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## Modernity and Religious Interpretations

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### Introduction

In the contemporary world, modernity is instinctively associated with the West; and when discussing the issue of development of the so-called underdeveloped countries, the following question is inevitably posed: Does development necessarily mean Westernisation or only modernisation? Present-day Africa is a continent where the Muslim religion has been well established since the nineteenth Century and thus, the issues of modernity and development are unavoidably linked to the Islamic culture. In this chapter, my purpose is to make a comparative analysis between religion and secularism in Europe, which ultimately leads to modernity and the parallel situation with Islam in Africa and the Middle-East. My purpose is to demonstrate that political Islam is not yet suited for making the intellectual changes necessary to accept modernity. But development in Africa and the Middle-East is not possible without modernity which, when all is said and done, is based on democracy and the freedom to alter or change traditions.

### Modernity

#### *Reason and Emancipation*

There are two moments in history that were decisive for the formation of the modern world.

The first of these moments refers to the birth of modernity. It is the time of the Enlightenment (the European seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), which is also, and not coincidentally, that of the birth of capitalism. I will summarise its significance in the two following propositions.

The first of these propositions is related to the definition of modernity, which is, to my mind, the affirmation that the human being must and can individually or collectively create his own history. An affirmation that marks a rupture with the dominant thinking in all previous societies – in Europe and elsewhere – which were

founded on the principle that God, having created the universe and the human being, is the ultimate 'legislator'. The ethical principles which this divine legislation erects are, of course, formulated through the historical religions or transcendental philosophers, hence opening the door to diverse interpretations through which the social realities under permanent transformation have been expressed. Reason is in that case frequently – but not always – invoked in order to serve those interpretations. But in this case, it is subjected to the duty of 'conciliating faith and reason'. The new affirmation that defines modernity frees itself from this duty, without necessarily ignoring issues of faith. The new affirmation closes a chapter, but opens another with its own problems: the freedom that human beings give themselves must be defined in turn. History, when it no longer operates as a force outside mankind, must be explained by other 'laws' whose discovery is the object of a new set of sciences, the constitution of which becomes simultaneously possible and necessary: those of man and society. Reason is mobilised anew in search of these objective determinations of the movement of societies. The new freedom that modern mankind confers on itself therefore remains subjected to the limitations of what we believe constitutes the logic of social reproduction and the dynamics of the transformation of societies.

The second refers to the bourgeois character of modernity, as expressed by the thinking of the Enlightenment. The emergence of capitalism and the emergence of modernity constitute the two facets of one and the same reality.

The thinking of the Enlightenment, therefore, offers us a concept of reason, inseparably associated with that of emancipation, without which the phrase 'the human being creates his own history' would lack meaning. It turns out that the emancipation in question is defined and limited by what is demanded and allowed by capitalism. The discourse of the Enlightenment, however, proposes a concept of emancipative Reason that claims to be transhistorical, while the examination of what it actually is will show that it is terribly historical in nature.

The most systematic fundamental expression of this discourse is the one that has been formulated by Adam Smith, unfortunately calling it 'utilitarianism', an ambiguous but spontaneous word in the tradition of English empiricism. In this view of the human world, society is conceived as an assembly of individuals, and here we have a view that breaks with the tradition of the Ancien Régime. It is therefore an unarguably emancipative ideology for the individual, once again one of the dimensions of modernity. This individual is, meanwhile, of course endowed with reason. The social order that must ensure the victory of this emancipative Reason – and therefore the happiness of human beings – is imagined as a system of 'good institutions', to employ the phrase still used today in social thinking in America. This system is in turn based on the separation, in social life, of the arena of politics and that of the economy. The 'good institutions' that must ensure the management of political life by reason are those institutions of democracy that guarantee the liberty and equality of individuals. In the management of economic life, reason imposes choosing contractual freedom (expressed in another way, 'the market') as

the foundation of relations of exchange and of the organisation of the division of labour among the 'individuals' which society is composed of. The healthy operation of the economy in turn demands the protection of property, considered as of that time as a sacrosanct value in the 'good society'.

Emancipative Reason is, therefore, expressed in a classical triptych: liberty, equality, property. The formula of the successive precocious revolutions of the United Provinces and of the English 'Glorious Revolution' of 1688, before being more systematically taken up again by the United States Revolution and later by the French Revolution in its first period.

The constitutive elements of the triptych are regarded as 'naturally' and harmoniously complementary with one another. Hitherto, the statement according to which there is an equal sign between 'market' and 'democracy' has continued to be the cornerstone of bourgeois ideology. The conflict that in actual fact has, on the contrary, incessantly pitted the extension of democratic rights to all citizens, men and women, bourgeois and proletarian, whether property owners or not, against the unconditional defenders of 'the market' is removed from the debate right from the outset.

Adam Smith and the thinking of the Enlightenment certainly contain the intuition that the system of the 'good society' that they propose – rational and emancipative for all the eternity – faces some difficulties. But these, they ignore. The 'invisible hand' that guarantees the triumph of Reason in the management of economic life very often appears as an 'unpredictable' hand, for that very reason again putting into question human beings' capacity to really create their own history as modernity envisions. And the guaranteeing of freedom, of equality, of the security of property implies that the 'visible fist' of the state must complete the work of the invisible hand of the market.

The emancipative Reason of the Enlightenment does not exclude, but rather implies, the importance that is attached to an ethical principle. Reason here is not instrumental but rather inseparable from the emancipative goals and means whose triptych summarises the fundamental ethical elements.

The ethical aspect associated with the thinking of the Enlightenment may or may not be of religious inspiration. God is present for those who attribute to him the quality of being at the origin of the need for emancipation to which all human beings aspire. He disappears when this aspiration is only verified as 'natural'. The difference is minimal.

The contemporary version of bourgeois emancipative Reason, made fashionable with all the insistence that is allowed by vulgarisation through the mass media – that of the egalitarian liberalism of John Rawls – does not contribute anything new, having remained a prisoner of the liberty-equality-property triptych. Challenged by the liberty/equality conflict that is necessarily implied by the unequal distribution of property, the liberalism that is termed egalitarian is only very moderately so. The inequality is accepted and legitimised by a scarcely 'reasonable' acrobatics, which takes from vulgarised economy its pseudo-concept of 'allocations'. It is a very sim-

ple-minded analysis: the ‘individuals’ (society being the sum of these latter) who participate in the ‘market’ are endowed with differing fortunes (some are – by chance? – the heads of powerful corporations, others have nothing). These unequal ‘allocations’ nevertheless continue to be legitimate since they are the product (evidently an inherited one) of work done and of savings made (by their ancestors). We are therefore invited to turn backwards the chain of history until the – mythical – day when the original social contract was signed among equals. Yet, later, these formerly equal fellows became unequal because supposedly they wanted to, by virtue of the inequality of the sacrifices they consented to make. I believe that this form of facing the issues related to the specificity of capitalism does not even deserve to be considered as elegant.

