

## I

## Introduction: Muslims and modernity: culture and society in an age of contest and plurality

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On the eve of the modern era, Islam, not Christianity, was the most globalised of the world's religions. Muslim-majority societies stretched across a broad swath of Old World territory from West Africa and Morocco in the west to China and the Malay archipelago in the east. Several pieces were to be added to the map of the Muslim world after the eighteenth century, but otherwise most of what was to become the Muslim world's modern expanse was in place. Meanwhile, however, another international order was emerging, one driven not by the hallowed imperatives of a world-transforming religion but by the demands of industrial revolution and imperial expansion. The West's great transformations were to unleash their own globalisations, ones that were to challenge Muslim culture and society to their core.

Earlier, in the late medieval period, the Muslim world had shared with China the distinction of being the greatest military and economic power on earth. Whereas Chinese emperors dominated only the far eastern face of the Eurasian land mass, however, Muslim rulers presided over its vast central and western domains. Muslim merchants also held monopoly shares in the maritime trade that stretched from Indonesia's spice islands through India and southern Arabia to the Mediterranean. Though jealously eyeing its riches, Western Europeans were but bit players in this vast mercantile ecumene. In matters of scholarship, too, medieval Muslims had inherited and expanded on the civilisational accomplishments of ancient Greece, Persia and India. Mathematics and science in the Muslim lands were the most advanced in the world.<sup>1</sup> In the late Middle Ages Europeans had relied on Arabic translations to recover many lost classics of Greek philosophy and science. In all these

<sup>1</sup> See Toby Huff, *The rise of early modern science: Islam, China, and the West*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 2003); A. I. Sabra, 'The appropriation and subsequent naturalization of Greek science in medieval Islam', *History of Science*, 25 (1987), pp. 223–43.

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regards, Muslim societies in the Middle Ages lay at the pinnacle of Old World civilisation.

As the modern world order began to take shape, however, the longstanding Muslim advantage over Christian Europe disappeared. Western Europe's Renaissance, Reformation and early scientific revolutions passed largely unnoticed in Muslim lands. The revolution in industry and armaments that swept Western Europe after the eighteenth century, however, allowed no such indulgence. The West's military and political ascendance hastened the decline of the three great Muslim empires of the early modern period, the Ottoman, the Persian and the Mughal. Western expansion also brought about the collapse or colonisation of a host of smaller Muslim states in Africa, the Middle East and Central, South and South-East Asia. With these events, one thousand years of Muslim ascendancy came to a swift and traumatic end.

The Western impact was as much cultural and epistemological as it was political. For centuries Muslims had lived in societies governed by leaders identified as Muslim. With good reason, Muslims had grown accustomed to regarding their civilisation as foremost in trade, science and the arts. Suddenly and irrevocably, it seemed, the self-regarding standards of Muslim civilisation were placed in doubt. The crisis of cultural confidence upset the delicate balance of power among the social authorities responsible for stewarding Muslim culture's varied streams. The Western threat provoked loud cries for Muslim unity against the unbelievers. Although Muslim modernists quietly urged their fellows to learn from the West, conservative reformists countered that the cause of the Muslim decline was neglect of God's law. The only way to reverse the slide, these reformists insisted, was to replace localised and accommodating variants of the faith with an uncompromising fidelity to scripture and traditions of the Prophet Muḥammad.

Western hegemony eventually resulted in the introduction of new techniques of education, administration and social disciplining into Muslim-majority societies. The ascent of the West also introduced new models for private life and amusement. Although some Muslim leaders rejected these innovations, many did not. From the 1800s on, Muslim societies buzzed with debate over which elements in the Western cultural repertoire were to be welcomed and which forbidden.

The rise of the West, then, presented a deeply unsettling challenge to a civilisation and peoples long confident of their place in the world. Muslim debates over what was to be done in the face of the Western challenge eventually came to focus on the question of whether, in becoming modern, Muslims must adopt the habits and values of the West or whether Muslims

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have the means and duty to create a modernity of their own. Although the details have changed, this same question lies at the heart of arguments over religion, secularity and the modern in Muslim-majority societies today.

