1

Introduction

1.1 The Rising Interest in Religion

To the surprise of many, religion and its role in society have recently resurfaced as major issues to be investigated by social sciences. To be fair, many social scientists have always been skeptical about the pertinence of the modernization theory, according to which the role of religion should gradually vanish as development proceeds and material levels of living are elevated (Yousfi, 2011). Two pieces of evidence justify such skepticism. First, there is the puzzling fact of religious persistence and even resurgence in highly developed countries. In the United States, in particular, religious resurgence takes on the form of born-again Christianity and charismatic sects. Second, religious movements remain vital in many developing countries, as reflected, for example, in the explosion of African-born churches in sub-Saharan Africa, the spread of Protestant sects in Central and Latin America, the revival of Islam, the increasing assertiveness of Hinduism and Buddhism in Asia, and the growing adherence to the Christian Orthodox religion in Russia. Skepticism about the validity of the modernization theory of secularization has been aptly expressed by Sudhir Kakar (1996), who questions the belief in the primacy of political and economic structures in the shaping of consciousness. According to him, cultural traditions transmitted through the family, which include religion, "can and do have a line of development separate from the political and economic systems of a society" (p. 196).

Economists have for a long time paid attention to religion, and its role was already a central concern for classical political economists writing at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century – Adam Smith, Thomas-Robert Malthus, and John Stuart Mill, in particular. Recent economic research on religion, however, has tended to focus on two distinct

questions. On the one hand, we find attempts to analyze religion as a market phenomenon, with churches competing to attract adherents and satisfy demands for spirituality, mutual support and insurance, trust-based transactions, and other services. Using the industrial organization approach, this analysis treats the content (as well as the number) of religious denominations as an endogenous instrument in this competition.[1] Empirical works along this line are largely based on U.S. data (for recent reviews, see Aldashev and Platteau, 2013; Iyer, 2016). On the other hand, economists have pursued the task of assessing quantitatively the manner in which particular religions affect long-run economic growth performance or have tried to uncover correlations between religion and economic prosperity. They have done so by adding religious measures to other determinants in conventional cross-country regression frameworks. The underlying assumption is that particular religious affiliations have stable characteristics that influence economic behavior. In this sense, this assumption echoes the thesis of the "clash of civilizations" that claims that certain religions possess more or less fixed attributes that make them more suitable for modern social, economic, and political development (Huntington, 1993). The clash is especially fractious between Islam and Christianity, whose mutual relationships are alleged to have always been "deeply conflictual" (Huntington, 1996, p. 209).

This view aligns with the work of Max Weber, who stressed the pro-growth and pro-accumulation virtues of the ethics of Protestantism. Of late, increasingly visible social tensions and political instability, as well as retrograde social and cultural movements in the Muslim world, have prompted certain scholars to tread the same route by privileging religious explanations of development. They point to the inherent difficulties that Islam raises when meeting the challenges of modernity, understood as a set of achievements including not only economic growth but also an enlarged space for personal freedoms and broad human rights, as well as increased opportunities for self-expression inside large collectivities. Some of these scholars have been highly influential, as attested by the role of Bernard Lewis as special adviser for Middle Eastern affairs to U.S. president George W. Bush. Lewis went as far as saying that Islam and democracy are antithetical and that this incompatibility can be traced to Islam's very foundational act. Because Islam was born inside a body politic rather than in opposition to it – in stark contrast to Christianity – separation between state and religion never occurred in Muslim lands (Lewis, 1993, 2002). The logical implication is that these lands would have to abandon Islam to be able to start evolving

[1] Since the early 1990s, rational-choice sociologists have followed the same route.

toward democracy and modernity (for an extremely pessimistic and negative view of the Muslim faith, see Harris, 2004).

Along with this growing emphasis on the barriers that Islam allegedly puts up against modern development, there has been a recent surge of literature extolling the virtues of Christianity for its support of modernization. In this literature, essentially of North American origin, the Catholic Church is often depicted as the vanguard of modernity. This theme is epitomized by the titles of some of the books written by Rodney Stark, one of the most well-known American sociologists of religion: *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success* (2005) and *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery* (2003). *How the Catholic Church Built Western Civilisation*, by Thomas Woods (2005), and *The Evolution of the West: How Christianity Has Shaped our Values*, by Nick Spencer (2016), are in the same vein.

