Hodgson goes on to mention the Quran and its challenge as a prime example of creative foundation.

The group commitment and the interaction within the group are inseparable from a conflict of interpretations and a "continuing cumulative dialogue" (ibid., 1: 81). As Hodgson notes, this pattern is not limited to religious, ideological or scientific fields; the same applies to the forms of economic and political life, where the conflictual dynamic of interests and interpretations is at work. In all these regards, the civilizational frame of reference is crucial: the interpretive conflicts and the cumulative dialogues unfold on that scale, and we must adopt a correspondingly broad view if we want to put them in proper perspective. The widely shared and articulated high cultural traditions are the most representative examples of the broader pattern that Hodgson calls the 'process of cultural tradition.' In that sense, the civilizational perspective is needed to do justice to the general problematic of tradition. We may add a point that fits into Hodgson's scheme, even if he did not elaborate on it. There is a reflexive side to the creative moment which he lists as the first part of his model: Cultural traditions construct retrospective images of their foundational episodes and figures, often in the form of a more or less explicitly sacred history, and the most important of such constructions have crystallized and operated on a civilizational scale. The Islamicate civilization is, in that regard, as good an example as any other.

To conclude this discussion of traditions and their civilizational dimension, one more aspect should be noted. After criticizing one-sided comparisons of East and West (including some arguments put forward by Max Weber), Hodgson draws a very far-reaching conclusion that is best quoted in full (ibid., 1: 37):

The difference between major traditions lies not so much in the particular elements present within them, but in the relative weighting of them and the structuring of their inter-

play within the total context. If this structuring remains relatively constant (in the very nature of tradition, it cannot remain absolutely so), it will be because the predisposing conditions remain relatively constant, and because they are further reinforced by the institutionalizing of attitudes appropriate to them.

Different traditions are, in other words, characterized not by the presence or absence of specific themes, ideas or orientations, but by different combinations of shared components. This view is best treated as a working hypothesis that will still need extensive testing; but it would seem to be in line with current trends of comparative studies (one case that comes to mind is the question of the idea of creation in the Chinese tradition: it is now widely accepted that it was not simply absent, as earlier historians of ideas tended to think; rather, its contextual meaning differed from the Western Eurasian traditions). And the civilizational perspective is at least a plausible corollary of the hypothesis: it takes a civilizational scale for the available components and the possible combinations to become fully visible.

2. The second point can be stated relatively briefly, since it has already been touched upon in the preceding discussion. Civilizations are, in Hodgson's view, expressions of formative ideals, and there are two sides to the formative potential. On the one hand, the high cultural traditions that constitute the core of a civilization can be diffused beyond their original social context and affect the patterns of local and popular cultures in more or less decisive ways. This is an obvious implication of the conception of civilizations as superimposed cultures. On the other hand, the formative ideals can be reaffirmed and reinterpreted by concerned minorities, aiming at a reordering of social life. Once again, the historical dimensions of such projects can only be grasped if they are studied on a civilizational scale, and the record of Islamic revivalist movements is as good an example as any other.

3. The third point is linked to a vision of world history and a controversy about the proper way of writing it. I mean the – real or potential – debate between Hodgson and William McNeill, about which we know less than we would like to. They were colleagues at the University of Chicago, working on their main projects at roughly the same time, but it is unclear whether there was an ongoing exchange of views. But the only published part of the debate (apart from arguments implicit in *The Venture of Islam* is a long excerpt from Hodgson's letter to John O. Voll, dated 1966 and included in a posthumous collection of essays (Hodgson 1993: 91-94). Here Hodgson begins with a brief criticism of three defunct visions of history: the Christian, the Marxist and the Westernist, and then moves on to discuss an emerging alternative which he calls the "four region pattern." As he sees it, the new paradigm reached its "first fulfilment" in McNeill's *Rise of the West* (which Hodgson describes as the "first genuine world history ever written"); but on close examination, this work appears as an uneasy compromise between the four region model (with the Chinese, Indian, Near Eastern

and European worlds as the main units of reference) and an underlying Westernist one. Hodgson even suggests that McNeill's version of world history might not be immune to a Westernist takeover, and he links this to a complaint about the "unphilosophical structure" of the work: an absence of critical reflection on philosophical presuppositions inherited from Western traditions, and an insensitivity to the contexts of meaning that determine the nature and limits of diffusion.

To Hodgson, the four-region pattern was obviously a step in the right direction, but it did not go far enough. As other texts show, he was developing a more elaborate model of regional differentiation. More importantly (in the present context), he insisted on the distinction as well as the connection between regions and civilizations. To counter the persistent influence of Westernism, world history had to be reconstructed in both regional and civilizational terms. Hodgson's discussion of this task did not get beyond rough outlines, but we can reconstruct the basic orientations, and it seems appropriate to begin with the references to the Axial Age: although Hodgson's views on that subject differ markedly from the most influential approaches, his case confirms that the axial connection is essential to a full-fledged model of civilizational analysis. When discussing Hodgson's specific version of it, we should bear in mind that he engages directly with Jaspers's philosophical interpretation of the Axial Age; the later historical-sociological approaches had not yet taken shape.

For Hodgson, the Axial Age was less unique than Jaspers had suggested. 'Citied agrarianate societies,' as he called the social formations that succeeded each other from Sumer to the French Revolution, were on the whole resistant to radical innovation. Technological conditions set limits to the accumulation and investment of surplus, and in a more elusive general sense, cultural patterns privileged continuity: "there was an inherent tendency in style which militated against radical innovation" (ibid., 1: 236-37). There were, nevertheless, a few strikingly creative periods of "cultural florescence," as Hodgson called it, and the Axial Age was one of them (other, more localized examples included India in the early centuries CE, China under the Tang and Song dynasties, and the Western European Renaissance – but in this last case, florescence was followed by something much more unprecedented: the 'Great Western Transmutation'). As for the specific achievements of the Axial Age, Hodgson seems to have drawn from Jaspers's reflections the sceptical conclusion that interpretations in terms of a shared intellectual or spiritual direction were premature. He refers in very general terms to a new interest in transcendence (this is perhaps comparable to Benjamin Schwartz's loose definition of that concept as a way of "standing back and looking beyond" – cf. Schwartz 1975), and to a widespread concern with the individual, but all things considered, he thinks it makes more sense to define the Axial Age in terms of its long-term consequences than its initial aspirations or self-understandings. The innovations of the Axial Age laid the foundations for civilizational traditions that divided the main cultural zones of Eurasia between themselves during the following two millennia of premodern history. Greek, San-

skritic (or Indic) and Chinese (or Sinic) traditions go back to these parallel but not common beginnings. In all cases, the civilizational patterns have a regional identity: Hodgson would no doubt have agreed with Braudel's statement that civilizations can in principle be located on a map. But the abovementioned distinction between regions and civilizations is also relevant: the traditions in question are characterized by a capacity – unequally developed and channelled in different directions – to spread beyond their original regional settings.