### Plurality in civilisation

Although nineteenth-century Western commentators believed otherwise, the Muslim world on the eve of the modern age did not consist of unchanging Oriental despotisms or, even less, ‘peoples without history’. In the early modern period (fifteenth to seventeenth centuries), the Muslim expansion was still going strong, as new peoples were won to the faith in eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Indonesian Archipelago and sub-Saharan Africa. The Muslim world’s external dynamism was accompanied by an equally vital internal one, expressed in a bustling circulation of goods, ideas and people. Certainly, the cultural traffic was heavier in some regions than others, but it was sufficiently pervasive to ensure that across the expanse of the Muslim world people held certain core values and practices in common. Cultural differences remained as well, in everything from family organisation and gender relations to folk religion and state administration. The variation illustrated an endemic feature of Muslim civilisation: the tension between the ideal of Muslim unity and the reality of social diversity. This cultural tension was to mark Muslim culture and society even more deeply in the modern era.

As with other world religions, the tension between global ideals and localising accommodations had long been a feature of Muslim civilisation. Since the age of the Prophet, Muslims had conveyed their urgent message in different languages and cultural garbs while attempting to keep to a common normative core. Lacking pre-modern Christianity’s sacerdotal priesthood and clerical hierarchy, Muslims could not look to a church to authorise and stabilise their religion’s message and organisation. By the third century of the Muslim era, however, Muslims agreed in recognising the Qur’ān and Ḥadīth (canonical accounts of the actions and sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad) as the main sources of divine guidance. The key normative ingredients in this corpus were known collectively as *sharī‘a*, the divinely appointed ‘path’ or ‘way’. Often translated as ‘Islamic law’, the *sharī‘a* offered more extensive guidance on piety and devotion than it did infractions and punishments; the latter were never but a portion of the larger whole.

By its third century, Muslim civilisation had also developed the networked institution of religious scholars, the ‘*ulamā*’, whose duty it was to study and rule on the details of God’s commands. The ‘*ulamā*’ are not priests in any

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formal sense of the term, since they undergo no ordination and administer no sacraments. But they are religious specialists, and, as such, play an important role in matters of religious learning, scholarship and the law. For many believers, this combination of divine guidance and ‘*ulamā*’ authority was the foundation on which religious life was to be built.

For other Muslims, however, knowledge of the law was never all that there was to the experience of the divine. For these believers, the illuminationist devotion of Sufi ‘friends of God’ was especially attractive, because it seemed to offer a more accessible and emotive path toward knowledge of God. Indeed, for some travellers on the mystical path, Sufism was a deliberate ‘reaction against the external rationalization of Islam in law and systematic theology’.<sup>2</sup> More broadly based in society than the ‘*ulamā*’ (at least since the founding of the great Sufi orders in the tenth century CE), Sufi masters (*shaykhs*, *pīr*, *baba*) and their disciples comprised a complementary and, at times, alternative stream to the legal-minded current in Islamic civilisation, one that resonated deeply with the concerns of ordinary Muslims. In addition, as in northern India in the eleventh century, Senegal in the sixteenth or Kazakhstan in the seventeenth, Sufi disciples regularly migrated from sedentary homelands out into turbulent borderlands, where some served as missionaries to non-Muslims. Embedded as they were in diverse social communities, Sufi masters were often more inclined than scholars of the law to tolerate the saint veneration, spirit devotion and healing cults popular among ordinary believers. Some scholars of the law, and even some Sufi masters, decried Sufi liberality on these matters. In most of the Muslim world, however, it was not until the changes provoked by the arrival of Europeans that the reformist view became the norm. Thereafter, *sharī‘a*-minded reformists challenged and, in some places, diminished the Sufi stream in Muslim civilisation. However, they nowhere eliminated it entirely. Indeed, the last years of the twentieth century were to witness a neo-Sufi revival in many Muslim lands, centred this time in the educated middle class rather than the peasantry and urban poor.<sup>3</sup>

Alongside ‘*ulamā*’ and Sufis, kings and governors served as the carriers of a third stream of religious culture, a courtly or imperial Islam. In the eyes of the ‘*ulamā*’, the ruler was responsible, not for shaping religious tradition, but merely

2 J. Spencer Trimingham, *The Sufi orders in Islam* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 1–2.

3 For comparative studies of contemporary Sufism, see Vincent J. Cornell, *Realm of the saint: Power and authority in Moroccan Sufism* (Austin, 1998); Martin van Bruinessen and Julia Day Howell (eds.), *Sufism and the ‘modern’ in Islam* (London, 2007); and Claudia Liebeskin, *Piety on its knees: Three Sufi traditions in South Asia in modern times* (Delhi and Oxford, 1998).