This book takes religious explanations seriously, and its central objective is to assess their relevance in the specific case of Islam. To what extent and in what sense can Islam, the religion of Muslims, be considered responsible for the problems encountered by the countries in which it dominates? Foremost among such problems are a high level of political instability and the postponement or reversal of social reforms conducive to long-term development. Political instability results from the lack of legitimacy of the prevailing (autocratic) regimes and the inability to eject incumbents peacefully.[2] Postponed reforms include changes to the family code, measures to improve women's status, modernization of school curricula, and measures to minimize rote learning of religious and other texts. The resulting social costs are significant: The comparatively low educational attainment and workforce participation rates of women in the in Muslim countries – the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has the lowest women's participation rate in the world – are very costly in terms of growth opportunities foregone (Norton and Tomal, 2009; World Bank, 2008). The same can be said of the high total and youth unemployment rates that exceed those oberved in other regions of the world. Especially worrying is the fact that in some countries like Egypt, unemployment rates are highest among university graduates. The inadequacy of educational systems seems to be at least partially responsible for this predicament: It is striking that higher levels of education in

[2] Since 1991, not one incumbent has been ejected at the ballot box in Arab countries. By contrast, at least thirty-six incumbents have lost power in sub-Saharan Africa (*Economist*, 20–26 August 2016, p. 27).

Muslim countries do not breed greater openness or more critical thinking. Governments and religious authorities use schooling as a form of indoctrination to perpetuate ideas of obedience and, often, misunderstanding or even hatred of other faiths and sects (*Economist*, August 6–12, 2016a, p. 18). Policies that lower competition and create an uneven playing field constrain private sector job creation. Access to jobs and to government licenses and subsidies typically depends on possessing the right connections ("wasta") within a deeply authoritarian and clan-based political system (Schiffbauer et al., 2015).

This book attempts to explain the simultaneous presence in many Muslim countries of political instability and lack of progressive social reforms in the context of kleptocratic and clan-based autocracies. It rests on two propositions. First, I disagree with the essentialist view according to which Islam is a major obstacle to modern development because it has always been associated with a merging of religion and the state or a fusion between the spiritual and political spheres of life. Second, I hold that Islam possesses a special feature: a highly decentralized structure. This characteristic tends to make politics comparatively unstable, even though rulers can mitigate instability at the cost of a reduced pace of institutional reforms or backpedaling on them.

In the next section, I elaborate on these two assumptions by summarizing the narrative that underpins this book's main line of argument. The narrative contains stylized facts and insights derived from the history of Islam, as well as propositions derived from a formal theory that is only sketched here. As will become evident, far from offering a monocausal explanation, I put forward a complex argument that is articulated around a central idea – the key role of autocratic politics – but at the same time allows for the influence of several important forces, including international factors.

1.2 The Central Storyline of the Book

This narrative starts with the idea that only in the times of the Prophet were religion and politics truly merged in the history of Islam. After the death of Muhammad, violent confrontations between different power-seeking factions became the order of the day, and each faction claimed legitimacy for its own version of inheritance from him. Politics thus took precedence over religion, and military men often occupied the commanding positions, whether at the center or behind the stage. The implication is that Islam is separable from politics, and religious clerics must therefore be conceptualized as actors separate from the state who must decide how to relate

to it. The vision of present-day Salafists according to which the primeval caliphates of the Umayyads and the Abbasids were entirely guided by the principles of Islam is just a myth that resembles the glorified origins of nations imagined by ultranationalist movements. Both types of movements, Islamist and ultranationalist, follow the same objectives: (1) to escape the hard and painful reality of underachievement in a globalizing world where international comparisons are unavoidable and foreign influences pervasive and (2) to alleviate deep anxieties about the destiny and even survival of the cultures of the periphery that such comparisons arouse. True, some measure of self-esteem based on strong (national) ideologies is required to construct the economic and technological capacities required for modern development. However, when romantic views of past grandeur are mobilized not to project a country or a region into the future but to vindicate a return to earlier institutions and policies, they become dangerous and self-defeating.