But if the falsely egalitarian liberalism is stubbornly proposed as an ideological alternative in face of the bewilderment of the society of our period, it is because the front stage is no longer occupied by utilitarianism (which the so-called egalitarian liberalism barely distinguishes itself from) but by the driftage represented by the right-wing (actually an extreme right) libertarian ideology. This ideology substitutes the ‘liberty-property’ diptych for the Enlightenment’s triptych, decisively refusing to give equality the status of a fundamental value. The Von Hayek version of this new extreme right-wing ideological formula re-establishes that of its inventors, the ‘liberals’ of the nineteenth century (Bastiat and company) who were at the origin of the driftage, coming as they did from a declared aversion towards the Enlightenment, responsible for the French Revolution. But the diptych in question has for a long time now constituted the kernel of the ‘US ideology’, establishing a contrast with European ideologies that still remain partly faithful to the Enlightenment.

In the right-wing libertarian version, ethics disappears because human beings, if they create their own history properly, are authorised to create it by behaving as if they were in the jungle: they are not responsible for the consequences of their actions, in particular for the inequalities which they may deepen, and which are even welcome. Therefore, without responsibility there is no ethics. Little, therefore, matters that some – in fact many – of these right-wing libertarians proclaim themselves to be ‘believers’ – in this case Christians. Their religion is in fact amoral, tending for that very reason to be transformed into simple social convenience, an expression of ‘communitarian’ singularity and nothing else. This is perhaps one possible interpretation of religion; the least we can say is that it continues to be arguable.

The second decisive moment is launched by the criticism that Marx directs at the bourgeois emancipative Reason of the Enlightenment. This criticism opens up a new chapter in modernity, which I call modernity critical of modernity.

Emancipative Reason cannot ignore this second moment of its deployment – more precisely, of the beginning of its redeployment. After Marx, social thinking can no longer be what it had been before him. What I wrote earlier referring to the criticism of the emancipative Reason of the Enlightenment – my second observation – certainly could not have been so without Marx. Marx is inevitable.

Emancipative Reason can no longer inscribe its analyses and its propositions under the 'liberty-equality-property' triptych. Having grasped the magnitude of the unsolvable conflict that pits the conservation of capitalist ownership against the deployment of equality among human beings, emancipative Reason cannot but suppress the third term of the triptych. And must substitute it by that of fraternity, stronger than that of 'solidarity', proposed here and there today by one and the other. 'Fraternity' thus meaning, evidently, the abolition of a capitalist ownership which necessarily pertains to some – a minority, the true dominant and exploiting bourgeois class – while depriving the others (the majority) of access to the conditions for an equality worthy of that name. 'Fraternity' thus meaning substitution of this exclusive and exclusionary form of ownership by a new form: that of social ownership, exercised by and for the benefit of the social body as a whole. Social integration would then operate by democracy, an inevitable requisite not only for the sound management of political life in the strictest sense of the term, but for social ownership as well. Integration through democracy would replace the partial and unequal integration via nature operated within the limits of respect for capitalist ownership, that is to say, for the exclusive 'market', to employ the language of the dominant vulgate.

'Liberty, equality, fraternity' – the motto was not invented by Marx, as every Tom, Dick and Harry knows. The French Revolution, like all the great revolutions, was ahead of its time and is projected far beyond its demands. For that reason, it both is a bourgeois revolution (and will tardily become stabilised on that basis) and, being projected forward, is experienced as a popular revolution and can be read today as initiating the socialist criticism of the bourgeois system; exactly in the same way that the two other great revolutions of modern times – the Russian and the Chinese – are projected in an attempt at a communist society far beyond the immediate demands and possibilities of their societies.

The 'popular ownership' that the French Revolution believes it can and therefore must guarantee is that of millions of peasants and artisans; and the 'market' that it protects, it is declared, must be authentically open and competitive, shutting out monopolies and the profits they produce. But this popular ownership is already, in that period, threatened both on the right and on the left. On the right, by the bourgeoisie of the large businessmen and capitalists who will crystallise in the symbol represented by those famous 'two hundred families' that own the Bank of France. On the left, by all those excluded in the city (proletarians and the hard-scrabble poor) and in the countryside (poor and landless peasants). The jolts of the French Revolution will take up the entire nineteenth century through to its end, as of when the 'Republic' becomes stabilised, adopting the motto of the Revolution, but after having quashed the Commune and emptied the term 'fraternity' of its original content, to eventually substitute it by that which can be expressed in, and by, being a part of the 'national' community and in universalist humanism.

All the ambiguities, contradictions and diverging interpretations of 'French ideology' constitute the essence of this story, up to our time. And it is these ambiguities that we today seek to rid ourselves of by means of a brutal return to the formula that guarantees the supremacy of the security of bourgeois property.

Bourgeois Reason, placed on its feet again, is no longer and can no longer be emancipative. At the same time, it stands only on its two feet: liberty and property. From this point onwards, Bastiat and Von Hayek, who proclaim their open hostility against any fancy for attaching any importance to equality, are the true representatives of a degenerate reason, which isn't even that which the Enlightenment had conceived. And this is why the bourgeois Reason reduced to liberty and to ownership is the Reason of the 'US ideology'; this retreat – the abolition in thinking of the French Revolution and naturally of the Russian and French ones – is nothing but the expression of the essence of what we may understand by 'Americanisation of the world'.

This bourgeois Reason, deprived from that point on of every emancipative ambition, thus becomes by the force of facts an instrumental reason, summary, hollow, irresponsible (and therefore lacking in an ethical foundation).

The consummate expression of this non-emancipative Reason is displayed in the field of 'what pertains to economics', which, by the way, is defined by its inventors and defenders as 'a pure science' ('pure economics'). I shall recall here very briefly the criticism I directed on another occasion at this truncated rationality. In the first place, the fact that it never reaches the point of establishing, with consistent logical arguments (in the simplest sense of the term 'logical'), the veracity of its fundamental proposition: that market freedom produces an 'optimum general equilibrium'. Next, that it obstinately refuses to reflect on the reasons for its failure, reasons which are the result of its unreal conception of society, reduced to the sum of the individuals that compose it. On the contrary, it attempts to emerge from the confusion in which it has installed itself by reinforcing its initial axiom (the individual constitutes the exclusive cell of which society is constituted) with the invention of those famous 'anticipations'. But the integration of the latter into 'economic reasoning' worsens the chaos and leads to a sole possible conclusion: that the market shifts from imbalance to imbalance without ever tending towards equilibrium (a conclusion to which Marx and even Keynes had arrived a long time before). The cherry on the cake that the term 'social optimum' had wanted to be also has to disappear. It should not remain at that pure economics that gives up this ambition, without which, however, the emancipation of the human being – the happiness of the Enlightenment and of Adam Smith – loses sense. The human being is declared as irresponsible as the market through which he expresses himself. The cynics of pure economics will dare think and say it, and it is necessary to thank them for this courage. The market can produce three billion 'useless' human beings, a rising proportion of 'poor' in the wealthiest countries – it matters little. It seems to be 'rational'. Reason, converted into a destroyer of the alienated and/or excluded human being, of nature (something which the economic calculation that is called rational, always a short-term one, implies) and of entire societies (and therefore of human cultures), not only gives up on being emancipative, but also accepts to perform the role of a demolition company against humanity.