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for providing an environment in which the law could be implemented and the Muslim community flourish. As often as not in the pre-modern period, however, rulers acted as culture-makers, not merely handmaidens of the ‘*ulamā*’. Anxious to pre-empt challenges to their authority, many rulers appointed chief jurists (*muftīs*) to represent their interests before the ‘*ulamā*’, often recruiting their candidates from among members of the ruling clan rather than from the ranks of learned scholars. In Muslim South-East Asia and West Africa, many leaders were so confident of their authority in religious affairs that they dispensed with the position of the *muftī* entirely. Not coincidentally, many of these same rulers proved lax in enforcing the *sharī‘a*.

There was another dimension to the ruler’s stewardship of Muslim cultural tradition. The pre-modern state commanded resources on a scale much greater than any other social class or institution, including the Sufis and scholars of the law. At imperial courts in Anatolia, Persia, northern India and Java, among others, rulers used their comparative advantage to sponsor cultural activities that, in their eyes, bore witness to God’s greatness even if not explicitly enjoined in the law. For proponents of imperial Islam, excellence in warfare, religious festivals, literature and science was all part of the way in which a ruler demonstrated the power and glory of Islam, as well as, of course, the piety and majesty of the court itself.<sup>4</sup>

This harnessing of religious interests to the cart of royal excellence was not just an instrument of political domination; it provided the social rationale and imaginative energies for some of the pre-modern Muslim world’s most remarkable civilisational achievements. In a seventeen-year period after the death of his beloved wife in 1631, the celebrated Indian Mughal ruler, Shāh Jahān (1592–1666), dedicated his kingdom’s resources to the construction of a magnificent tomb complex known today as the Taj Mahāl. The Taj offered detailed allegorical commentary on the Day of the Resurrection and Judgement of the Dead. ‘Every feature of the Taj...forms part of a unified whole designed to support this message.’<sup>5</sup> In expressing this otherwise orthodox conviction, the Taj did something more. It gave visual expression to the idea that Islam’s majesty can be expressed through unbounded cultural genius as well as conformity to the law. For centuries, a similarly ecumenical

4 On kingship and imperial Islam, see Aziz Al-Azmeh, *Muslim kingship: Power and the sacred in Muslim, Christian and pagan polities* (London, 1997); Anthony Milner, ‘Islam and the Muslim State’, in M. B. Hooker (ed.), *Islam in South-East Asia* (Leiden, 1983), pp. 23–49; Barbara D. Metcalf and Thomas R. Metcalf, *A concise history of India* (Cambridge 2002), pp. 3–27; and Paula Sanders, *Ritual, politics, and the city in Fatimid Cairo* (Albany, 1994).

5 John F. Richards, *The Mughal empire* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 124.

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conviction underlay imperial patronage of and scholarly engagement with the arts, poetry, mathematics and science. In the modern era, however, some supporters of strict-constructionist reform were to insist that activities like these have little to do with Islam, since (these reformists insist) they are not expressly demanded by God's law. Criticisms of this sort undermined the religious idealism and inner-worldly empiricism responsible for many of the finest achievements of the classical Muslim world.

From its first centuries to today, then, public Islamic culture took not one but several forms. Jurists jostled with theologians, Sufi masters, folk specialists and court officials to shape the forms of public ritual and personal devotion. At any one time or in any one place, one group's vision might enjoy a momentary ascendancy over the others. The relative weakness of the pre-modern state, as well as the segmentary diversity of Muslim societies, however, guaranteed that no single group was able to achieve an enduring monopoly over the means of religious production and the standards of religious excellence. The streams from which pre-modern Muslim civilisation flowed were many, and this diversity was a source of great cultural vitality.