Not only has autocracy persisted as the dominant political system in Muslim countries since the times of the Umayyads and the Abbasids but also the submission of the clerics to the autocrat quickly became a general rule of conduct. Not infrequently, it amounted to slavish obedience. This characterization also holds true in the numerous instances where Islam was used as a catalyst for national unification and as a banner waved to legitimize actions aimed at controlling rebellious territories or bringing together a fragmented political space. The idea that religion is the handmaiden of politics and that religious clerics are expected to cooperate with absolute monarchs in a subordinate position has been justified in principle, despite the professed aim of Islam to establish a righteous world order and provide guarantees against despotic rule. In this general situation, the autocrat succeeds in wielding complete control over the religious clerics, and the political regime is therefore rather stable. I characterize such a state in which the sovereign runs the territory without being contested by these clerics as the archetypal politico-religious equilibrium in which the autocratic ruler chooses an *opposition suppression strategy*. The alternative equilibrium is obtained when the ruler chooses the *opposition confrontation strategy* in which only a fraction of the religious clerics are brought into submission. A possible outcome of this second equilibrium strategy is that the popular anger mobilized by rebelling clerics leads to an upheaval that shakes up the ruling regime. Religious figures suddenly come to the forefront of politics, and the relationship between politics and religion is inverted. The political crisis then arises as the endogenous outcome of the autocrat's bad policies or his inability to confront adverse external circumstances, foreign aggression in particular. To better understand how the autocratic ruler may choose to

have partial rather than complete (or near-complete) control over the clerical body, it is important to realize that the tradeoff between political stability and the autocrat's ability to pursue his own selfish interests is critically influenced by the behavior of the clerics.

Religious clerics have two special features that distinguish them from other elites: (1) They hold values regarding social justice and human rights or proper behavior that they draw from their religion, and (2) as representatives of the supernatural world and as wise men possessing deep knowledge (theological and philosophical, in particular), they have a natural prestige and influence on the population. Because of these two traits, the clerics are susceptible to playing a role as political actors or social leaders, especially in traditional societies where most people are uneducated and believe strongly in the role of supernatural forces. At the same time, however, the clerics are vulnerable to corruption, meaning that they can be "bought off" – seduced or corrupted – by the autocrat. The price of their submission increases with the distance between their values and the policies or practices of the autocrat.

Given that the preferences of the clerics are heterogeneous (they attach different weights to the values inspired by their religion than to income), the autocrat chooses the proportion of clerics whom he wants to co-opt. This he does with the knowledge that those left out may become opposition leaders, thereby representing a threat to the stability of his autocratic rule. Obviously, co-option of clerics constitutes only one arm of the autocrat's strategy. The other arm consists of the policies followed: Policies that have strong disequalizing effects and involve a great measure of elite corruption or those that hurt religious values or interests tend to arouse more opposition from the clerical body, for given levels of perquisites received from the autocrat. When choosing both the kinds of policies and the extent of co-option of religious clerics, the autocrat pursues his own interest, which is conceptualized as the expected income earned, implying that he pays attention to his income and his political survival probability. Both variables are influenced by the extent of religious co-option, the former because co-option involves costs that must be subtracted from the gross income of the autocrat (and his clique), and the latter because more extensive co-option reduces the risk of popular rebellion.

The co-option strategy may create a divide in the religious body. On one side are the official clerics, who are co-opted by the autocrat, and on the other side are the clerics who stand outside the ambit of the state and are therefore more independent. They either belong to independent institutions run by the ulama themselves, or they are self-appointed clerics and

firebrands who act outside any kind of organization. Clerics of the latter type are particularly radical socially, and they are especially able to organize popular rebellions. Such a division is possible in the world of Islam, because no hierarchy exerts authority over the whole clerical profession. Because no church establishment exists, the clerics operate in a decentralized way, pronouncing their own fatwas as they deem fit. Fatwas issued by official clerics can thus be followed by counter-fatwas issued by one or several self-appointed clerics. The situation is highly unstable, especially when self-appointed clerics head well-structured and longstanding Islamist organizations.

