

## Introduction

The problematic conjunction of social privilege and a demand for equal justice constitutes a central theme in the history of the Middle East, and one that long precedes the rise of Islam in the region.<sup>1</sup> But it assumes a particular urgency in the period under discussion here because Islam, unlike Christianity, enjoyed spectacular political success from the very beginning. On the one hand, the fruits of this early success contributed to the inevitable emergence of stratification within the early Muslim community; and on the other, the political power gained by the early Muslims meant that their religious egalitarianism could not fail to have strong social implications.

That Muslim societies between the second/eighth and seventh/thirteenth centuries were stratified despite the egalitarian orientation of the Islamic religious ethos requires no demonstration. It is necessary, however, to consider the kind of egalitarianism that may be said to characterise the Islamic tradition, and to indicate briefly that Islamic cultures were also in possession of a full repertoire of hierarchical ideas. In the section that follows I shall examine accordingly the evidence of the Qur'ān and consider the ways in which Islam's emphasis on equality may have been generated or reinforced by early Muslim experience. I shall then turn to a single instance of hierarchical consciousness from the period under study. Out of a vast number of possible examples, several of which will be discussed in the chapters of this book, I shall focus here on what is probably the most notable of all social models produced in a medieval Islamic environment, that of the seventh/thirteenth-century scientist and philosopher Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī (597–672/1201–1274).

### Egalitarian consciousness

In certain respects, the Islamic tradition of classical times may be said to be strikingly egalitarian. By the end of the formative period, neither a church nor a priesthood had developed, and classical Islamic law, with the significant

<sup>1</sup> The importance of this dilemma in Middle Eastern history has been particularly stressed by M.G.S. Hodgson; see *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago and London, 1974), vol. 1, pp. 105ff, 128ff.

## 2 Introduction

exception of marriage equality,<sup>2</sup> overwhelmingly assumed the equality of free male believers.<sup>3</sup> Whether this egalitarian spirit was present in the Arab monotheism that generated the conquests of the seventh century is more difficult to establish. This difficulty lies partly in the problematic nature of the sources for the early period, a point to which I shall return in the first chapter. But there are, I believe, reasonable grounds for assuming that the Arab monotheism that later developed into Islam was egalitarian in nature. This supposition is based firstly on the fact that in some respects Middle Eastern monotheism in general has tended to have a certain egalitarian element, and secondly on the egalitarian aspects of the tribalism with which the Arab monotheism was fused. I shall discuss these two elements in turn.

There may be a logical connexion of sorts between an affirmation of the oneness of God and the upholding of the principle of equality among the human beings created by him; in principle, at least, the monotheistic religions treat their adherents as brothers, regardless of the difference in their origins.<sup>4</sup> Such an outlook, however, need not go beyond the conviction that human beings are equal in the sight of God. This kind of religious or moral egalitarianism is reflected in the Qur'ān as it is in the Gospels, while neither scripture is overtly concerned with the subject of social stratification. The Qur'ān, like earlier scriptures, has a good deal to say about the moral standing of human beings, but it is left to human beings to apply these sentiments to the question of worldly status.<sup>5</sup>

In the minds of later commentators, the most important Qur'ānic verse in this context was 49:13: 'O men! We have created you from male and female, and have made you into peoples and tribes that you may know one another. The most noble among you in the sight of God is the most pious ('yā ayyuhā 'l-nās innā khalaqnākum min dhakarīn wa unthā wa ja'alnākum shu'ūban wa qabā'ila li-ta'ārafū inna akramakum 'inda'llāhi atqākum'). On the face of it, this verse appears to be concerned with tribal or ethnic rather than with social differentiation; its main point is that the various 'peoples and tribes' into which God has divided humanity have no bearing on the personal merit of the individual. Nevertheless, 49:13 proved remarkably flexible and in it Muslims have found sanction for egalitarianism of many kinds. Some have taken it as a reference to inter-Arab tribal differences; some have seen in it a reference to

<sup>2</sup> On which see ch. 1.

<sup>3</sup> See P. Crone, 'The Tribe and the State', in *States in History*, ed. J.A. Hall (Oxford, 1986), pp. 73–77.