There is, of course, a major and obvious exception to this generalization about the Axial Age. In the Nile-to-Oxus region, the birthplace of the most important archaic civilizations, no new unifying pattern emerged from the innovations of the middle centuries of the last millennium BCE. Hodgson refers to monotheistic tendencies in the Iranian and Semitic traditions (he thought that Zoroastrian 'dualism' was best understood as a version of or a step in the direction of monotheism); but these developments did not crystallize into a pattern of regional unity and trans-regional diffusion, comparable to those of the previously less developed regions. We should perhaps note in passing that although Hodgson mentions only Iranian and Semitic forms of monotheism, his general argument does not exclude the possibility of analogous trends in earlier phases and other places: both the abortive monotheistic revolution in Egypt (Akhenaten) and the peripheral monotheistic turn in South Arabia could be fitted into the picture.

This incomplete axial transformation of the Nile-to-Oxus region is the background to Hodgson's interpretation of Islam. It was Islamicate civilization that for the first time achieved the cultural unification of this part of the world, and it did so through a new elaboration of the monotheistic themes inherited from Iranian and Semitic sources. But the civilizational pattern that served to integrate the region also manifested a trans-regional expansive and integrative dynamic that has no parallel in premodern history. The formative classical period of Islamicate civilization (Hodgson dates it from 692 to 945, i.e. from the definitive crystallization of the Marwanid caliphate to the irreversible decline of the Abbasid one) thus stands apart as a very specific phase of cultural florescence, different from the more dispersed innovations of the Axial Age as well as from the more localized ones of the other periods mentioned above.

4. The fourth point has to do with responses of non-Western civilizations in general and the Islamicate one in particular – to the 'Great Western Transmutation.' This latter formulation sums up one of the most interesting but least developed parts of Hodgson's argument. Here it must suffice to say that he was adumbrating a very distinctive (but in a very general sense Weberian) analysis of early European modernity, centred on the 17th century and on interconnections between the absolutist state, the scientific revolution and the developments that later economic historians have described as 'industrious' or 'proto-industrial' revolutions. But in the present context, our main concern is with repercussions and responses on the non-Western side, and although Hodgson's reflections on this are not always easy to follow, there seem to be two main thematic foci.

On the one hand, he suggests that reactions to the abrupt global empowerment of the West – as a result of the transmutation – must be interpreted in civilizational terms. The legacies of the respective high cultural traditions and their 'cumulative dialogues' were in all cases reflected in the ideological and practical responses to the Western challenge. But in the light of more recent experience, it is tempting to go beyond Hodgson's explicit statements and argue that the significance of civilizational legacies manifests itself most clearly in the failure of attempts to neutralize them. The ascendancy of political Islam – on the ruins of various nationalisms and socialisms – is obviously the most spectacular case in point. But the politicization of Hinduism in post-Congress India and the ideological development of post-Communist China would seem to support the same conclusion.

On the other hand, Hodgson finishes his third volume with reflections on the crisis of modernity and the possible significance of premodern traditions in that regard. The thrust of these reflections is best described as aporetic: Hodgson argues that the dynamic of modernity generates a whole series of problems – from the atomization of social life to the destruction of the environment – that call for a 'new vision.' But such a vision cannot be built on the utilitarian-technicalistic premises that have come to dominate modern culture. It is tempting to turn to the surviving premodern traditions. But "we cannot say that the religious heritages are in fact able to offer such vision: it may be that they are too drastically handicapped by the element of wishful thinking that has been so rooted in their whole history" (ibid., 3: 436). We can only find out through closer study; and the work that Hodgson put into the study of Islamic traditions suggests that he was prepared to give them the benefit of doubt.

5. The fifth and final point will only be briefly mentioned here. It has to do with the ultimate presuppositions of Hodgson's work, and with a philosophical anthropology which he was rather reluctant to spell out. But he said enough to make it clear that he saw a comparative analysis of civilizations as essential to the understanding of the human condition and its potentialities, and that he liked to think of the major civilizations as 'human heritages,' some of which surpassed others in the exploration and articulation of specific dimensions of human being-in-the-world. As for the most distinctive achievements of Islamicate civilization, seen from that angle, I will only quote a few remarks from the last passages of the 'general prologue' in the first volume of *The Venture of Islam*. On the aesthetic level, Hodgson described Islamicate visual arts as "the greatest ever known in which the elements of sheer visual design could be given priority over all other considerations." More provocatively, he suggests that Islamicate literatures are "perhaps unparalleled in – among other things – their mastery of the esoteric as a dimension of human experience," here he was obviously thinking of the Sufi tradition, to which he felt strongly attracted. But he goes on to note that "the Islamicate society represents, in part, one of the most thoroughgoing attempts in history to build a world-wide human community as if from scratch on the basis of an ex-

plicitly worked out ideal" (ibid., 1: 98). The implications of that point for comparative study of human societies and their histories can hardly be overstated.

Islamic religion and Islamicate civilization

Civilizational patterns are, in principle, irreducible to religious visions; but religious orientations are, by definition, likely to play a central role among the formative ideals that characterize a civilization, and some sets of religious orientations are more translatable into a civilizational logic than others. As we have seen, the Islamic vision was – compared to other world religions – more totalizing and more explicitly oriented towards an all-round ordering of human life, from it most natural foundations to its most demanding moral dimensions. But even so, it had to fall short of a total impact. The religious vision had to adapt to other trends and forces already at work in the region which it took over and from which embarked on the path of global expansion; as it unfolded on an ever larger geopolitical and geocultural scale, it also released forces and triggered transformative processes which it had to accommodate but could not absorb.