The archetypal politico-religious equilibrium, or the dominant system of politico-religious interactions, is brought about when the autocrat's strategic choices consist of extensive co-option of religious clerics combined with moderately popular policies. An unstable autocracy prevails when the opposite choices are made: The autocrat follows policies that blatantly favor his inner circle and the surrounding elite, surrender national sovereignty to external powers, and/or antagonize traditional values cherished by religious representatives. If the bad scenario materializes – that is, if an open rebellion occurs that succeeds in overthrowing the autocrat or in severely limiting his ruling capacity – a crisis situation arises. Rebellious clerics then successfully enter the political stage to protect the common people or rescue the nation. Under these circumstances, socioeconomic and cultural grievances tend to be expressed in the language familiar to most people – a religious idiom depicting a fateful struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil and promising to bring justice to the oppressed.

Antagonizing traditional values and reforming traditional institutions upheld by the religious elite may generate political instability in the same manner as inequitable policies. Nonetheless, pervasive corruption, cynicism, aloofness, and callous indifference of the elite around the autocrat seem to be far more damaging to political stability than progressive institutional changes ushered in by an honest, equitable, and dedicated ruler. It is when the former situation occurs that religious clerics appear to be more prone to rebellion or their opposition drive is more likely to resonate among the masses. As a matter of fact, religious dignitaries can exchange their positions in traditional religious institutions for positions in new state structures, whereas self-appointed clerics do not care much about the way the ruler treats institutions of the "high Islam," insofar as they are excluded or have excluded themselves from these. It is moreover evident that the most unstable political situation is created when the autocrat simultaneously pursues reforms antagonistic to tradition and socially unjust policies. In

contrast, when the reformist autocrat is wise enough to adopt inclusive growth policies to accompany institutional change, and to introduce such change in a manner that does not openly confront the "low Islam" of the uneducated masses, he can be said to be "enlightened." This implies that he achieves the best compromise between political stability and long-term development of the country.

The situation most often observed in many Muslim countries since World War II is best depicted as unstable autocracy. It is characterized by the combination of socially inequitable policies and pervasive elite corruption with partial co-option of the religious elite, resulting in a division between official and nonofficial clerics eager to preserve their privileges and to forestall equalizing policies and corruption-preventing and democratizing reforms. In this situation Muslim autocrats mobilize Islam to buttress their legitimacy and condone their unjust policies. Because of this strategic choice, most public debates and controversies are framed in religious terms. On the one hand, by presenting progressive and secular opposition forces as apostates and enemies of Islam, the regime not only prevents any serious discussion of its policies but also justifies its harsh crackdown on these forces. On the other hand, the opposition, gradually deprived of its secular and leftist components, becomes dominated by self-appointed religious leaders who blame the autocrat and his clique for their corruption, cynical opportunism, and hypocritical behavior. Such domination is easily established because in traditional societies leftist ideas do not have a large appeal. Ordinary people are therefore not ready to come to the rescue of leftist militants when they are the victims of brutal repression.

In many countries, the political stage has thus been largely dominated by, on one side, official clerics who pronounce fatwas in support of the regime's religious legitimacy and, on the other side, rebellious clerics from the low Islam who pronounce counter-fatwas accusing the ruling clique of being miscreants who transgress Islamic values and pervert the original message of pure Islam. The former type of cleric is faithful to a deep-rooted Islamic tradition prescribing that, to avoid chaos and disorder, Muslims should obey their sovereign regardless of the despotic character of his rule. The only condition is that he be considered a pious Muslim on the superficial basis of his official gestures and postures. As for the second type, they are deviant clerics who have entered into open rebellion against the official religious establishment.