<sup>4</sup> Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. 1, pp. 103ff; see also I.M. Lapidus, 'The Arab Conquests and the Formation of Islamic Society', in *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society*, ed. G.H.A. Juynboll (Carbondale and Edwardsville, 1982), p. 52.

<sup>5</sup> For a comprehensive view of the Qur'ānic understanding of human society and its reflection in the career of the Prophet, see R. al-Sayyid, 'Min al-shu'ūb wa'l-qabā'il ilā'l-umma. Dirāsa fī takawwun mafhūm al-umma fī'l-Islām', in *al-Umma wa'l-jamā'a wa'l-salṭa* (Beirut, 1404/1984), pp. 17–87; *idem*, 'Jadaliyyāt al-'aql wa'l-naql wa'l-tajriba al-ta'rīkhiyya lil-umma fī'l-fikr al-siyāsī al-'arabī al-islāmī' in *al-Umma wa'l-jamā'a*, pp. 152ff.

the distinction between Arabs and non-Arab converts; some have seen in it an implied moral objection to a hierarchy of degrees.<sup>6</sup>

Similar in tone are the several places in which the Qur'ān makes plain that sons and wealth, while they may be marks of precedence in this world, will be of no assistance in attaining salvation in the next. Such passages include 26:88–89, 'The day when neither wealth nor sons shall profit except for him who comes to God with a pure heart ('*yawma lā yanfa'u mālun wa lā banūna / illā man atā 'llāha bi-qalbin salīm*')';<sup>7</sup> 18:47, 'Wealth and sons are the adornment of the present world ('*al-mālu wa'l-banūna zīnatu'l-ḥayāti 'l-dunyā*')', which, according to a common interpretation, reminds men that these fleeting goods are of lesser importance in God's sight than good works;<sup>8</sup> and 2:247, where Saul's people object that he is not wealthy enough to be their king.<sup>9</sup> The effect of these verses, as of 49:13, is not to deny the significance of such marks of rank in this world, but to declare them useless in terms of individual salvation.

Still other verses make no mention of worldly status, but emphasise inequalities based on religious virtue. These include 16:75, 'God has struck a similitude: a servant possessed by his master, having no power over anything, and whom we have provided of ourselves with a fair provision, and he expends of it secretly and openly; are they equal? ('*ḍaraba 'llāhu mathalan 'abdan mamlūkan lā yaqdiru 'alā shay'in wa man razaqnāhu minnā rizqan ḥasanan fa-huwa yunfiqu minhu sirran wa jahran hal yastawūna*')'<sup>10</sup> 32:18, 'Is he who has been a believer like unto him who has been ungodly? They are not equal ('*a-fa-man kāna mu'minan ka-man kāna fāsiqan lā yastawūna*')';<sup>11</sup> 4:95, 'Such of the believers as sit at home – unless they have an injury – are not the equals of those who struggle in the path of God with their possessions and their selves ('*lā yastawū 'l-qā'idūna min al-mu'minīna ghayru ūlī*

<sup>6</sup> For the exegetical history of 49:13, see R.P. Mottahedeh, 'The Shu'ūbiyah Controversy and the Social History of Early Islamic Iran', *IJMES* 7 (1976), pp. 161–182; R. al-Sayyid, 'Min al-shu'ūb wa'l-qabā'il ilā 'l-umma', especially pp. 26–31; and ch. 4.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl wa asrār al-ta'wīl*, ed. H.O. Fleischer (Leipzig), vol. 2 (1848), p. 54.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Maḥmūd b. 'Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf 'an ḥaqā'iq al-tanzīl wa 'uyūn al-aqāwīl* (Cairo, 1385/1966), vol. 2, p. 486; al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl*, vol. 1, p. 564.

<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that according to the commentators, the Israelites' real objection to Saul's right to authority had less to do with his poverty than with the lack of kingship or prophethood in his family history, and with his lowly occupation (he is variously said to have been a water-carrier, tanner, or shepherd); see Abū Ja'far al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*, eds. M.M. Shākir and A.M. Shākir (Cairo, 1373/1954–), vol. 5, pp. 306–312; al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, vol. 1, p. 379; al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl*, vol. 1, pp. 127–128; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'azīm* (Beirut, 1966), vol. 1, p. 534.