Other advocates of bourgeois Reason are hesitating to join the camp of cynicism and/or of Americanisation in which the system of the real world is engaged. The so-called egalitarian liberalism which I referred to above therefore tries to save the day. This trend of modern bourgeois thinking, embodied by Rawls and which some people even think may be termed 'leftist'! ignores Marx, precedes him. It experiences bitter failure, as testified by its seclusion into the chaos of the theory of inequality of the 'allocations' (to individuals) that compels one to go back up to the mythical day zero of the initial social contract.

I don't know if the 'culturalist' adversaries of the real world and of the trends in its evolution – understood as 'Americanisation' by some, 'Westernisation' (in general) by others – can be termed 'rational'. Confronting the threats of 'Americanisation', some, therefore, solely defend the 'cultural values' without questioning the general trends in the system, as if reality could be cut into slices, like salami, for the purpose of saving 'a piece for tomorrow'. Others, having previously confused capitalism with 'the West', forgetting the determining reality of the latter for the sake of a gratuitous and false affirmation of a supposedly eternal 'West', believe they can transfer the locus of the confrontation from the terrain of a social reality in permanent movement to the heaven of a trans-historical cultural imaginary for everyone.

The heteroclitical contents of these attics – the pure economics of imaginary markets, plus the falsely egalitarian liberalism, plus the trans-historical culturalist lucubrations – are pompously set up as a 'new' thinking, the so-called 'post-modernism'. Having erased the criticism of bourgeois modernism and the reason having given up of its emancipative vocation, hasn't contemporary bourgeois thought become anything other than the thinking of a system well advanced in the stage of senility?

A dangerous senility, and a danger reinforced by adherence to the principle of irresponsibility. A dangerous senility because the system has reached a degree characterised by the monstrous power of its destructive capabilities. Destruction, as I stated earlier, of the human being, of nature, of entire societies. Emancipative Reason must respond to this challenge.

### ***Reason is Emancipative, or It is Not Reason?***

The concept of Reason, therefore, implies more than the creation of a set of mental procedures that allow the progress of intelligence on the relations among objects and all sort of phenomena. This intelligence on relations is also about the extent of their degree of necessity, which is absolute – or virtually so – only in situations of extreme banality of no interest. The deployment of science – knowing more but also, and above all, knowing the limits of knowledge – therefore allows the localisation of the degree of freedom with which human actions can be endowed, the definition of the possible and efficient options. But also the recognition that there is uncertainty (few absolute certainties) and the appreciation, as much as possible, of its margins.

This set of procedures does not in itself constitute Reason, even if numerous researchers in the sciences termed as sciences of nature or sciences of man can, in a first approximation, not only adhere to this (it is necessary to do so) but also be satisfied, be content with it. All live beings – and above all the higher species – put into practice, over the course of their lives, methods of action and choices that testify to a certain degree of this type of intelligence, at least in its first step, intelligence about relations.

Reason demands more. Because emancipation presupposes responsibility, without which the options among different possibilities have neither scope nor meaning. He who says responsibility says ethics, the principles of which cannot be eliminated from a reflection that aspires to be scientific.

The principles of the ethics in question can be those that non-deistic (and *a fortiori* non-religious) universalist humanism inspires since the Enlightenment (and even previously), in Marxism and in our own times. But they can also be those of a deistic Universalist humanism – even a religious one in the sense that is inscribed in a given religious tradition, Christian or other. Strong probabilities exist that these tributaries would flow into the same great river. The example that comes immediately to mind is that of the theologians of liberation whom I read as believers for whom being a Christian isn't to stop at Christ but to start out from him. There could be other religious interpretations (Islamic, Buddhist and other), or non-western philosophical ones (in the sense that their ancestry isn't the 'Hellenism' common to the peoples of the Christian and Muslim worlds), that will appear in this future to be built, common to all humanity. It is in this sense and only in this sense that one must, with regard to the diversity named as cultural (for want of a better description), more than 'respect' it ('tolerate' it is a pejorative term, you 'tolerate' what you don't like), wish to see it deployed in all its potential richness. I distinguish this diversity – oriented, in the tradition of emancipative Reason, toward the construction of the future – from the false diversity of the specificities inherited from the past, which the culturalists turn into trans-historical invariants (which they are not) in order to cling neurotically to them.

To return to the challenge which emancipative reason faces today is to invent the efficient means that may allow progress toward well-defined goals, progress in the direction of emancipation from mercantile alienation, a distancing from the practices that destroy the potential of nature and of life, a convergence toward the abolition of the gigantic disparities of the so-called (material) 'development' that the polarising expansion of world capitalism necessarily produces.

Marxism is, to my mind, the efficient instrument that makes it possible both to analyse the challenges and to define strategies capable of changing the world in the directions specified here, as long as we also consider that Marx only launched the reflection and actions in this regard. Stated differently: what we will define as arising from Marx and not ending with him.

The issues to be solved, in theory and in practice, are complex, and in their entangled condition they do not allow any one-sided solution, since the latter would

ignore the conflicts arising among the different elements of the challenge. I shall select just one example, because it entails, to my mind, the greatest magnitude of the challenge on a global scale. The huge centres/peripheries contrast which capitalism has constructed must be destroyed. This will, without any doubt, demand a certain development of productive forces on the peripheries of the system – and we must admit that by doing so we run the risk of relegating the other dimensions of emancipation to the background. The contradiction resides in reality itself. Some think it can be overcome by eliminating one of its terms. They persist in ignoring 80 per cent of humanity, being content to declare that it must first ‘pass through the capitalist stage’ without taking into account that the polarisation that is immanent in this system will never allow them to ‘catch up’ with the others. They ignore the dimensions of emancipation as a whole, to the exclusive benefit of the prior development of productive forces. Emancipating Reason, must, in its living Marxist formulation, be able to combine the two contradictory terms of the challenge.

## **Modernity and Interpretations of Religions**

### ***The Flexibility of Religious Interpretations***

Modernity is based on the claim for the emancipation of human beings starting from their liberation from the bonds of social determination in its previous traditional forms. This liberation called to relinquish the prevailing forms of power legitimisation – in the family, the communities within which are organised the ways of life and production modes, in the State – so far based on metaphysics, generally of religious expression. It implies, therefore, a separation between state and religion, radical secularisation, a condition for the deployment of the modern forms of politics.

Will secularisation abolish religious belief? Some philosophers of the Enlightenment so thought and wished, who ranked religion among the absurd superstitions. This perception of religion has found an enabling ground for expansion in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the popular classes attaining political consciousness. If only because the working-class lefts (and the organic intellectuals who expressed their ideologies) were coming up, in practice against the conservative options of all organised Christian, Catholic, Protestant or Orthodox religious hierarchies. Anticlericalism became downright synonymous with anti-religious and, thereby, has gained ground nearly everywhere in Europe, although in various degrees of course, depending on the circumstances of the evolution of the ideological, political and social struggles. The French society, in particular, has counted among the most sensitive to the new anticlericalism – atheism, for reasons pertaining to the legacy of the radical nature of its Revolution. The Soviet ideology has resumed this fundamental atheism which it incorporated into its concept of dialectic materialism.