To clarify this relationship between religious vision and civilization, we must first go back to the beginnings. Islamicate civilization – as Hodgson calls it – took shape during the formative period from 692 to 945. It was not simply imposed on the Nile-to-Oxus region by conquerors coming in from the periphery; rather, it was the outcome of complex developments and innovations, separate at first but finally brought together in a new synthesis. The region was a configuration of heterogeneous cultures with a long history of interaction and conflict, but aspects of the new pattern had been in the making long before the Islamic conquest. According to Hodgson, they included monotheistic traditions – in different Semitic and Iranian forms – as well as the growing strength of mercantile classes, and the egalitarian social ethics (sometimes spiralling into movements) that drew support from both of these trends. But this is not to suggest that the Islamic input *sensu stricto* was of minor importance. The 'Islamic infusion,' as Hodgson calls it, was the catalyst that brought about a creative fusion of the other components.

However, when it comes to the concrete history of the events in question, Hodgson's approach seems more conventional than his understanding of classical Islamicate civilization as a synthesis of multi-traditional sources. To put it another way, there is a tension between the theoretical framework and the narrative. As is well known, there is now a flourishing current of revisionist historiography on early Islam. The historical validity of the traditional account of the conquest and the early caliphs is being called into question. It would be more than misleading to lump all the revisionists together: for example, the line taken by John Wansbrough (1977; 1978) is a good deal more extreme than the view of Christian Décobert (1991). One can even observe major shifts within the work of individual authors (Crone and Cook 1977 is much more extreme and less convincing

than Crone 1987). But a search for concrete anticipations of revisionism in Hodgson's work would not be very rewarding. The first part of the first volume includes a chapter called "Muhammad's challenge," here Hodgson notes that "we know far less about Muhammad than was once supposed" (ibid., 1: 160). This does not go beyond the critical stance of classical Western scholarship on Islam, as represented e.g. by Goldziher. And Hodgson goes on to state that we nevertheless know a good deal more about Muhammad than about Jesus. As for the sources of this superior knowledge, he seems to have no doubt that "we can rely on the Quran as direct evidence" (ibid., 1: 160). Today's revisionists would take strong exception to this statement. Here I cannot pursue the question further. But I would like to suggest that Hodgson's interpretive model, i.e. his analysis of the emergence of Islam as a synthesis of multiple sources on a regional scale – is perfectly compatible with a moderate version of the revisionist view; indeed, it positively calls for that kind of approach. If the 'infusion' of a somewhat inchoate but also incipiently rationalizing monotheism from the periphery was a crucial factor in the formation of a new civilization, it seems a plausible hypothesis that this aspect of the process was retrospectively stylized into a sacred history, and that the record transmitted to later generations must be seen in that light.

These considerations apply to other questions raised by the revisionists. In particular, Hodgson had next to nothing to say about the Yemeni connection (no surprise, given the then very limited knowledge of the whole South Arabian background), but I think it can be easily fitted into his model – it is one more component of the synthesis. There is, however, another recent line of thought about classical Islam that may pose more serious problems. The traditional idea of a 'decline and fall of the Roman Empire' has now been replaced by an alternative model best summed up in terms of a 'transformation of the Roman world' (this was, among other things, the title of a vast interdisciplinary project launched under the auspices of the European Science Foundation [for one of the best discussions of the whole problematic, cf. Fowden 1993]). This should probably be seen as one of the major historical paradigm shifts of the last decades. It involves a new perspective on Islam as one of the three successor civilizations into which the Roman world mutated, and each of which transformed the legacy of late antiquity in its specific way. It can hardly be said that Hodgson anticipated this turn. He was obviously aware of the presence of the Roman Empire in the region that was to be transformed by Islam, but he did not do much to place this transformation in a broader context involving the whole Roman world. He made a valid point when he noted that the experience of the Maghreb showed how much more alien to the Roman past Islam was than the two other successors; but that is not the whole story.

Let us now return to Hodgson's more specific conception of the formative period. The most striking aspect of his periodization is the choice of precise dates – 692 and 945 – for the beginning and the end of the 'classical civilization of the High Caliphate.' The late beginning implies a long prehistory that includes both

Arabic origins and the early expansion. Hodgson's main reasons for separating this long-drawn-out prelude from the classical phase have to do with the relationship between religion and politics. He is reluctant to treat the militant Islamic community of the first decades as a stage within an ongoing process of state formation. Muhammad's regime in Medina was a "new and total moral order" (ibid., 1: 197), a "new social order" (ibid., 1: 187); but although a subtitle refers to a "new polity" (ibid., 1: 176), and Muhammad is – in passing credited with building a state (ibid., 1: 193), a later note (ibid., 1: 321 n.) refers to Medina as having neither state nor church. The principles and problems of statehood seem to have been overshadowed by the total fusion of prophecy and government, the total union of the believers' community, and the vision of prophet and community as vehicles of divine command. The situation changed when the community turned to sustained expansion, but the first solutions to new problems were improvised and unstable. According to Hodgson, the caliphate began as an emergency arrangement (there was no preconceived substitute for prophetic rule, and no consensus on ways to regulate succession), and continued as a central authority for the community at war. The crisis began with the transition from Umar to Uthman and was not overcome until the second *fitna* ended with Abd-al-Malik's victory over his rivals in 692.

On this view, the "early Muslim state" mentioned in the title of the last chapter of Hodgson's "book one" (ibid., 1: 187) was at best a proto-state, and in some key respects an anti-state. As will be argued in another contribution to this volume(on the emergence of Islam), there are – especially in light of more recent scholarship – reasons to propose a more nuanced model, and to link a longer phase of crystallization to a more continuous dynamic of state formation. Hodgson's interpretation would thus seem too dependent on classical Islamic images of Muhammad's Medina and the early caliphate. However, this does not mean that his analysis of formative processes during the period he defined as classical should be discarded: it still seems more systematic, more theoretically articulate and more attuned to civilizational perspectives than any other available work of its kind. Here I will try to reconstruct its essentials in terms somewhat closer to the 'state of the art' in civilizational analysis, and therefore not always in close alignment with Hodgson's own conceptual framework. More work will be needed to integrate his problematic into current debates among civilizational theorists.