Other passages on the ultimate irrelevance of wealth and progeny occur in verses 63:9, 64:15, 34:37, 23:55–56, 8:28 and 68:14–15.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 14, pp. 148–149, where the analogy is taken to refer to infidels, who fail to use their wealth in the path of God, and to believers, who spend their money in ways pleasing to God; al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, vol. 2, pp. 420–421; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* (Cairo), vol. 20 (1357/1938), pp. 83–84; al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl*, vol. 1, p. 522; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 4, p. 211. <sup>11</sup> Al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl*, vol. 2, p. 120.

## 4 Introduction

'l-ḍarari wa'l-mujāhidūna fī sabīli 'llāhi bi-amwālihim wa anfusihim').<sup>12</sup> This last verse established an important distinction for some Khārijites, who at an early date came to regard inactive support as less meritorious than activism.<sup>13</sup>

It appears, then, that while the Qur'ān frequently points out the meaninglessness of differences in rank in terms of the afterlife, it certainly does not attempt to abolish them in the present world. On the contrary, it might be observed that the Qur'ān endorses several forms of worldly inequality: in addition to its acceptance of slavery and the social superiority of men over women, it notes that 'were it not for God's restraint of the people, some by means of others, the world would surely have been corrupted (2:251, 'wa law lā da'f'u'llāhi 'l-nāsa ba'ḍahum bi-ba'ḍin la-fasadat al-arḍ')',<sup>14</sup> and that God has 'raised some over others in terms of rank, so that some may take others in servitude (43:32, 'rafa'nā ba'ḍahum fawqa ba'ḍin darajātin li-yattakhidha ba'ḍuhum ba'ḍan sukhriyyan').<sup>15</sup> It also proclaims, 'Behold how we favoured some of them over others, and the next world will be greater in degrees and greater in favour (17:21, 'unzur kayfa faḍḍalnā ba'ḍahum 'alā ba'ḍin wa lal-ākhiratu akbaru darajātin wa akbaru tafḍīlan')'.<sup>16</sup> Its central point thus appears to be that such inequalities have no bearing on an individual's moral worth and ultimate fate in the next world.

The religious egalitarianism of Arab monotheism was accentuated, however, by its conjunction with a second force, that of Arab tribalism. Arab tribal society, like its counterparts in some other pastoral settings, appears to have been in certain important respects strongly egalitarian. At least in the northern parts of the peninsula, insufficient local resources were available for a highly refined system of stratification to develop, and consequently Arab tribalism lacked the forms of social differentiation that characterised Central

<sup>12</sup> Cf. al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān*, vol. 9, pp. 85–96; al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, vol. 1, p. 555; al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl*, vol. 1, pp. 225–226; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, vol. 2, pp. 365–368.

<sup>13</sup> E.A. Salem, *Political Theory and Institutions of the Khawārij* (Baltimore, 1956), pp. 87–88.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-tanzīl*, vol. 1, pp. 129–130, where the principal reference is to God granting assistance to the Muslims against the infidels, rather than to degrees of authority among Muslims.

<sup>15</sup> For al-Bayḍāwī, God allots people different kinds of sustenance and other unspecified goods, 'so that they may make use of one another for their needs, and thereby foster harmony and association such that the order of the world is upheld' (*Anwār al-tanzīl*, vol. 2, p. 238; on this kind of argument see also ch. 6). For Ibn Kathīr, God grants people different degrees of wealth, sustenance, intellect, understanding and other gifts, both external and internal (*Tafsīr*, vol. 6, p. 225).

<sup>16</sup> According to al-Bayḍāwī, this verse refers to the differences in sustenance created by God, and to the greater differences among people in the afterlife, where people are consigned to the various levels of paradise and hell (*Anwār al-tanzīl*, vol. 1, p. 536). For Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, it refers to unspecified worldly goods which are bestowed on or withheld from believers and polytheists impartially in this world, although the different stations of the two categories will be clearly apparent in the next life (*al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, vol. 20, p. 181). Ibn Kathīr interprets the verse as a reference to worldly differences of wealth and poverty, good looks and ugliness, early death and a long life, and so on (*Tafsīr*, vol. 4, p. 297). For the use of these and other Qur'ānic proof-texts in justification of hierarchy, see ch. 6.