Notwithstanding the claims of some modern commentators, in the pre-modern period there was also no *de facto* union of religion and state. The degree to which there was a clear and enduring differentiation of religious and political authority from the Umayyad period (661–750) on is still a matter of dispute among historians.<sup>6</sup> What is clear, however, is that, lacking Christendom's church, Muslim societies tended toward a vigorous and agnostic pluricentrism in the management of religious affairs. Rulers' attempts to meddle in religious matters created a legacy of Sufi and '*ulamā*' suspicion of state

6 For the view that there was a significant separation from early on in Muslim history, see Ira M. Lapidus, 'The separation of state and religion in the development of early Islamic society', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 6, 4 (1975), pp. 363–85; and P. Crone and M. Hinds, *God's caliph: Religious authority in the first centuries of Islam* (Cambridge, 1986). In an important work, Muhammad Qasim Zaman has demonstrated that in the early Abbasid period, when the Muslim community was still just beginning to regularise the relationship of '*ulamā*' and caliph, the caliph continued to intervene in matters of religious law, including, at times, those of some technical detail. See 'The caliphs, the '*ulamā*', and the law: Defining the role and function of the caliph in the early 'Abbasid period', *Islamic Law and Society*, 4, 1 (1997), pp. 1–36. Such interventions do not detract from the fact that, from the early Abbasid period on, the institutions of the caliphate and the '*ulamā*' developed according to a relatively autonomous institutional logic. The caliphate and local rulers developed an array of institutions for warfare, taxation and administration, the detail of which exceeded anything specified in religious law. Just as in the late medieval West, rulers' repeated meddling in church affairs does not deny the relative *differentiation* of church and state, so too the caliph's intervention in '*ulamā*' affairs does not contradict the fact that religious scholarship and governance were increasingly differentiated.

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interference. Their attitude was expressed in the fact that, even when invited, many prominent scholars refused to serve as state judges, on the grounds that such collaborations were corrupting. ‘Of three judges, two are in Hell’, says one tradition of the Prophet, none-too-subtle in its view of the moral benefits of state-service.<sup>7</sup> Stories of holy men (Sufis and scholars of the law) overcoming unjust rulers were a ‘classic theme in the Moroccan moral imagination’,<sup>8</sup> as in other parts of the Muslim world. In folk stories and witticism, too, state-appointed judges were the target of a derision rarely directed at Sufis or independent jurisconsults. Not surprisingly, then, in pre-Ottoman times, and even where rulers appointed respected jurists to serve as state legal experts, ‘they have no monopoly of giving *fatwas* [judgements on points of law], and the practice of consulting private scholars of high reputation has never ceased’.<sup>9</sup>

In practice, then, there was a *de facto* recognition of two important facts: that the scope of the ruler’s authority was different from that of jurists, theologians and Sufis, and that it was important to accept this differentiation so as to protect the latter from the corrupting intrigues of self-interested potentates. Certainly, rulers were expected to play a role in the management of public religious affairs. In particular, they were charged with defending the community of believers and upholding the law. But these responsibilities were not expected to extend to formulating legal opinions or writing religious commentaries. These were the responsibility of the ‘*ulamā*’, and, lacking an ecclesiastical hierarchy, the ‘*ulamā*’ exercised that authority more gingerly than did their clerical counterparts in medieval Europe. The absence of a hierarchical church, and the decentred nature of religious organization generally, also created an environment inhospitable to direct state control.<sup>10</sup>

Notwithstanding these legacies, scholarly commentators on religion and governance hesitated to provide explicit normative sanction for this differentiation of state and religious authority. Whereas Christian political theory developed in an *ad hoc* way over the centuries, drawing on sources many of which were not at first Christian, Muslim political canons held firmly to the idea that the Prophet Muḥammad and his four rightly guided successors had

<sup>7</sup> Brinkley Messick, *The calligraphic state: Textual domination and history in a Muslim society* (Berkeley, 1993), p. 143.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Munson, Jr, *Religion and power in Morocco* (New Haven and London, 1993), p. 27.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph Schacht, *An introduction to Islamic law* (Oxford, 1964), p. 74.