In contrast to the first *fitna,* where religious and communitarian concerns had affected the course of events, the second one was fought through to the end, and settled by superior military force. The primacy of power was symbolically underscored by the fact that a claimant based in conquered territory (Syria) defeated a rival in control of Islam's original centres. As a result, the new empire was for the first time brought under unified central rule. The imperial Islamic state now had to be consolidated on a huge scale, and throughout a region particularly rich in diverse traditions of political organization, culture and imagery. Hodgson sees

the development of the Marwanid state after 692 (he prefers this term to the more conventional notion of a continuous Umayyad dynasty) against this background. His analytical frame of reference merits closer attention: although definitions of basic concepts leave much to be desired, and there is no mention of Max Weber, it does not seem far-fetched to speak of an implicit alternative to Weber's sociology of domination. The key category is a generalized concept of absolutism, which Hodgson explicitly applies to Eurasian societies from Western Europe to China, and which may be seen as a less reductionistic answer to the Weberian model of patrimonialism. As Hodgson argues, a legitimizing social rationale for strong monarchic rule is common to agrarianate societies, or at least to those that go beyond minimal size: an unchallenged supreme ruler appears as a necessary check on privileged minorities seeking to maximize wealth and power. In a state consistently based on this principle, the monarch's authority must be absolute, "one before which the rich and the well-born were as vulnerable as the little man" (ibid., 1: 282). It is this claim to unconditional primacy over all other centres of social power that constitutes the defining feature of the absolutist model. It is obviously not realized everywhere to the same degree; the regimes most familiarly associated with the label should not be mistaken for the most perfect examples; and to add a qualifying point which Hodgson does not discuss, specific circumstances could transform the oligarchic adversaries of absolutism into pioneers of broader political transformations.

The absolutist model is by nature prone to opposite deviations: a weak ruler can become an instrument of the forces he is supposed to control, but a more assertive one is easily tempted into arbitrary and oppressive uses of power. Some safeguards – or at least mitigating devices – against both dangers are built into symbolic and institutional frameworks of monarchic rule. Such patterns develop within all political traditions, with significant variations from one civilizational context to another. The recurrent core structures include models of court culture and society, designed to enhance the authority and prestige of the power centre, but also capable of channelling it in certain directions; more or less developed bureaucratic apparatuses that translate the monarchic principle into practical control; and the highly diverse paradigms of sacral rulership (divine kingship in the literal sense was only an archaic variant). When the victors of the second *fitna* set about consolidating their imperial domain, they faced a situation where the absolutist model was inescapably operative on a grand scale, and at the same time they fell heirs to its multiple traditional versions. As Hodgson stresses, prior progress towards cultural unity of the 'Irano-Semitic area' made empire-building easier, but different cultural traditions were still firmly entrenched. On the other hand, the conquerors had brought with them not so much a new model as a whole new problematic of sacral rulership. The close connection between religion and imperial expansion made it obligatory to define and legitimize political power with reference to the revealed message and its bearer; but there could be no simple continuation of the exceptional authority vested in the prophet. Although his-

torians of early Islam seem to agree that the image of Muhammad as the last prophet was not as definitive as it later became, his specific status had to be enshrined, and when new models of leadership or rulership seemed to transgress that rule, they were vulnerable to accusations of heresy (sectarian traditions also faced this problem, but their terms of reference differed from those of the mainstream). In short, the imperative need to derive legitimacy from prophetic origins went together with the unsettled problem of defining the precise nature of the connection. Different models of sacral rulership could be envisaged, within limits that were in turn disputed by the more militantly heterodox currents. This distinctive but still in many ways undetermined framework for ordering the relationship between religion and power was a key part of what Hodgson calls the 'Islamic infusion': it shaped the Islamic forms of absolutism.

Another part was, however, a "tradition of faith" that "developed most actively in an atmosphere of political opposition to the ruling forms" (ibid., 1: 241). At its most explicit, it became a "programme of the piety-minded" (ibid., 1: 252) that challenged an existing political order. But this political challenge was grounded in a broader religious vision. The triumphant faith had a transformative logic of its own that could and had to compromise with imperial absolutism, but did not lend itself to complete instrumentalization. Universalistic claims, inherent in the self-understanding of purified monotheism, had already transcended the Arab context, and they found a much more effective outlet at the imperial level. The original equality of believers, although never untempered by internal ranking, could be invoked to justify protests against the new power structures. These autonomous religious factors were reinforced by the circumstances of early Islamic history. Here it may be useful to link Hodgson's analysis to later work by Fred M. Donner (1998). Donner's interpretation of historical consciousness and historical writing in early Islam stresses the importance as well as the multiple modes of legitimation. He uses the latter concept in a very broad sense, perhaps best understood as synonymous with self-definition and orientation in the context of the divergences and struggles that followed the first conquests. His four types of legitimation can then be equated with fundamental but to some extent alternative ways of articulating the relationships between ethnic, religious and imperial aspects of a new formation. Theocratic legitimation, in the loose sense of those in power ruling by God's will, and legitimation through piety – a particularly militant, all-embracing and at first apocalyptic style of piety – represented different and easily polarized positions. Historicizing legitimation, based on narratives about the past and especially about the beginnings of Islam, could be aligned with both sides; but in Donner's opinion, it changed the basically ahistorical outlook of earliest Islam and was in due course refined into a rich historiographical tradition. The religious content evident in all these forms of legitimation was also associated with the fourth one: genealogical legitimation had a long pre-Islamic history, but in this specific case it had to do with genealogical demarcation of the Arabic community, in its capacity as a privileged recipient of the revelation, as

well as with dissensions and rivalries within its ranks, and problems arising in the latter respect converged with those of historicizing legitimation.