Asia, let alone the agrarian regions of the Middle East.<sup>17</sup> One of the most obvious indications of this lies in the nature of authority among the Arab tribes. Tribal leaders exercised only a limited kind of authority, based more on their ability to persuade than on their right to command; they also remained accessible to the generality of the tribesmen.<sup>18</sup>

The relative absence of stratification should not be taken to imply an absence of rivalry for status, power and such resources as were available. On the contrary, tribal society was fiercely competitive. In a society that lacked hierarchy, genealogy was an essential organising principle; it was especially important in matters of leadership, and in determining alliances and antagonisms.<sup>19</sup> Both individuals and descent groups as a whole vied for prestige, and in their rivalry frequently invoked the principles of genealogy (*nasab*) and inherited merit (*hasab*).<sup>20</sup> The lack of ascribed ranks and stations may in fact have led to a particularly high degree of competitiveness.<sup>21</sup> Rank was not regarded as an inherent attribute, and the lack of formal stratification entitled all individuals to seek prestige on their own account.<sup>22</sup> Thus within the framework of lineage, each man sought to attain honour and respect. In this regard the system was one of strong individualism, but it was also one in which a man's own honour was linked with that of his kinsmen.<sup>23</sup>

In both the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods, an egalitarian ideology coexisted with observable inequalities in the actual distribution of power, wealth and social esteem. (These inequalities were, of course, on a much larger scale after the conquests.) But whereas in the pre-Islamic Arab context anyone wishing to challenge this unequal distribution could attempt to do so (at least in theory), in the Islamic context this became increasingly difficult as the realities of state authority and a hierarchical social structure became established. The resulting tension was rendered all the more acute since sanction for such

<sup>17</sup> P. Crone, *Slaves on Horses. The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge, 1980), pp. 18ff; C. Lindholm, 'Kinship Structure and Political Authority: The Middle East and Central Asia', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 28 (1986), pp. 334–355 (I owe this reference to Patricia Crone). On the contrasting social structure of Central Asian nomads, see L. Krader, *Peoples of Central Asia* (The Hague, 1971), pp. 152–153; *idem*, *Social Organization of the Mongol-Turkic Pastoral Nomads* (The Hague, 1963), especially pp. 318–326. (The situation was quite different in South Arabia; see n. 27.)

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Crone, *Slaves*, p. 23; Lapidus, 'The Arab Conquests and the Formation of Islamic Society', p. 55. <sup>19</sup> Lindholm, 'Kinship Structure and Political Authority', p. 341.

<sup>20</sup> '*Hasab wa-nasab*', *ETZ*; see also R.P. Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society* (Princeton, 1980), pp. 98–104. On *hasab* (often understood as a store of merit inherited by a man as a result of the deeds of his forefathers, but one which he could either increase or decrease by his own actions), see Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'arab* (Beirut), vol. 1 (1374/1955), pp. 310ff, and I. Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, ed. and tr. C.R. Barber and S.M. Stern (London and Chicago), vol. 1 (1967), pp. 45ff.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. C. Lindholm, 'Quandaries of Command in Egalitarian Societies: Examples from Swat and Morocco', in *Comparing Muslim Societies. Knowledge and the State in a World Civilization*, ed. J.R. Cole (Ann Arbor, 1992), p. 65.

<sup>22</sup> Lindholm, 'Kinship Structure and Political Authority', pp. 345–346, 349–350.

<sup>23</sup> Lindholm, 'Kinship Structure and Political Authority', p. 345.

## 6 Introduction

a challenge could now be found not only in the attitudes and practice of tribalism but also in the egalitarian potential of Muḥammad's message. It was also intensified, and most significantly so, by the Muslims' early political success. The upheaval occasioned by the conquests created an environment in which the Arab monotheists, even those of lowly origins, became to a substantial degree equal members of a new polity.<sup>24</sup> The dissociation between Christianity and the state in the early centuries of that religion's history meant that the social aspects of the equality taught by Christians could remain relatively unexplored. By contrast, the immediate political success of the Muslims meant that their religious egalitarianism was bound to have strong social implications.