However, it is possible to have another reading of Marx. The often cited phrase (‘religion is the opium of the people’) is truncated, with what follows suggesting that the human being needs opium, because the human being is a metaphysical animal

who cannot avoid posing questions concerning the meaning of life. He gives them the answers he can give, by either taking up those offered by religion, or inventing his own, or still, avoiding to worry about them.

In any case, religions are there, are part of the picture of reality, even a significant dimension of this. It is therefore important to analyse their social functioning, i.e. in our modern world, their articulation to what constitutes the modernity in place – capitalism, democracy and secularism. I will try to do it in what follows, for the three so-called Religions of the Book. We will see then that the religions in question have been the subject of successive interpretations which enabled them to survive, to adapt to and accompany huge social transformations.

In this regard, the success of Christianity that has accompanied modernity, which was constituted in Europe (should it be reminded?) has given rise to a flowering of ‘theories’ that do not convince me. The commonest – which has become some sort of generally admitted platitude without it raising the slightest critical questioning – is that Christianity bore in it this exceptional evolution. The ‘genius of Christianity’ is thus reconstructed as one of the myths – among others (the Greek ancestor among others, ‘Indo-European racism’, etc.) – from which the ‘European miracle’ (the fact that modernity was invented there and not elsewhere) is explained. The most extremist of the ideologies of this Eurocentrism adopt an idealist theory of history according to which capitalism is supposedly the product of this evolution of religious interpretation. I propose a systematic critique of this in *Eurocentrism* (published in this book).

And the most extremist of the extremists reserve this creative genius of capitalist modernity to the Protestant Reform. One can recognise here the famous thesis of Max Weber, even less convincing in my opinion than what I called the ‘Christianophily’ of Eurocentrism.

The arguments developed by Weber in this regard are confused despite their apparent accuracy. Furthermore, they can be perfectly reversed; similar to those that were put forward yesterday to explain the backwardness of China because of Confucianism, then fifty years later to explain the take-off of this country, thanks to the same Confucianism! Superficial historians had explained the success of the Middle Ages Arab civilisation by Islam, whereas contemporary journalists, even more superficial, explain the stagnation of the Arab world by the same Islam. Culturalism has no possible unequivocal response to any of the major challenges of history; it has too many responses because it can prove any formulation as well as its contrary.

As counterpoint to these *idées-forces* (key ideas), false, but feeding the ideology of the dominant world, I propose the following theses:

- (i) Modernisation, secularism and democracy are not the outcomes of an evolution (or a revolution) of religious interpretations, but conversely, the latter have adjusted, with more or less good fortune, to their requirements. This adjustment was not the privilege of Protestantism. While it operated in the Catholic world differently, it was no less efficient. In any case, it created a new religious spirit, freed from the dogmas.

- (ii) In this sense, the Reform was not the ‘condition’ for the blooming of capitalism, even if this thesis (by Weber) is largely admitted in the societies it flatters (Protestant Europe). The Reform was not even the most radical form of the ideological break with the European past and its ‘feudal’ ideologies – among others its previous reading of Christianity. It was, on the contrary, its primitive and confused form.
- (iii) There has been a ‘reform of the dominant classes’ which led to the creation of national Churches (Anglican, Lutheran) controlled by these classes and implementing the compromise between the emergent bourgeoisie, the monarchy and the big rural property, warding off the threat of popular classes and the peasantry that is systematically regulated. This reactionary compromise – expressed by Luther and analysed by Marx and Engels as such – has enabled the bourgeoisies in the countries in question to avoid what happened in France: a radical revolution. Thus, the secularism produced in this model has remained shy to date. The regression of the Catholic idea of universality which is shown by the institution of national Churches has fulfilled only one function: establish its role of arbitrator between the forces of the Ancien Régime and those represented by the rising bourgeoisie, strengthen their nationalism and delay the progression of new forms of universalism that the socialist internationalism would propose later.
- (iv) But there were also reforming movements that took hold of the popular strata victims of the social transformations produced by the emergence of capitalism. Those movements which reproduced ancient forms of struggle – those of the millenarianisms of the Middle Ages – were not ahead of their time, but behind relatively to its requirements. Therefore, we had to wait for the French Revolution – with its secular and radical democratic popular mobilisations – then socialism for the dominated classes to learn to express themselves efficiently in the new conditions. The Protestant sects in question fed on illusions of fundamentalist type. They created an enabling ground for the endless reproduction of ‘sects’ with an apocalyptic vision, as we can see them flourishing in the United States.
- (v) There were not only ‘positive’ adjustments, the renovated religious interpretation offering open perspectives to social transformations. There were also involutions, with religious interpretation becoming, in turn, an obstacle to social progress. I will give the example of certain forms of the North-American Protestantism.
- (vi) Christianity has no monopoly of adjustments, be they positive or negative. Islam has experienced positive adjustments in the past and is presently experiencing involution in many aspects similar to those of the American protestant sects in question. Judaism too. And I will add (what the reader will find explained in *Eurocentrism*) that this concerns both the great ideologies and religions of Asia.

- (vii) That these adjustments may be positive or negative speaks in favour of an interpretation of historical materialism based on 'under-determination.' What I mean here is that each of the authorities (economic, political, ideological) has its own internal logic and that, thereby, complementarity in their evolution, necessary to ensure the global consistency of a system, does not define beforehand a given direction of a guaranteed evolution.

The three religions declare themselves 'monotheist' and take pride in this. They even pretend that they are the sole to be so, each in the 'fairest' manner of course, and, thereby, show contempt that borders on arrogance towards other religious beliefs which, having failed to conceive the God that is unique, abstract, the same for all human beings – whether they recognise him or not – would be thereby 'primitive' and 'inferior'.

Moreover, the three religions declare themselves 'revealed' (by this God that is unique) and deny others this quality. These would be thus 'invented' (therefore false) religions. Of course, the supporters of other religions believe as much in revelation. Revelation is synonymous with sacred. The distinction between the Religions of the Book and the others is ideological arrogance.

The relationship between the three so-called Religions of the Book is an obvious historical fact. They have in common a sacred book, the Bible of the Jews (the Old Testament for the Christians), even if this Bible is presented in very different variants among Jews and Muslims, each pretending of course that his version is the 'good' one, the one that was truly 'revealed'. Catholics and Protestants, on the contrary, accept the Jewish versions of the Bible, the former the corpus of Jews in the Diaspora, the latter that of Jews in Jerusalem. This relationship could be explained in a very basic manner by the geographical place of birth of the three religions. Christ lived in Palestine, besides the Jewish communities of the country, and perhaps within these communities. Islam is born in a nearby country, impregnated by the beliefs of Jews and Christians, challenged by these, in particular the Christianity of the civilised societies virtually surrounding it from Byzance to Ethiopia.