In regard to Hodgson's line of argument, this analysis lends weight to the emphasis on religion as an autonomous factor. The various legitimizing or self-defining uses of a religious tradition in the making led to increased demand for specialized and authoritative knowledge in that field; an emerging religious elite of a new kind, with its own agenda, thus became an active participant in the conflicts that shaped the course of Islamic history for a long time to come. The result was, as Hodgson sees it, that an "Islamic religion in the full sense, as a comprehensive aspect of human culture, began to take form" (ibid., 1: 249). The Islamic opposition contains the germs of later differentiation, but it would be misleading to describe its beginnings in sectarian terms. In an earlier publication, Hodgson (1955) had argued – and it now seems to be generally accepted – that the sectarian turn of the Shia took place later than historians had tended to assume. The succession to Muhammad was disputed, and conflicts over that issue were transfigured into symbolic beginnings of later sectarian divisions, but such concerns were not yet paramount for the 7th-century protagonists. Only the Kharijis, who according to the traditional chronology broke with Ali in 657, can be seen as an early case of ideological opposition: they maintained the "uncompromising claims for egalitarian justice" (Hodgson 1974, 1: 216) that were much less important to the main contenders for the succession. At later stages, their militantly dissident stance – with minimal doctrinal elaboration – often merged with tribal resistance to state formation; they remained marginal to the history of Islamicate civilization. As for the struggle between Ali and his victorious Umayyad rivals, it became much more central to conflicting identities and interpretations within the Islamic universe of discourse, but Hodgson's view is that there were two trends at work. On the one hand, Ali was retrospectively de-marginalized and integrated into the idealized picture of early Islamic leadership that was adopted by the mainstream; on the other hand, he and his descendants were re-imagined by the sectarian Shia – in increasingly divergent ways – and canonized as embodiments of ideas of later origin.

The 'Islamic opposition' that – as Hodgson sees it – emerged in tandem with caliphal absolutism was still at the very beginning of a long history of conflicts and compromises between orthodoxies and heterodoxies. But it already signalled a new twist to the relationship between religion and politics, and more precisely between religious authority and imperial power. There was no clear-cut division of spheres: the aspirants to absolutist rule could no more dispense with the legitimizing resources of a triumphant religion than the interpreters of a totalizing religious vision could ignore the problems of political life. The new constellation was, in other words, marked by more problematic relations between mutually dependent forces. This view of the transition to the classical phase is central to Hodgson's understanding of Islamicate civilization, and some key implications should therefore be noted. Most obviously, Hodgson's argument runs counter to

the entrenched idea – convincingly criticized by many scholars, but still not quite disposed of – that Islam as such excludes the differentiation of religion and politics that could more easily develop in some other cultural environments. His analysis also shows that differentiation was not only a matter of adapting to the conditions and legacies of older states conquered during the initial phase of rapid expansion. It is true that imperial administration of conquered territories with old traditions of statehood brought political imperatives and priorities to the fore in a particularly massive way; but the new situation exposed and exacerbated the tensions between religious and political goal-orientations that had remained latent during the brief episode of charismatic-prophetic rule over a small territory. At the same time, idealized memories of the earliest stage served to reinvigorate visions of a total unity of the two spheres. The outcome thus reflected a complex interaction between internal and external factors. Hodgson's account of it seems more adequate than G.E. Grunebaum's thesis, first formulated in a lecture on Islam and the medieval world delivered in 1945. Although this text deserves notice as one of the first cases of comparative reflection on the three civilizations succeeding the Roman Empire, there are good reasons to doubt the claim that the relation between temporal and spiritual power "was least troublesome in Islam, where the spiritual power was never formally organized, while the temporal remained satisfied with the role of a *defensor fidei* without arrogating the right of developing or even interpreting the body of religious doctrine" (Grunebaum 1969 [1946]: 2). Neither the recurrent sectarian challenges, nor the new problems posed as the dynamics of state formation and religious expansion diverged ever more markedly, are easy to fit into this picture.

The problematic relationship between the religious and political spheres was also crucial for further contacts with other civilizations. That aspect of Islamic history has often been explained in terms of a generalized cosmopolitan attitude. S.D. Goitein (1966: 64) stressed "the general receptivity of Islam which was due to its originally universalistic and eclectic character." This inherent openness is supposed to have facilitated extensive borrowing from other traditions and successful integration of their cultural products, and most notably the Islamic appropriation of the Greek heritage. The long-accepted image of Mecca as a cosmopolitan trading centre made such perspectives more plausible, but it has now been demolished, and as Goitein noted in more detailed comments, the 'general receptivity' was in practice very selective. Following Hodgson, it may be suggested that the problematic of interrelated but mutually unassimilable religious and political spheres determined the specific direction and limits of intercivilizational borrowing. Efforts to develop a more elaborate doctrinal framework for the prophetic message led to active interest in the intellectual resources of older traditions, and during the classical period this resulted in extensive appropriation of Greek philosophy, up to a point wher the most ambitious philosophical projects could aspire to alternative versions of basic religious premises. A later backlash imposed a much more restrictive pattern of relations between religion and phi-

losophy, but considering the trajectory of Islamic thought as a whole, it now seems misleading to speak (as Grunebaum did) of an elimination of the Hellenic heritage: its later destinies are better described in terms of mutation and relocation. Henry Corbin's reconstruction of the continuing and active Neo-Platonic strain in later Iranian thought has done much to accredit the latter view.

On the political side, Fred M. Donner suggests in a recent paper that the Byzantine imperial vision, asserted with incomparable vigour by Justinian in the 6th century and reaffirmed through Heraclius's early 7th-century counteroffensive against Persia, should perhaps figure more prominently in the genealogy of Islam than has mostly been the case. "The idea of a distinctive religious message underpinning a God-guided kingdom that would – or should – embrace all mankind, and that was particularly hostile to paganism, was thus another part of the intellectual environment in which Muhammad and his Believers worked and acted" (Donner 2005: 517). But if there was a historical connection with the final Christian-imperial form of Greco-Roman civilization, it did not translate into historical interest in the background: Muslim notions of Greco-Roman history were notoriously vague, and the most distinctive aspects of Greco-Roman political experience were wholly ignored. On the other hand, the demands of court culture obviously counted for something in the work undertaken to preserve and continue Greek philosophy and science. The 9th – and 10th-century translation movement, sponsored by the caliphal authorities in Baghdad, may be seen as the most productive result of converging political and intellectual interests. In the long run, however, both statecraft and court culture were much more decisively shaped by reactivated Persian traditions (the legacy of an empire that had been taken over *in toto)* in the first phase of expansion), and in contrast to the Greek case, this long-drawn-out encounter with a conquered civilization led to the acceptance of Persian as another pre-eminent cultural language, albeit without the religious status reserved for Arabic.