### Hierarchical consciousness

Despite the notion of equality that lies at the heart of the Islamic tradition, the members of sedentary pre-modern Muslim societies, like those of other complex pre-industrial societies, perceived themselves and those around them as occupying positions in a hierarchy.<sup>25</sup> It is true that, despite the existence in the pre-Islamic period of orders or classes in many of the regions that came to comprise the Islamic world, the hierarchies of the Islamic period were often rather looser, and the religious ethos no doubt played a role in this partial softening of social boundaries. But few Muslims (or at least, few of those whose opinions have been recorded) were prepared to go very far in extending the religious ideal to the social sphere, and widely acknowledged, if informal, conceptions of social hierarchy were part of common experience in pre-modern Islamic communities as elsewhere.<sup>26</sup> Some such conceptions were limited to local settings;<sup>27</sup> others came to form part of a broadly shared Islamic culture.

<sup>24</sup> P. Crone, *Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 88.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. P. Crone, *Pre-Industrial Societies* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 99f.

<sup>26</sup> Among the small number of communities that actively experimented with the implementation of egalitarian ideals, the example of the Qarmaṭīs of Baḥrayn is best known. On the taxation practices of the Qarmaṭīs and the social services enjoyed by them in Baḥrayn, see Abū'l-Qāsim Ibn Hawqal, *Kitāb sūrat al-ard* (ed. J.H. Kramers) (Leiden, 1967), pp. 25–27, and especially Nāṣir-i Khusraw, *Safarnāmeḥ*, ed. M. Dabīr Siyāqī (Tehran, 1354), pp. 148–149; tr. C. Schefer, *Sefernameh. Relation du voyage de Nassiri Khosrau* (Amsterdam, 1970), pp. 227–228. Both passages are discussed in B. Lewis, *The Origins of Ismā'īlism* (Cambridge, 1940), pp. 99–100. Such utopian experiments seem to have been short-lived, however, and they were not rooted in Ismā'īlī ideology (cf. W. Madelung, 'Qarmaṭī', *EI2*; P. Crone, 'Kavād's Heresy and Mazdak's Revolt', *Iran* 29 (1991), p. 29).

<sup>27</sup> Among the most striking examples are the ideas underlying the distinctive social arrangements that evolved in several South Asian Muslim communities (see, for instance, F. Barth 'The System of Social Stratification in Swat, North Pakistan', in *Aspects of Caste in South India, Ceylon and North-West Pakistan*, ed. E.R. Leach (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 113–46; I. Ahmad, 'Caste and Kinship in a Muslim Village of Eastern Uttar Pradesh', in *Family, Kinship and Marriage among Muslims in India*, ed. I. Ahmad (New Delhi, 1976), pp. 319–45, esp. n. 2; and R. Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims 1871–1906. A Quest for Identity* (Delhi and Oxford, 1988), pp. 1–38), and in south Arabia (see P. Dresch, *Tribes, Government, and History in Yemen* (Oxford, 1989), pp. 117ff; R.B. Serjeant, 'South Arabia', in *Commoners, Climbers and Notables. A*

Particularly remarkable among conceptions of the latter type is the quadripartite social model articulated in the seventh/thirteenth century by Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī:

The first condition for justice is that he [the ruler] should keep the categories (*aṣnāf*) of mankind in correspondence with each other (*mutakāfī*), for just as balanced temperaments result from the correspondence of the four elements, so balanced societies are formed by the correspondence of the four categories.

The first [category] consists of the men of the pen, such as the masters of the sciences and the branches of knowledge (*arbāb-i 'ulūm va ma'ārif*), the jurists, judges, secretaries, accountants, geometers, astronomers, physicians and poets, on whose existence depends the stability of this world and the next; among the natural elements these correspond to water. The second [category] are the men of the sword; soldiers, warriors, volunteers, skirmishers, frontier-guards, men of strength and courage, guardians of the realm and protectors of the state, by whose intermediacy the order of the world is effected; among the natural elements these correspond to fire. The third [category] are the men of transactions, merchants who carry goods from one region to another, tradesmen, masters of crafts and professions, and tax-collectors, without whose cooperation the livelihood of the species would be prevented; among the natural elements, they are like air. The fourth [category] consists of the men of agriculture, such as sowers, farmers, ploughmen and cultivators, who organise the feeding of all the communities, and without whose help the survival of individuals would be impossible; among the natural elements, they have the same rank as earth.<sup>28</sup>