By itself, the relationship neither excludes, nor involves *a priori* the fundamental uniqueness of the metaphysics of the three religions. To answer this question, it will be necessary to measure the fundamental, minor or significant importance of the common origin they share. How did the latter mark the metaphysical options and the social experiences of the groups of people that are divided among the three religions?

All the peoples of the world have a mythology that gives an account of the Creation and their place within it. All, initially, give themselves in this universe the place of the 'chosen people', the one whose mythology is the real story of the Creation. Their gods are too, therefore, the 'real' ones; all other peoples made mistakes, or were deceived. Initially, the gods are thus conceived of as particular and different from one people to another. However, there have always been enough clear-sighted minds, even very early in history, to put in perspective the significance of mythological stories and the particularity of gods. A first salutary reaction has

been to accept the plurality of the truths revealed to any of them ('every people has its truth'; it is the same, expressed in different languages) and therefore, in a way, the equivalence of the gods of each one. This reaction encourages syncretism which is found for instance in the Roman empire which associates diverse peoples, like elsewhere, up to contemporary Africa. Furthermore, the mutual borrowings between the mythologies are better known. The advances of archaeology, history and the exegesis have made it possible to discover 'ancestor mythologies' like those recounting the issue of the Deluge in the Middle-East, the myth of Gilgamesh, etc.

The Jews are, therefore, not the only people to proclaim itself 'chosen'. They all did the same. Do the Jews continue to think it seriously? I doubt it. In present-day social reality, most of the Jews, even those among them who are convinced believers, like among other peoples, probably know that they are only ordinary human beings. The nuance that can be brought in this regard is perhaps that, because of the Diaspora, the Jews were led, in order to survive as such, to stress their 'specificity' (therefore, their religious attachment). But they are not absolutely the only ones in this case.

Our modern society has made some progress all the same, for two thousands years or more (even if the concept of 'progress' should be thrown into the dustbin, as they say!). Many human beings in our modern world, even among those who remain strongly attached to their own beliefs, have somewhat put into perspective their religious references. They are perhaps more easily 'tolerant' not only in their daily external behaviours but also – and this is more important – in the intimate respect for other people's beliefs.

Owing to this progress, the mythologies of the Creation have been undermined in their turn. They are no longer construed as they were initially: to the letter. Many of our contemporaries – once again including among believers – accept that these mythologies are only mythologies, i.e., have the status of educational tales even – and precisely if – they are supposed to be inspired by the divinity. The Bible of the three religions of the Book, the mythology of the Bororo or the Dogons have the same status: that of being the original sacred text of the beliefs of one or several peoples.

The monotheist affirmation in itself is a strictly theological concept. When you say that there is only one god, you don't say much. This is neither evidence nor counter-evidence. Furthermore, monotheism is probably more widespread than the partisans of the formal distinction between monotheist/so-called polytheist religions. Many of those who are accused of polytheism hierarchically rank their divinities and often reduce them to various expressions of one and the same supernatural force. Looking at it more closely, it was realised that those who were called the 'idolaters' where in reality 'animists' and that this term improved their status because, beside the plurality of its expressions, the supernatural force was one.

For all that, are the monotheists as strongly monotheist as they declare? All religions, including Judaism, Christianity and Islam, affirm the existence of supernatural beings other than God – angels, demons, jinns, etc. In the same way as they

affirm that, among human beings, some are 'inspired' by the divinity: Saints or prophets, they have conveyed God's word. The three religions of the Book know Satan as well as God, even if they organise the powers of these two beings along hierarchical lines for the benefit of the second. Before and after the religions of the Book, the same dualist conception of the supernatural has existed, with the Zoroastrians, the Manicheans and others. And in Christianity, the unique God embodied in three persons (Father, Son and Holy Spirit), a mystery that is the subject of theological debates that animated the discussion between monophysites and other Christians – qualifies the concept of monotheism. How then can we really distinguish the word of God from the one that he inspires through his Prophets or his Son? From the point of view of the analysis of the metaphysical text, this is the same.

No doubt, the three religions of the Book have been more than others affirmative of this monotheist character, as they have introduced some form of rationality in other aspects of their ethical and organisational constitutive elements. One is therefore tempted to establish a correspondence between this religious evolution and that of the former Middle-East societies, with the surpassing of the lineage organisation by the building of the state. But if this mutual adjustment of the social basis of the religious instance is plausible, it does not constitute the sole historical form possible. Other no less developed societies, in India and in China for instance, have responded to these requirements by other means: in China by adopting a non religious metaphysics (Confucianism), in India by the freedom of religious invention (Hinduism).

At the risk of seeing some people protest violently, I will add that the three religions in question, like the others, have crystallised in moments where the temptations for syncretism were very powerful. Scientists were able to reveal 'borrowings', for instance of Christianity to the religion of ancient Egypt, of Judaism to the religions of ancient Orient (Baal and others), of Islam to the beliefs of the Arabic Peninsula, etc. If we come down a bit lower to rites, dietary restrictions and other things of the same type, the borrowings are even more visible. No believers will feel uncomfortable with this reconnaissance: it will only prove for them that God has inspired the human beings all along their history, even before the religion associated with him was revealed.

Among the three religions of the Book, proximity is greater between Judaism and Islam. Religions have put forward – not without argument – that Islam is largely an Arabisation of Judaism. Not only because its precepts, legislation and rites and those of the Jews are largely common but also – and more fundamental – because Islam shares with Judaism the same conception of the relationship between Religion and Society. The Arabisation of Judaism, besides, precedes the message of the Prophet of Islam. History and the Koran recognise the existence of the Hanifs who identify with the God of their ancestor, Abraham, without proclaiming themselves Jews for all that. In this spirit, Islam affirmed to be the religion revealed by God to mankind from the very beginning, having been revealed to Adam himself. Islam is

supposed to have always existed, even before God spoke through his Prophet Mahomet. But it was supposedly forgotten or misunderstood by some (polytheists), and only partly understood by others (Jews and Christians).

So, we seize the importance that Muslims – or some of them – give to a curious debate. There is actually an abundant literature that is not considered as heretic by the authorities who proclaim themselves to be ‘the’ bearers of Islam, and that seeks to ‘prove’ that Abraham was not a Jew, but an Arab, etc. This demonstration appears like scientificity: there is reference here to the excavations in Mesopotamia, linguistics, the etymology of nouns, etc. For he who reads the Bible as a mythology among others, the question is meaningless. You don’t ‘correct’ a mythology, or try to find out who was the real person behind the mythological figure.

One, therefore, understands – in the perspective of the thesis of Arabisation of Judaism (or Islamisation of Judaism) – that Islam does not resume the Bible of the Jews just as it is. It is reviewed and corrected.

The concomitance between the advent of Islam and the political unification of the Peninsula is so obvious that it led many Arab historians to saying that monotheism – substituting for the plurality of tribal divinities – had been the vehicle of the Arab national formation, because obeying the same God became synonymous with obeying the same political power. By then, the Arabs were well familiar with the Christian and Judaic monotheism. But if they had opted for Christianity, they would have run the risk to be dependant on Byzance which dominated the region, something they feared above all. On the contrary, by taking over in their own name a form of Judaism, they ran no risk, since the Jewish religion was not associated with a state system in place. There was, therefore, great temptation to make their singular reading of Judaism and to own it by refusing to see it as the proper religion of a particular Semitic people, the Hebrews, but proclaiming it as a religion revealed to their own ancestors, also Semitic, but Arab.