Hodgson's account of the early classical constellation may also help to clarify another issue that remains central to debates on Islam's place in history: the question of cultural memory and the specific form it took in relation to Islamic origins. Western students of Islamicate civilization seem to have had trouble in reconciling the emphasis on cultural openness during the golden age with the closure and discontinuity evident in the internal view of Islamic origins. Goitein's statements on all-round receptivity, quoted above, sum up the background to his description of Islam between 850 and 1250 CE as an "intermediate civilization" (Goitein 1966: 54-70).[2] As we have seen, Hodgson also stressed the civilizational

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2   Goitein's concluding formulation is worth quoting at length: the Islamic world between 850 and 1250 (his chronology is very different from Hodgson's) was "intermediate in *time* between Hellenism and Renaissance, intermediate in *character* between the largely secular culture of the later Roman period and the thoroughly clerical world of Medieval Europe, and intermediate in *space* between Europe and

synthesis brought about by the "Islamic infusion." But his historical narrative begins on a strong note of discontinuity: "The Islamicate was unique among the great civilizations of its time in failing to maintain the earlier lettered traditions of its region" (Hodgson 1974, 1: 103). In contrast to the survival of Greek, Latin, Sanskrit and classical Chinese in other regions, older languages of the Nile-to-Oxus region were (with the partial exception of Persian) supplanted by Arabic. This linguistic break was, for those who brought it about, only one aspect of a more fundamental rupture with the past, and that point of view has had a lasting influence on Western approaches. Donner's analysis of classical Islamic historiography concludes with reflections on its legacy inside and outside the Islamic world; he argues, in particular, that Western scholarship has "in large measure internalized certain aspects of the traditional Islamic view," especially "the notion of the rise of Islam as a profound break in human history," and that this view is "profoundly misleading, because it obscures (or tempts us to ignore) important continuities spanning the supposed 'divide' between the Islamic and pre-Islamic eras" (Donner 1998: 294). We might add that it also obscures the real discontinuities resulting from the dynamics of interaction between Islamic conquerors and their socio-cultural environment, rather than from a pristine and self-contained religious project. According to Donner, the critical turn in recent scholarship has not been strong enough to dislodge the unwitting traditionalism that still affects the organization and evaluation of research. And although he does not make the point, it could be argued that radical revisionism is a kind of inverted traditionalism. To suggest that evidence and memory were obliterated to the extent needed for the imposition of a whole fabricated past is, if anything, even more implausible than the vision of a mature Islam storming out of Arabia.

If the critique of traditionalism is an unfinished task, further reflection on the construction of the divide between Islamic and pre-Islamic times should be an integral part of it. And an explanation in terms of a single foundational and pre-programming factor would not seem convincing – it would amount to another restatement of the traditionalist premise. The background to early Islamic self-understanding should be seen as a concatenation of historical forces, processes and situations; a few aspects may be noted, but they are only the most salient parts of a complex and still puzzling picture. First and foremost, the notion of a definitive revelation, completing and superseding earlier ones while correcting the errors that had affected their transmission, was *ipso facto* conducive to devaluation of past traditions: the truth behind them had been restored in a more perfect state, and their outward forms were no longer of any positive interest. This conception

Africa on the one hand and India and China on the other hand, thus forming, for the first time in history, a strong cultural link between all parts of the ancient world" (Goitein 1966: 59). This is obviously an attempt to grasp the discontinuity between the classical phase and later Islamic history, but the culture in question is only defined with reference to other epochs and regions, never in terms of its own logic.

of the revelation cannot be assumed as present from the very beginning. Scholarly opinions seem to have more or less converged on the view that it evolved in the course of Muhammad's prophetic mission and took more definitive shape as the confrontation with other religious communities continued on a larger scale after the early conquests. Nor did it predetermine the whole range of responses to pre-Islamic traditions. Rather, its influence became effective in conjunction with other factors. The shift to a less apocalyptic stance might at first sight appear to have mitigated its impact (the interpretation of earliest Islam as an apocalyptic vision, although not uncontroversial, is clearly more widely accepted than it once was). But conquest became a kind of substitute for the apocalypse, and the ahistorical model of a great divide could thus be maintained in a very different context. The 'sacred history' that served to make sense of the conquests also became an obligatory frame of reference for succession disputes and factional rivalries among the conquerors. As Donner argues, the cumulative impact of such problems eventually led to a more articulate historical consciousness. But he also shows that the resultant vision of history, and the historiography that grew out of it, were dominated by specific themes: those of prophecy, community, leadership and hegemony. This orientation was not likely to favour recognition or discovery of continuities across the divide. The subsequent construction of an empire and a civilizational framework for it was, as we have seen, accompanied and aided by a massive appropriation of intellectual resources, most importantly those of classical antiquity. But the self-defining emphasis on discontinuity was strong enough to maintain a clear-cut distinction between the properly Islamic branches of knowledge and those inherited from the alien world of the ancients. Even if it can be argued that philosophers of the classical period tacitly transcended this division, it remained a dominant cultural pattern; and although it did not block productive use of the classical past when other conditions were propitious, it could be activated in a more exclusivist vein when the broader historical environment changed. There was, moreover, another side to the exceptional effort put into translating Greek texts during the 9th and 10th centuries. Rémi Brague (1992: 85-92) makes a convincing point when he argues that the focus on translation was also a specific way of relating to the past and its legacy, drawing on it while putting it at a distance. And as a later turn of events was to show, this was a fragile relationship: the abrupt and complete end to translation from the Greek is no less striking than the sustained effort had been.