As its immediate context indicates, Ṭūsī's model is both descriptive and prescriptive: Ṭūsī provides an account of his own society as he saw it, but at the same time his didactic tone suggests that his perceptions were shaped by a certain utopian vision. (This blurring of the distinction between description and imagination, or the real and the ideal, will be observed more than once in the course of what follows.) Ṭūsī's model is especially noteworthy in two respects. Firstly, as Lambton has pointed out, it is in several ways reminiscent of pre-Islamic Iranian social ideals.<sup>29</sup> With these it shares its quadripartite structure, the broad composition of its constituent categories, its emphasis on the importance of agriculture, its vision of all four social groups as interdependent, and its stress on the need for harmony among them. In its incarnation in Ṭūsī's *Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī*, however, the Sasanian framework for this visualisation of society has undergone significant modifications. Most

*Sampler of Studies on Social Ranking in the Middle East*, ed. C.A.O. van Nieuwenhuijze (Leiden, 1977), pp. 226–247; and T. Gerholm, *Market, Mosque and Mafraj. Social Inequality in a Yemeni Town* (Stockholm, 1977), especially pp. 102–158).

<sup>28</sup> Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī, *Akhlāq-i Nāṣirī*, ed. M. Minovi (Tehran, 1356/1978), p. 305; tr. G.M. Wickens, *The Nasirean Ethics* (London, 1964), p. 230.

<sup>29</sup> A.K.S. Lambton, *Islamic Society in Persia* (London, 1954), p. 3–4; *idem*, 'Justice in the Medieval Persian Theory of Kingship', *SI* 17 (1962), p. 97. Ṭūsī's theory has also sometimes been linked to Platonic ideas (E.I.J. Rosenthal, *Political Thought in Medieval Islam* (Cambridge, 1962), p. 221 (in the context of Davvānī's ninth/fifteenth-century version of the model); K. Karpat, 'Some Historical and Methodological Considerations Concerning Social Stratification in the Middle East', in *Commoners, Climbers and Notables*, pp. 86–87).

## 8 Introduction

obviously, whereas Sasanian models customarily placed the various priestly occupations and those associated with the court and administration in the first and third categories respectively, here these groups have been amalgamated; secretaries and other figures attached to the court (physicians, poets and astrologers) have been grouped together with religious functionaries in the single composite category labelled 'men of the pen'.<sup>30</sup> The vacancy created in the third rank is now filled by the merchants, who are thus elevated to a respectable and independent position whereas in Sasanian models, when acknowledged at all, they appear as a despised appendage to the fourth group.<sup>31</sup>

Secondly, Ṭūsī's description became immensely popular, especially in the Perso-, Turko- and Indo-Islamic cultural areas, where it was rapidly established as a standard, indeed a normative, model for the conceptualisation of society.<sup>32</sup> No earlier social model had achieved such a dominant position in Islamic political culture.<sup>33</sup> The present study deals largely with the social imaginings that preceded Ṭūsī's model and contributed to its intellectual context.

It should be emphasised that this study is concerned with social ideals and their place in the intellectual and cultural life of Muslim communities in the classical and early medieval periods, rather than with the actual social organ-

<sup>30</sup> In his treatise on finance, Ṭūsī lists four similar groups under the heading 'men of the pen': (1) the men of religion, (2) masters of subtle sciences such as philosophy, astronomy and medicine, (3) the men of great affairs, such as viziers and *yārghūchīs* ('investigators') and (4) accountants (M. Minovi and V. Minorsky, 'Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī on Finance', *BSOAS* 10 (1940), pp. 758, 771).

<sup>31</sup> On the social models of pre-Islamic Iran, see ch. 3.