<sup>10</sup> See Sami Zubaida, *Law and power in the Islamic world* (London, 2003), esp. pp. 40–89. The relative autonomy of the jurisconsult community was greatly reduced in Ottoman times, which was characterised by a growing bureaucratisation and centralisation of religious education and authority. See Colin Imber, *The Ottoman Empire, 1300–1650: The structure of power* (New York, 2002), pp. 244–51.

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provided an exemplary and enduring model for political affairs. Related to this view was the idea that the best expression of this divine guidance was to be found in the *sharī‘a*, and the *sharī‘a* itself needs no human legislation, because God is sovereign and his message is complete. However much their actions might bespeak more complex understandings, then, the guardians of the law were reluctant to take account of the facts of Muslim political history and provide normative sanction for the differentiation of religious and state authority, like that which John Locke provided for modern Christian political thought.<sup>11</sup> The fact that an endemic feature of Muslim political practice was not legitimated in jurisprudence created an abiding tension in Muslim political culture, between the golden-age idealism of the law and the less-than-ideal accommodations of the real world.

In most times and places, this tension was not so much resolved as it was displaced into a quiet pessimism concerning the inability of the real-and-existing world, in all its greyness, to match the shimmering ideals of Islam’s golden age. At the same time, and notwithstanding this cultural resignation, the model of the Prophet’s leadership, with its charismatic union of religious and political authority, remained intellectually accessible and richly appealing. A *leitmotif* of Muslim history, then, was that during periods of social turmoil, dissident religious leaders arose and invoked the idealism of God’s law to demand a more intimate union of religious and political authority. Not coincidentally, the proposed fusion could also be used to justify the overthrow of the old regime and the ascent of a new political order. The tension between canonical ideal and real-world practice thus offered a latent cultural resource for reform and rebellion in the name of Islam. This restless disposition was to be recovered and amplified in modern Muslim political thought.<sup>12</sup>

Here, then, was a tension at the heart of Muslim culture and politics. Although a source of great social and intellectual dynamism in pre-modern times, the pluralism of Muslim culture and society was susceptible to normative attack in the name of God’s law and Muslim unity. In the restless circumstances of the modern era, challenges of this sort were to become, not just periodic, but chronic.

<sup>11</sup> See James Tully, ‘Locke’, in J. H. Burns (ed.), *The Cambridge history of political thought, 1450–1700* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 616–52; for an overview of these themes in Muslim political thought, see L. Carl Brown, *Religion and state: The Muslim approach to politics* (New York, 2000), esp. pp. 46–51.

<sup>12</sup> On legitimacy and rebellion in the name of God’s law, see Al-Azmeh, *Muslim kingship*, esp. pp. 101–14; and Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Rebellion and violence in Islamic law* (Cambridge, 2001).



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### From pluralist flux to unitarian reform

Well before the tectonic shifts of the modern period, there was evidence of a slow but steady adjustment in the balance of power among Muslim civilisation's primary cultural streams, especially between Sufis, lay Muslims and scholars of the law. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries CE, the great scholar Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (1058–1111) laid the foundation for a reformed Sufism based on reconciling the mystical path with the law.<sup>13</sup> This brilliant synthesis was still generating powerful cultural reverberations centuries later, for example, in the actions and writings of reform Sufis like Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī (1563–1624) of northern India<sup>14</sup> and Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī of Sumatra (born in Gujarat, India, some time in the late sixteenth century, d. 1666). By the sixteenth century, challenges to once-popular forms of Sufi mysticism emphasising monist union with God were commonplace across the Muslim world. By the end of the nineteenth century, a non-monist, reform Sufism was the norm in most Muslim lands.<sup>15</sup>

There was a social-organisational background to this development, one that illustrates a basic difference between Islam and Christianity as regards the stewardship of religious tradition. Since there is no church in Islam, when a reform movement emerged in pre-modern times, its proponents were often inclined to take their case to either of two juries: the ruler's court, or the network of religious scholars and adepts regarded as religious authorities. Most of the pre-modern Muslim world's reform movements used some combination of these arrangements to convey their message to a larger audience.