On the other hand, the features of the environments in which Islam and Christianity were formed are very different. Islam was formed with all its dogmas in a small homogenous environment, that of the Arab tribes of Mecca and Medina. So it was bound to bear the marks of this origin to such a point that the universal vocation of this religion was not established at first. In the first time of the Arab conquest beyond the peninsula, the dominant trend among the Arab was to reserve Islam for themselves and leave to the peoples conquered their religions. If that was the way things were, Islam would have remained a strictly Arab religion. But a double movement has opened Islam to its universal vocation: the spontaneous conversion of important segments of the populations conquered and the finally favourable reception of these conversions by the Arabs themselves. Christianity, on the contrary, was formed in the cosmopolite environment of the Hellenist culture of the Roman Empire. In addition, its formation has been slow. It was therefore marked from the very start by this multiethnic and multicultural environment which encouraged its vocation for universalism.

A final remark: is monotheism really a tremendous progress of thinking, a qualitative 'progress'? There are evil spirits (but who says evil says ill-intentioned, inspired by the Evil One, the Devil) who draw a parallel between this unique God (in popular imagery – if not in the purified vision of doctors – an old man with a white beard, symbol of wisdom and authority) and the patriarch of the patriarchy, the autocrat of power systems. In this imagery which translates well real-life experience, it is obvious that the wise old man is nearer to God than a woman or a youth. A projection in Heaven that legitimates the patriarchy and autocracy that reign here below. Among others, the elimination of female deities, always important in non-monotheist religions, could but accentuate patriarchal domination. The evil spirits will say that this almighty unique God deprives them, poor wretches, of any power because, with numerous gods that are competing and in conflict, you can call to your rescue the one that is better positioned to render service and – in the Greek style – thumb your nose at the one annoying you! Is it by chance if the Greek democracy is polytheist? Is it by chance if in the areas that will be dominated by the great religions – here Christianity and Islam – this democracy disappears? But we will make you observe that the power that adopts a non-religious metaphysics in China and Hinduist religious pluralism in India also was autocratic and nothing else.

### ***Religion and Society: The Risk of Theocracy***

Religions are not merely metaphysical systems. They are expressions of major social realities. Metaphysics and social function mutually determine each other in an historical dialectic. It is thus difficult to disentangle metaphysical claims from the social systems from which they emerge and on which they operate.

A useful starting point to answer the question posed above – are the three religions of the Book mainly one or several? – consists in the vision of historical time which they propose.

Judaism believes in an end of time. This hour will sound with the advent of the Messiah who will organise his kingdom here on earth, that is to say a society which is just and happy and which will endure forever. The convinced believer does not believe that this reign of justice can be conquered by human action before the end of time. That is the reason why some Jews reject the State of Israel. Nevertheless, the Messiah has not yet arrived. The end of time is still ahead of us.

Islam has adopted a different position on this important question. The Prophet in his lifetime had already organised, at Medina, a just society. In this sense, even though he is regarded as a prophet, the last of the prophets, this Prophet can be considered as the one the Jews call the Messiah: the organiser of the Kingdom of God on earth. I know fully well that this interpretation of Islam and of the time of the Prophet is not the only one even among Muslims. Many would say – and not necessarily only a minority who claim to be enlightened – that it is not necessary to re-establish the social system which existed in Medina in the time of the Prophet, that from that epoch, one can at best derive certain general principles, and nothing more, principles which must be adapted to the changing reality of the times. If only because the Prophet is no longer there to lead society and no one could replace him.

The issue then is to adapt these principles to the changing realities of time. Hence, a large margin paves the way for discussion and diverse opinions. However, this relativistic concept has actually dominated the real history of Islam. But it is only a concept and can be rejected. We can substitute for it the idea that social organisation in the time of the Prophet is well and truly the final model of history, the one we must turn to, which should be reproduced or to which we should return if we moved away from it. An interpretation that can be termed fundamentalist if you want, since it calls for a return to the 'sources', the fundamentals. It exists and has always existed. It catches the full wind in its sails today. But it comes back in the foreground, imposes itself or seems to do so only in particular circumstances, the reasons for which would need to be analysed. Therefore, what matters here is to know that this concept places the future in the past. The end of times started fifteen centuries ago, history has stopped it for the main. What may have come since in real history hardly matters, since that history provides no lesson worthy of being retained by those among the Muslims who adhere to this interpretation of Islam.

Christianity has adopted a third position on the question of the end of time, a point of view which separates it from Judaism and Islam, and which gives it a specificity both as a metaphysics and as a force which participates in shaping social reality. But in order to see this difference, it will be necessary to come directly to the analysis of the social reality in question.

- Judaism is not merely an abstract monotheism; it is also the organiser of an historical society, that of the Jews in Palestine and later and partly, that of the Jewish communities in the Diaspora.

The real history of the Jews in ancient Palestine is not well known. Infinitely less well than that of other peoples in the region, perhaps because the latter, more powerful and more developed, have left more written and other traces. But what is certain is that Judaism produced precise and extremely detailed laws which included not only the great moral principles enshrined in the Ten Commandments – which, moreover, seem to have been inspired by others – but much more: an ensemble of rules which governed the individual, family and social life of the Jews. These laws regulated everything in the fields of personal laws, marriage, divorce, filiation, inheritance, etc. All these laws are religious and sacred, and thus difficult (if not quite impossible) to modify. These laws and regulations are accompanied by criminal laws that are no less precise and besides, very hard, even savage to contemporary eyes (lapidation of adulterous women ...), which are themselves integral part of the sacred. Lastly, they operate within a highly ritualised framework: from circumcision through absolute prohibition of all activity on the Sabbath to dietary restrictions, the list is long.

It is probably the precise formalism of all these laws, rules and rituals that permitted the Jews of the Diaspora to preserve themselves from unavoidable contagion, assimilation and conversion. It is also perhaps one of the motives for the hostility against them (a motive is not an excuse!).

What appears certain is that such a social conception of religion leaves no real place to the concept of lay society. It can only produce a theocratic concept of

power, which has been preserved by the Jews of the Diaspora. Since power cannot invent laws, it is there to apply those which God has established once and for all. There is a tendency today to call theocratic only those forms of power which operate through a religious caste which lays claim to a monopoly because it alone knows the laws which it is necessary to apply, whether this caste calls itself a synod, a Church, or something else, or even, has no name. This is unfortunate. Theocracy means the power of God and in practice that of those who speak in his name. Theocracy is opposed to modernity if by modernity we mean the fundamental concept of modern democracy: that human beings freely establish their own laws and because of this are responsible for their own history.