One more aspect of Hodgson's interpretation should be noted. A quasi-cyclical pattern seems to be built into the post-conquest relationship between religion and political power. That notion is anything but unfamiliar to students of Islamic history. Quite a few modern scholars have proposed more or less adapted versions of the cyclical model originally developed by Ibn Khaldun. Although Hodgson does not explicitly argue in such terms, cyclical outlines are clearly visible. It follows from his analysis of absolutism as an inherent tendency of agrarianate societies, reinforced when they are unified on an imperial scale, that

the political dynamics of Islamic states will obey a logic of their own. At the same time, political power will remain vulnerable to interventionist challenges from the social and cultural forces that sustain an autonomous religious sphere. Too much is left of the totalizing religious vision for it to be safely neutralized. But to the extent that projects of religious revival become effective on the political level, they expose themselves to a new round of political alienation from their origins. The cycle may also be seen as a widening one. The transformations of political power – cumulation, fragmentation and internal rationalization – can release trends that attenuate the legitimizing links to religion; conversely, the autonomy of religious elites, interests and ideas can lead to further differentiation inside the religious sphere, not least through the divergent directions of law-minded and personal piety. Finally, it would not seem far-fetched to read Hodgson's model as more general than the Khaldunian one and its modern variants. The cycle that involves religious mobilization and political domination of tribal warriors would, on that view, be a particular case of the fundamental relationship between religion and politics.

Hodgson's analysis of the later history of Islamicate civilization is not explicitly guided by the model summarized above. It is, in my opinion, implicit in his analysis of the "development of political and cultural multiplicity" (Hodgson 1974, 2: 12) that characterizes the 'middle periods' (from the middle of the 10th century to the middle of the second millennium CE). Detailed reconstruction of that part of his narrative is beyond the scope of this paper. But to round off the argument, a few words should be said about political and cultural trends during the classical period, and about Hodgson's interpretation of their long-term consequences. A brief overview must begin with the forms and circumstances of the Islamic turn to absolutism: it specific features were reflected in social and cultural reactions, and the whole constellation set the course of later developments. Every account of this crucial period must focus on the respective roles of the two dynasties that established and consolidated absolutist rule, the Umayyads (or, as Hodgson prefers to call the branch in power from 692 onwards, the Marwanids) and the Abbasids.

As Hodgson sees it, the Marwanid caliphate was caught up in a whole series of inescapable dilemmas. It was from the very beginning widely perceived as a reversion to kingship of a pre-Islamic kind, notwithstanding official claims to Islamic legitimacy. Within the Arab power structure, it represented a shift towards more traditional elites, at the expense of the incipient Islamic aristocracy (the companions of the prophet); this relocation of power called for genealogical legitimation, but the traditional criteria were reinforced by a claim to kinship with the prophet. All these aspects of the Marwanid model exposed it to challenges from those who demanded a return to more genuine Islamic rulership, and their credentials were particularly strong when backed up by closer kinship links to the prophet. The Marwanids had risen to power through manipulation of factional (more or less artificially tribalized) alliances and rivalries among the Arab con-

querors, and were by the same token vulnerable to ongoing fragmentation and re-alignment of the forces active in that field. Last but not least, the Syrian power basis of the dynasty was not only inconveniently located at the western margin of the imperial heartland; it was also – and perhaps more importantly – a conquered part of an empire whose centre remained invincible, whereas the whole domain of the Sasanian Empire had been overrun and expansion had even continued be-yond its borders. The continuing conflict with the Byzantine Empire, charged with religious significance, was scaled down after the failed siege of Constantin-ople in 717, but it distracted attention and drained resources; it does not seem to have obstructed learning from the much older imperial tradition of the adversary, but it certainly constrained the overall strategy of the rulers in Damascus. In short, the Marwanid version of absolutism was ideologically, institutionally and geopolitically handicapped; Hodgson portrays it as a balancing act, bound to come unstuck sooner rather than later. This also explains why he does not – in contrast to many other Western historians – refer to an Abbasid revolution. From his point of view, the Abbasid seizure of power in 750 should rather be seen as a step towards a more normal and consistent form of absolutism, and the founders of the new dynasty "were completing the work" (ibid., 1: 284) begun by the Marwanids, "the reconstitution of the state in terms of the long-standing absolut-ist civic ideals of the region" (ibid., 1: 283).[3] The Abbasid mode of reconstitution entailed a more equal distribution of power and status, both between regions and between the now more ethnically diverse members of the Islamic community. But on this basis they built a superstructure much closer to Persian models of ab-solute monarchy than the Marwanid state had ever been.

If the 'Abbasid revolution' is a misnomer for a rationalizing and equilibrating twist to an older project, it becomes equally impossible to speak of a betrayal of the revolution. After 750, such accusations came from the more radical Islamic opposition, and they have sometimes found a sympathetic echo in Western scholarship. Hodgson prefers to describe the outcome as an "Abbasid compro-mise" (ibid., 1: 272) A compromise was already built into the alliance between dynastic pretenders and piety-minded activists that overthrew the Umayyads, but it was worked out in greater detail after the consolidation of Abbasid rule. It may be seen as a mediating framework or a *modus vivendi* imposed on the problem-atic relationship between religion and politics, outlined above, and in that capac-ity, it had – as Hodgson argues – a lasting civilizational impact. Three aspects of the institutionalized compromise (as distinct from the initial strategic one) should be noted.