As with Sirhindī in northern India and al-Rānīrī in Sumatra, the logic of appealing to rulers was that, in the absence of a centralised church, rulers alone commanded the resources for effecting quick and far-reaching religious reform. There were risks, however, to undertaking such a course of action. Rulers presided over societies in which direct participation in public affairs, not least of all as regards religion, was limited to a social and scholarly elite. There was no 'public' in the modern sense, that is, a broad-based audience

<sup>13</sup> See W. Montgomery Watt, *The faith and practice of al-Ghazālī* (Oxford, 1953); and Ebrahim Moosa, *Ghazālī and the poetics of imagination* (Chapel Hill, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Yohanan Friedmann, *Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī: An outline of his thought and a study of his image in the eyes of posterity* (New Delhi and Oxford, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> See Elizabeth Sirriyeh, *Sufis and anti-Sufis: The defence, rethinking and rejection of Sufism in the modern world* (London, 1999); for contemporary studies, see Henri Chamber-Loir and Claude Guillot (eds.), *Le culte des saints dan le monde musulman* (Paris, 1995).

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whose opinions, albeit not formally tallied, were deemed of sufficient importance that they had in some sense to be recognised when addressing matters of general importance.<sup>16</sup> Unconstrained by any such public gaze, Muslim rulers could change sides in a religious dispute, at a relatively low cost to themselves but with potentially disastrous consequences for one side in the scholarly argument. As with the wandering Gujarati scholar, Nūr al-Dīn al-Rānīrī, who in the 1630s enjoyed the favour of the sultan at the Sumatran court of Aceh,<sup>17</sup> a reformer embraced by a ruler in one period might find himself out of favour some time later. This vulnerability diminished in the modern era, as the development of mass education and communications made officials more sensitive to public scrutiny, and created the possibility for a more participatory, though not necessarily democratic, give-and-take between governments, religious elites and their publics.

The other channel through which new religious ideas were disseminated was the network of scholars, students and pilgrims that wove together the Muslim world's various sub-territories. As with Timbuktu in West Africa, Cairo in Egypt, Samarqand in Central Asia and Delhi in northern India, in the late medieval and early modern ages there were regional centres of education and pilgrimage in all corners of the Muslim world. The flow of people, literatures and ideas through these regional nodes was sufficient to ensure that the cultures of pre-modern Islam had distinct regional accents, traces of which can still be heard in Islam's Arab, Indo-Persian, Sudanese and Malayo-Indonesian subcultural streams.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, however, the pilgrimage centres of Mecca and Medina in the Ḥijāz had a special place in the Muslim religious imagination. Pilgrims came to these centres from all corners of the Muslim world. Many stayed several years to study under an eminent scholar while, to make ends meet, doing some teaching or trading of their own. If and

16 On the idea of the 'public' in modern Western society and politics, see Craig Calhoun (ed.), *Habermas and the public sphere* (Cambridge, MA, 1992); on Islam and its publics, see Dale F. Eickelman and Jon W. Anderson (eds.), *New media in the Muslim world: The emerging public sphere*, 2nd edn (Bloomington, 2003); Charles Hirschkind, *The ethical soundscape: Cassette sermons and Islamic counterpublics* (New York, 2006); and Armando Salvatore and Dale F. Eickelman (eds.), *Public Islam and the public good* (Leiden, 2004). For contrasting Muslim and French views of religion and the public, see John R. Bowen, *Why the French don't like headscarves: Islam, the state, and public space* (Princeton, 2007).

17 See Peter Riddell, *Islam and the Malay-Indonesian world: Transmission and responses* (London, 2001), p. 118.

18 This recognition of the pluralised nature of Islamic civilisation is at the heart of two comprehensive treatments of Muslim history, Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The venture of Islam: Conscience and history in a world civilization* (Chicago, 1974); and Ira M. Lapidus, *A history of Islamic societies*, 2nd edn (Cambridge, 2002).