<sup>32</sup> What follows is a brief and far from comprehensive list of some important later passages of social description that are informed by Ṭūsī's model. Shams al-Dīn Ibrāhīm Abarqūhī, who acknowledges his debt to Ṭūsī's *Akhlāq* in his *Majma' al-bahrayn* (711–714/1311–1314) (ed. N.M. Haravī (Tehran, 1364/1406), p. 82), introduces minor modifications in his reproduction of this passage (*Majma' al-bahrayn*, p. 92; I owe this reference to Hossein Modarressi). Ḥusayn b. Muḥammad Āvī, in his 'translation' (c. 729/1329) of 'Alī's letter to Mālik al-Ashtar, reduces the original five social categories of the *Nahj al-balāgha* to three in a fashion that suggests his familiarity with Ṭūsī's model (*Farmān-i Mālik-i Ashtar*, ed. M.T. Dānishpazhūh (Tehran, 1359/1400), p. 89). An almost exact copy of Ṭūsī's model appears in an early Ottoman source, the *Mir'at ül-mülük* of Ahmed b. Hüsamüddin al-Amāsī, composed for Mehmed I (d. 824/1421) (ms. Esed Ef. 1890, ff. 56a–b; I owe this reference to Cornell Fleischer). A similar, although differently arranged, quadripartite model appears in the letters spuriously ascribed to the vizier Rashīd al-Dīn (*Mukātabāt-i Rashīd al-Dīn Faḍl Allāh*, ed. M. Shafī' (Lahore, 1376/1947), p. 12). Very similar models also appear in the two well-known adaptations of the *Akhlāq-i Nāsirī* by Jalāl al-Dīn Davvānī (830–907/1427–1501) (*Lavāmi' al-ishrāq fī makārim al-akhlāq=Akhlāq-i Jalālī* (Lucknow, 1377/1957), pp. 270–271; tr. W.F. Thompson, *Practical Philosophy of the Muhammadan People* (London, 1839), pp. 388–389) and Ḥusayn Vā'iz Kāshifī (d. 910/1504–1505) (*Akhlāq-i Muhsinī* (Hertford, 1850), pp. 57–58). For the place of Ṭūsī's model in the thought of later Ottoman writers, see C. Fleischer, 'Royal Authority, Dynastic Cyclism, and "Ibn Khaldūnism" in Sixteenth-Century Ottoman Letters', *JAAS* 18 (1983), pp. 198–220. In India, a rearranged version of Ṭūsī's model (soldiers, artisans and merchants, men of the pen (among whom, as in the *Akhlāq-i Muhsinī*, the 'ulamā' do not appear) and cultivators) is found in the *Ā'in-i Akbarī* of Abū'l-Faẓl (ed. H. Blochmann (Calcutta, 1872), vol. 1, pp. 3–4).

<sup>33</sup> See further H. Inalcik, *The Ottoman Empire. The Classical Age 1300–1600* (New York and Washington, 1973), pp. 65–69, and N. Itzkowitz, *Ottoman Empire and Islamic Tradition* (New York, 1972), pp. 58ff.



isation of any particular pre-modern Muslim society. Such ideals probably never corresponded very closely to the social organisations of the communities in which they were produced; in so far as they corresponded to real conditions at all, it was to different extents in different places at different times.<sup>34</sup> Nevertheless it is worth noting the constancy of certain ideas, since this suggests that some form of ranking was widely regarded not only as a legitimate, but also as a necessary, characteristic of social organisation in settings that were distant from each other in time and space. The distinction between the upper and lower strata of society, the *khāṣṣa* and the *ʿamma*, for example, is attested as early as Ibn al-Muqaffa' (d. c. 139/756) and endures throughout the pre-modern period. The term *khāṣṣa* (pl. *khawāṣṣ*) generally refers to the holders of political, bureaucratic, military and sometimes religious offices, and to the literate, urban groups, who might include educated merchants and landowners. Such persons could be differentiated in terms of their culture and affluence from the *ʿamma* (pl. *awāmm*), the illiterate or semiliterate mass of the population.<sup>35</sup> It might be said that such a general distinction as 'upper' and 'lower' (or 'special' and 'general') is an insufficient basis on which to argue for a widespread sensitivity to social differences. There are also, however, indications in the classical literature of a more defined and complex awareness of social stratification. These include the references to *ṭabaqāt al-nās*, literally 'the strata of society' and *aṣnāf al-nās*, 'the categories of society'. The latter term need not imply a scale of social value, although it was frequently used in discussions of rank; the former, however, gives graphic expression to a vertically layered structure.<sup>36</sup> The phrase *ṭabaqāt al-nās* was sometimes used, especially in the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries, specifically to refer to the various ranks of attendants at court, differentiated according to an elaborate system of protocol reminiscent of that of Sasanian Iran.<sup>37</sup> Later it came to be used in a general sense, to describe a hierarchical vision of society as a whole.