Jewish law has relatively few provisions regarding the organisation of power, public law, to speak modern language. By comparison with other developed states in the region, Pharaoh's Egypt, Acheminid then Sassanide Iran, countries in Mesopotamia, Greece and Rome – which have produced detailed models of administrative and political organisation (little matters that these models were not democratic), the Jews have remained confined in more unpolished political forms in which the powers of the judges and the kings were ill-defined. But this weakness is only an additional argument in favour of theocracy. The power of God cannot be weighed down by precise formalisms.

Long forgotten among the Jews of the Diaspora, this natural propensity for theocracy emerged again in the Jewish State – contemporary Israel. Only those who resist understanding Judaism as a form of social organisation will be surprised.

- Islam offers, on all planes, a rigorous parallel with Judaism.

Islam regulates, in the same manner, in detail and on the basis of its sacred text, all aspects of personal law. It has a similar penal law as strict and formal as that of the Jews (again, even in the details, there is perfect analogy: lapidation of adulterous women ...) and practices similar rituals, from circumcision through dietary restrictions to fixed hours of prayer (not at any moment) and in a unique repetitive formula (with no personalisation possible). It is an ensemble of rules and practices which organises society in a way which leaves little room for innovation or imagination.

It matters little here that all this may have seemed or may still seem insufficient for more demanding believers. In historical Islam, Sufism opens its doors to them and allows the blooming of non ritualised mystics.

However, Jews and Muslims – like everybody – are practical people. They need commercial law to supplement personal laws. They borrow it, therefore, to the surrounding environment adapted to the requirements of the time. Muslims 'Islamise' the practices and laws that they discover in the civilised area they conquer. In this regard, Muslim law translates sometimes literally the Byzantine law. This operation is presented as Islamic, sacred, but this is only dressing.

The Muslims, like the Jews, have little in the way of an elaborate public law. As in the case of the Jews, this presents no problem. The lack was made up with the

invention of the Caliphate (that preceded the Prophet's Islam) and by adapting Byzantine and Sassanid administrative institutions. The absence of precision concerning the supreme power, which one cannot define when it comes under divine jurisdiction, meant that it was impossible to transcend autocracy, pure and simple.

Autocracy and theocracy go together, for who will speak in the name of God, if not to legislate (no human has the right), then at least to apply the law? The Caliph – or his substitute the Sultan – will do it without hesitation. And the people will see him as 'the shadow of God on earth,' even when the doctors of the law hesitate to say so.

In this sense, power in Islamic countries has always been theocratic, even if the theocracy in question is not exercised by a caste of religious specialists. Islamic states cannot conceive of themselves otherwise, at least in so far as they are Islamic states. To do so has required, in the two Islamic regions to laicise radically (Turkey and the former Soviet Republics of Central Asia), a loud and official rupture with Islam. And these countries may well be returning to the Islamic norm. But that is another story.

In this sense, contemporary political Islam is nothing new. It simply goes further, and wants to transform the 'soft' theocracies of the Islamic world, contaminated by the surrounding modernity, into theocratic states in the strong sense of the word, that is to say to give whole and absolute power to a religious caste, a quasi-Church in Iran; the Azhar in Egypt – which has a monopoly on the right to speak in the name of 'the' religion, 'the law (of God), purge social practice of anything which, in its eyes, is not genuinely Islamic in the law and rites. Otherwise, if this caste cannot succeed in imposing itself as the exclusive holder of the Islamic legitimacy, then 'anybody', especially the chief of clans or of any group of people will. The result is permanent civil war, as in Afghanistan.

I had already written this text when I read the critique of the Jewish religion by Israël Shahak. Reading this book will convince the reader of the extraordinary similarity between Judaism and Islam which share a common conception of theocracy as sole legitimate form of political power. The reasons by which Shahak thus explains the renaissance of Jewish fundamentalism in Israel can be transposed word-for-word to Islamic fundamentalism. But of course both religions, Jewish and Muslim, may also – if one so wishes – be read differently, but not without difficulty.

- Christianity deviated from the theocratic road, then returned to it, before the Christian peoples departed from it once again.

At the moment of its constitution, Christianity did not appear to break with the Jewish heritage regarding the end of time. The announcement of the final judgement and the second coming of the Messiah certainly has eschatological dimensions, which are strongly accentuated in the text of the Apocalypse. This is why there have been, throughout the history of Christianity, messianic and millenarian movements.

Nevertheless, by the very nature of its message, Christianity broke radically with Judaism. This rupture is fundamental because the message which is expressed in the

dramatic story of Christ is clear: the Kingdom of God is not, and never will be, of this world. If the Son of God himself has been vanquished on Earth, crucified, it is obvious that it was not God's (The Father) intention to establish his kingdom of justice and happiness here below. But if God refuses to substitute himself for human beings and to solve their problems, then it belongs to humans themselves to take responsibility and to do so. There is no longer the end of time, and Christ does not proclaim it being here or coming. In this regard, Christ is not the expected Messiah of Judaism, and the Jews were not in error when they refused to recognise him as such. The message of Christ can then be interpreted simply as an invitation to human beings to make their own history and, if they do it well (that is inspired by the values of which the Messiah gave an example by his life and death), then they bring themselves closer to the God in whose image they have been created. It is this interpretation which imposed itself in the end, and which gives to modern Christianity its particular style founded on a reading of the Gospels which makes it possible to imagine the future as an encounter between history made by human beings themselves and divine intervention. The end of time, imagined as the product of a divine intervention from outside of history, has disappeared.

This rupture then extended itself to the whole field which up to then had been regulated by sacred law. While Christ made it quite clear that he did not come to abrogate the law (of the Jews), he did make it subject to human judgement, something which inevitably meant that it would be called into question. Christ himself will exemplify this by challenging one of the most formal and hard among these criminal laws (precisely the lapidation of adulterous women). By saying 'Let he who never sinned throw the first stone', he opens the doors of debate: what if this law was not just? What if it only hid the hypocrisy of the real sinners? The Christians will then abandon in fact the Jewish law and rituals: circumcision disappears, the rules of personal law diversify, especially as the expansion of Christianity beyond the Jewish environment adapts to different laws and statutes, for which it does not substitute a Christian law that does not exist, dietary restrictions lose strength, etc.

The same was true with respect to dogma. While not breaking openly with Judaism, and in fact admitting its sacred text (the Bible), it did so 'without discussion', neither submitting it to re-reading or to review, in a way which effectively annulled their meaning. It juxtaposes it to other sacred texts, those it produced, the Gospels. The morality proposed in its own sacred texts (love for the neighbour, pity, forgiveness, justice ...) is somewhat different from the one inspired by the Old Testament. What is more, the Gospels did not propose anything sufficiently precise to inspire any positive legislation regarding the personal or criminal law status. From this point of view, the texts are neatly different from those of the Torah and the Koran.

There is no longer any possible confusion between legitimate power and God ('Give unto Caesar what is Caesar's'). This is an untenable precept in the sense that the Empire, after having combated Christianity for three centuries, suddenly embraced it and became Christian. Even before, in the clandestineness of the churches around which the Christians are organised, even more after the Emperor became the armed protector of Christianity, a new law developed, which called itself 'Chris-

tian.' First, in the field of personal law. What is a Christian family? This should be clearly outlined, legislated. The process will be long, fluctuating, and no agreement will ever be reached because previous laws and customs, different here and there, are accepted... However, gradually, these laws will take on the prestige of the sacred: the Catholics canon laws (there is one for Oriental churches and another for Occidental churches), as the legal forms of the different orthodox and protestant churches are the outcome of this slow evolution.