What the autocratic authority is thus sparking is a dangerous religious war in which both the regime and the opposition try to outbid each other in their claim to be the most legitimate bearer of Islamic values and

principles. Intransigent discourses and a winner-take-all attitude come to invade the political space in which arguments are replaced by anathema and confrontation takes on the form of a Manichean struggle between the forces of good and evil. Some strand of religious opposition, which is typically of urban origin, may get radicalized and take on the shape of puritanical movements preaching a return to the pristine form of Islam. More moderate groups clamor for the replacement of state laws by the sharia, which they deem to be the only way to coax the despotic sovereign to end blatant corruption and oppression (the original meaning of sharia is a way of promoting the well-being of the individual and the community). An "obscurantist deadlock" is thereby created in unstable autocracies, and how it ends up is an open question. One possible outcome is the sort of chaos so much feared by official clerics, a chaos that may be triggered by the assassination of the autocrat. This may be followed either by a takeover of political power by the army acting in support of autocracy or by religious leaders coming to the frontline of politics determined to restore social order in the name of Islam. When the prevailing chaos ends in a military coup, the general result (with a few notable exceptions such as Pakistan) is the emergence of a secular regime relying on the use of coercion and repression. The corruption and cynicism of often secular despotic rulers, who are often secular, are largely to blame for this sobering association between secularism and force. It is utterly disappointing for all those who believe that secularism should promote a democratic order and an inclusive society based on tolerance, fair access to economic opportunities, and peaceful cooperation among people.

When autocrats opt to obtain wide religious support to stabilize their regime or make up for their lack of legitimacy, they may have to rely on the allegiance of religious family dynasties that lead big Sufi brotherhoods and wield considerable local political influence due to their moral authority and patronage power. In these cases, the co-option of clerics goes beyond the world of high Islam to reach out to lower rungs. The rulers are then automatically tempted to enact laws or adopt measures that reflect erstwhile tribal customs and not only the preferences and values of the high-level urban ulama. The consequence is the consolidation of tribalism and clannism.

To understand why, since their independence, many Muslim autocracies have been politically unstable, it is necessary to examine the role of the international context. One important channel of influence goes through the supply of Islamist ideologies, the propagation of which is facilitated by the abundant oil wealth of Saudi Arabia, the Iranian Islamist Revolution, unresolved problems of statehood in Pakistan and Afghanistan, and the ready availability of effective mass communication technologies. At the same time,

the demand for ideologies stressing the victimhood of Muslim people and demonizing Western civilization has been stimulated by the one-sided meddling of advanced Western countries in the regional conflicts of the Middle East. Such meddling has been associated with colonial interventions, the priority given by Western countries to their own geopolitical interests in the context of the Cold War and the struggle against emerging left-wing and nationalist movements in developing countries, and the unflinching support of Israel by the United States in particular. Factors pertaining to the supply of and demand for Islamist ideologies, plus the threats and challenges arising from the pressure to catch up with the rapidly developing economies of the West, modify the tradeoff faced by Muslim autocrats. Religious clerics, at least those who are relatively sensitive to social injustice, become harder to buy off (they are more "expensive" than before), and as a result, the autocratic regime becomes more potentially unstable. Confronted with a growing threat, autocrats are not expected to remain passive, however. Their predicted response consists of moderating their controversial policies and ill-framed practices or of adopting regressive measures that accord more influence to Islam in public life. The policy shift ought to be large enough to ensure that they eventually regain the support of the clerics, even at the cost of creating new barriers to economic growth and development.

Islamist movements, which tend to appeal to educated or semi-educated people with dislocated life experiences, are born of deep-seated frustrations caused by the behavior of both political and religious elites. Their struggle tends to be especially fierce and determined when, as a result of the corruption and/or incompetence of the political autocracy, national interests are surrendered to foreign powers. The proclivity of these movements to adopt puritanical scripturalist interpretations of the Prophet's message is the result of two circumstances: (1) the association of corruption with the values of material individualism and atheism and (2) the obsequious attitude of religious dignitaries accused of being "lackeys of the prince" and hurting the "dignity of Islam." This second feature is especially important because it reinforces the idea that what matters are deeds and not talk: Speaking in the name of Islam even with the apparently highest credentials may just be a trick to conceal a devious cooperation with those who treat the state as their personal fiefdom and as a set of arrogated privileges that can be sold to foreign foes. Official Islam is thus seen as a debased version of the primeval faith, justifying the need for the latter's restoration.

Globalization of the jihad, in the sense of a redefinition of its objectives to include a declaration of total war against the West itself, is of rather recent origin. It was initiated by Osama bin Laden, the head of al-Qaeda,