<sup>34</sup> See for example the comments of C. Fleischer, *Bureaucrat and Intellectual in the Ottoman Empire. The Historian Mustafa Āli (1541–1600)* (Princeton, 1986), pp. 5–7.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. M.A.J. Beg, 'al-Khāṣṣa wa'l-ʿamma', *EI2*; I. Lapidus, *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1967), pp. 80ff; B. Lewis, *The Political Language of Islam* (Chicago and London, 1988), pp. 67–68; A.K.S. Lambton, *Continuity and Change in Medieval Persia* (Albany, New York, 1988), p. 224.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. M. Rodinson, 'Histoire économique et histoire des classes sociales dans le monde musulman', in *Studies in the Economic History of the Middle East*, ed. M.A. Cook (Oxford, 1970), pp. 142–148, where other terms that imply a consciousness of stratification are also discussed; R. al-Sayyid, *Mafāhīm al-jamāʿāt fi'l-Islām* (Beirut, 1984), pp. 84ff (on 'sinf'); Mottahedeh, *Loyalty and Leadership*, pp. 105ff. Following Mottahedeh, I have in general adopted neutral terms such as 'category' and 'group' rather than such commonly used terms as 'estate', 'caste' and 'class'. Since there seems to be little consensus regarding the precise definitions of 'estate' and 'caste', the use of these terms might make for less clarity rather than more; and since the term 'class', whether in its Marxian or Weberian sense, connotes the primacy of economic relations, it is not entirely appropriate for the forms of social stratification under discussion here. On the application of common sociological terminology to Middle Eastern history, cf. K. Karpat, 'Some Historical and Methodological Considerations', pp. 83–101.

<sup>37</sup> See for example pseudo-Jahiz, *K. al-taj fi akhlāq al-mulūk*, ed. Aḥmad Zakī Pāshā (Cairo, 1332/1914), p. 25.

## 10 Introduction

On its own the term *ṭabaqa* is frequently employed to denote a particular functional group,<sup>38</sup> and the phrase *‘alā qadri ṭabaqātihim* is used to convey differences in social and economic status.<sup>39</sup> Such expressions do not refer to any formal system of estates or ‘orders’, but they do suggest that the concept of a graded form of social organisation was taken for granted among the inhabitants of pre-modern Muslim societies just as it was among their neighbours in the more formally structured societies of China, India and Europe.

Whatever the relationship of such terms and concepts may have been to any particular set of historical circumstances, it seems clear that for many people the Islamic insistence on the ultimate irrelevance of worldly differences coexisted not only with hierarchical social structures on the ground but also with an array of more or less appealing ideas that sought to justify such structures. It is the interplay between various manifestations of egalitarian and hierarchical consciousness that forms the subject of the ensuing chapters. Many of the attitudes, sentiments and prejudices that the reader will encounter in what follows were common to other pre-modern societies. But in an Islamic context they take on somewhat different forms, partly, it is argued, because of the circumstances of early Islamic history and partly because the Islamic religious tradition could not be used easily to support the principle of hierarchy. As a result the élites who benefited from hierarchical forms of social organisation in the Islamic world found themselves in moral difficulties that their counterparts in other civilisations did not always share, or at least not to the same degree or in the same way. Much of this book is devoted to the ways in which such people responded to the complexities of this state of affairs.

<sup>38</sup> See for example Ḥasan al-Khū‘ī, *Ghunyat al-kātib wa munyat al-ṭālib*, ed. A.S. Erzi (Ankara, 1963).

<sup>39</sup> Thus al-Shayzarī, in his instructions to the *muḥtasib* on the exaction of the *jizya* from the *ahl al-dhimma* (*Nihāyat al-rutba fī ṭalab al-ḥisba*, ed. al-‘Arīnī (Cairo, 1365/1946), p. 107).