On the political side, the Abbasid settlement enabled first a half-century of

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3   There is some affinity between Hodgson's argument and Grunebaum's stronger claim that the Abbasids engineered a transition from patrimonial to rational state-hood (Grunebaum 1961 [1955]: 16).

vigorous absolutist rule, and then a long-drawn-out process of devolution and fragmentation, very different from the explosive crisis that toppled the Umayyads. The absolutist states of agrarianate civilizations, however rooted in unchanging conditions of social life, were always prone to disintegration, or at least loss of central control, and in imperial states, such processes unfolded on a correspondingly enlarged scale. Hodgson describes the Abbasid pattern of decline as a "dissipation of the absolutist tradition" (ibid., 1: 473) and dates it from 813 (the end of the fourth *fitna* that left al-Mamun in sole control of the caliphate) to 945. Political fragmentation during this period was largely due to bids for power by provincial elites, often without formal rejection of caliphal authority; but in the context of overall devolution, sectarian projects of state-building could also play a certain role. The dissipating process thus produced new models of political power, adapted to local conditions as well as to lower levels of religious legitimacy, and capable of further diffusion throughout an expanding Islamic world. On the religious side, the Abbasids "were willing to accord formal and exclusive status to the representatives of the former Piety-minded opposition" (ibid., 1: 275). In other words, they recognized the autonomy of a relatively large and loosely structured religious elite, barred it from direct intervention in affairs of state but did not obstruct the development of vast doctrinal and legal programmes that translated into mechanisms of comprehensive social control. Apart from a brief early 9th-century attempt (under al-Mamun) to reclaim religious authority for the caliph, this new pattern of relations between the two spheres was left undisturbed and took definitive shape during the 9th and 10th centuries. The ulama as the defining socio-cultural protagonists of Islamicate civilization, the elaboration of Islamic law as later periods were to know it, and the formation of the dominant schools of jurisprudence: these were the key components of a model that could be superimposed on a wide variety of local cultures during the later phases of decentralized expansion.

Hodgson's line of argument is less conclusive when it comes to a third aspect of the Abbasid settlement, but the general thrust of his reflections is reasonably clear: the institutional framework put in place after 750 enabled a certain development of alternative currents within Islamicate civilization, but contained them in such a way that their capacity to affect long-term developmental trends remained strictly limited. Philosophical speculation, often converging with the more speculative kind of Islamic theology, was an important part of intellectual life during the classical period. Several factors seem to have favoured its growth. The interpretive and reflective work undertaken within the now more securely available socio-cultural space was not confined to the boundaries of a clearly demarcated tradition – the demarcating criteria were yet to be defined. Earlier traditions that had developed philosophy as a mode of thought and a way of life were strong enough to provide themes and models for further elaboration within a still flexible Islamic context. The prosperous, mobile and culturally receptive society of the early Abbasid period offered various ways of linking philosophical

reflection to more professional activities. For all that, both philosophy and the more rationalistic versions of theology were at a disadvantage when pitted against the currents which Hodgson describes as piety-minded': the latter were both more effectively involved in the regulation of social life and more closely linked to the reconstitution of popular religiosity within a new doctrinal and institutional framework. Similarly, the cosmopolitan court culture (*adab* culture, as Hodgson calls it), most highly developed at the centre of the Abbasid empire, was dependent on a basis more adversely affected by the dissipation of the absolutist tradition' than was the nexus of piety and social order. Court society fostered literary culture and ideals of all-round cultivation, but did not produce a civilizational counterweight to the patterns that coalesced around *hadith,* sacred law and Quranic piety. On this point, Hodgson's conclusions are more negative than those of some other historians; for example, Ira Lapidus (2002 [1988]: 99) refers to "two principal versions of Islamic civilization, the courtly cosmopolitan and the urban religious," and argues that they "represented the political and religious elites thrown up by the Arab conquests."

Hodgson devotes whole chapters to speculative thought and literary culture. By contrast, he has much less to say on a third alternative current that for a while posed a much more overt challenge to mainstream Islam: the Ismaili movement of the 9th and 10th centuries. The most extensive discussion of Ismailism is to be found in the chapter on personal piety (Hodgson 1974, 1: 378-384), where it is described as the esoteric faith of an elite and a refuge for spiritual interests unsatisfied by other answers; its role in the 9th-century political restructuring of the Islamic world is only briefly mentioned. The civilizational dimension of Ismaili heterodoxy is not given its due. This shortcoming of Hodgson's analysis is obviously not unrelated to the general state of research at the time. The question will be revisited in another contribution to this volume.[4] To sum up, the 'classical civilization of the High Caliphate' left a legacy that set its stamp on developments during the 'middle periods.' In particular, Hodgson underlines the distinction between two kinds of trends and patterns: those that developed in ways conducive to further expansion and maintenance of civilizational unity across cultural and political borders, and those more closely bound up with transient conditions and therefore much less transferable – although not *ipso facto* irrelevant – to a different historical context. This is not to suggest that the whole course of Islamic history was predetermined by classical paradigms. Internal factors became effective in conjunction with external ones, and more specifically with massive changes to the global setting of Islamicate civilization. Hodgson notes two major

4　Hodgson has more to say on Ismailism elsewhere, especially in his contribution to the *Cambridge History of Iran* (Hodgson 1968; this goes beyond earlier work on the 'order of Assassins.') But the discussion of Iranian Ismailism underlines the paradox that the ideological impact of the movement was more visible within an enclave (and a fragmented one at that) than inthe counter-caliphate of Fatimid Egypt.

shifts of that kind during the early second millennium, although he does not fully spell out the implications. On the one hand, socio-economic, political and cultural transformations in East Asia and Western Europe – unmatched by anything comparable in the Islamic world – brought these two parts of the Eurasian macro-region to new levels of development and of interaction with other civilizations. Neither of these two regional mutations amounted to a global reversal of fortunes for Islamicate civilization, and although one of them did in the long run lead to such consequences, that had less to do with direct confrontation during the middle period than with subsequent outflanking. Western expansion triumphed through the construction of overseas empires, in contrast to the Eurasian arena of Islamic expansion. On the other hand (and, in the short run, much more importantly), the early second millennium saw momentous changes to the balance of power between the main agrarianate civilizations and the largely nomadic Inner Eurasian zone. The Islamic world was directly and massively affected, but the two main waves of Inner Eurasian expansion did not enter Islamic history in the same way. The Turks came as converts and participants in an ongoing process of political fragmentation and restructuring, the Mongols as pagan conquerors who caused widespread destruction before the power structures which they had imposed were assimilated and used to launch a new phase of empire building. It was the upshot of these successive encounters with inner Eurasia that determined the shape and position of Islamicate civilization at the time of global transition to modernity. But the present discussion cannot go beyond a brief acknowledgement of these interrelations between civilizational dynamics and global history.

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