Concerning the organisation of power, the relation of the political and the religious, we find the same fluctuations and the same evolution towards sacralisation. The churches, which had been constituted as clandestine parties, to use the language of our epoch, remained so after the 'seizure of power.' It was by necessity that they remained democratic by being close to the people. Now they lost this character, bringing themselves closer to power and distancing themselves from the faithful who they henceforth 'organised' on behalf of the rulers. The rulers, for their part, did not allow themselves to be domesticated by the Churches. They had their own rules of dynastic devolution; they institutionalise the requirement of the new system – feudal in the Romano-Barbarian West, imperial in Byzantine East – and subject the churches as much as possible to their own logic. The fusion progressed nevertheless, and like the Caliph, the Lord and the King became more or less sacred personages.

Christianity thus developed towards a 'soft theocratic model' managed jointly by clergy and by lay rulers who did not hesitate to proclaim themselves just as much Christians as the clergy. The result looked much like Islam. When, in the Christian world, the bourgeois revolution called into question the eternity of the social order which claimed to rest on immutable (or allegedly so) Christian principles, when this revolution opened the doors of modernity, invented the new democracy (however limited its implementation was), when the Enlightenment declared that Men (though not yet Women!) make their own history and must choose (and unmake) their own laws, the defenders of the old order denounced, in the name of Christianity, this inordinate ambition for human emancipation. Thus, Joseph de Maistre, in the France of the Restoration period, could proclaim democracy to be an absurdity, a dangerous and criminal dream, because God is the only legislator, that God alone makes laws which we only apply, without exercising his imagination for inventing better laws – A text which Ayatollah Khomeini or Sheik El Azhar could have written word for word!

It matters little that by the time Joseph de Maistre wrote, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was no longer possible to say just precisely what these Christian laws consisted in: the Ten Commandments? Or all the Roman, Germanic, and Slavic traditions which made up the fabric of the European societies which called themselves Christian?

By the time de Maistre wrote, it was too late. European society had developed a taste for making its own laws, without the obligation to refer to Christian principles, which continued to be invoked now and then, but without rigidity or great convic-

tion. These societies confronted new imperatives – an established objective need to act that way. The risk of theocracy was definitively passed.

From the Old Debate – Reconciling Faith and Reason – to the New Debate – Laicising Social Power

- Proclaiming God the sole legislator is fine in theory, but hardly practical. Muslims and Christians alike will experience it in their respective areas.

Highly civilised, the societies of the Muslim and European Middle Ages faced a problem: how to reconcile Faith – or more precisely the religion which is the foundation of legitimate power – and Reason, which one needs every day not only to solve ordinary problems, but also to inspire laws and regulations in response to fundamentally new situations.

Muslims, Christians, and Jews in the Diaspora solved this problem in the same way and by the same method – Aristotelian Scholasticism – which is neither Jewish nor Christian, nor Islamic, but rather Greek! – and with the same brilliant results. The avant-garde, Ibn Rusd among the Muslims, Thomas Aquinas among the Christians, and Maimonides among the Jews went quite far. They relativised dogmas, interpreted sacred texts as much as necessary, made up for their deficiencies, and substituted for the literal reading of the text images which met their educative requirements. The most audacious were often condemned as heretics (this was the case with Ibn Rusd) by conservative interpreters in service to the powers that be. But little matters: a European society already in motion lived according to the precepts which these radicals recommended. The Muslim world on the other hand refused to and entered into a decline from which it never exited. Al-Ghazali, the spokesman of Islamic reaction, the enemy of Ibn Rusd, has remained, up to this day, among the ‘revolutionary’ Ayatollahs of Iran, at the El Azhar, and in Saudi Arabia, the definitive point of ‘reference’ in all matters.

- Beginning with the Renaissance and above all during the Enlightenment, Christian Europe abandoned this old debate for a new one.

It was no longer a matter of reconciling Faith and Reason, but rather Reason and Emancipation. Reason, having declared its independence, did not deny that there might be an appropriate field where faith might be deployed, but if there was, it was no longer interested in it. It was, henceforth, a matter of legitimating new needs: the liberty of the individual, the emancipation of a society which took the risk of inventing its own laws and of fashioning its own future. Modernity consists precisely in this qualitative rupture with the past.

This new vision implied laicism, that is to say the abandonment of all reference to religion or to any other meta-social force in the debate around laws. To be sure, the different bourgeois societies went more or less far in this regard. The more radical the bourgeois revolution, the more radical the affirmation of laicism. The more the bourgeoisie compromised with the old order, the more limited the scope of laicisation.

Modern Christianity adapted to this profound social transformation. It has had to reinterpret itself from top to bottom, renouncing the ambition to govern and settling for an effort to inspire believers while compromising with adversaries. A beneficial exercise for, in so doing, modern Christians discovered how thin the laws attributed by God to their ancestors were.

Christianity has become a religion without dogmas.

However advanced the results produced by the effort to reconcile Faith and Reason, we must recognise their limits. In effect, these advances were blocked among the Muslims and Jews, and were finally defeated in favour of a return to ancient orthodoxies. By contrast, in the Christian world these advances prepared – without having necessarily conceived it – the way for their own elimination.

How can one try to explain this failure of some and the success of others, who will become the inventors of modernity? The materialist tradition in history gives priority to social development and supposes that religions, as part of the ideological instance, will ultimately be reinterpreted in a way which satisfies the exigencies of the real movement of history. This hypothesis is certainly more fertile than its opposite, which treats religions as dogmatic ensembles which are given once and for all; transhistorical invariants. This second hypothesis – that nowadays catches the full wind in its sails – precludes all reflection on the general movement of the history of humanity as a whole and rules out any real historical explanation in favour of recourse to ‘irreducible cultural differences.’

But the materialist hypothesis does not exclude reflection on the reasons why certain pathways in the evolution of religious thought seem to have had the way paved for them, and others not. For the religious instance – like all of the constitutive instances of social life (economics, politics, ideology) – moves according to its own proper logic. The logic of each of these instances can, therefore, facilitate and accelerate social evolution or block it. In this case which trend will carry the day? It is impossible to say. It is in this under-determination that lies the freedom of societies of which the choices (to submit this particular instance to the logic imposed by the evolution of another) fashions the real history.

This hypothesis of under-determination permits us perhaps to forward a response to the question posed above.

Judaism and Islam were constituted historically by the affirmation that God is the only true King of society (the Jewish or Muslim society). The principle of the ‘hakimiya’ reintroduced by the Islamic fundamentalists of our epoch only reaffirms this principle with greater force and draws out all of its possible conclusions. What’s more, Judaism and Islam give their sacred texts (the Torah and the Koran) the strongest possible interpretation. No word is superfluous. Indeed, these traditions have historically expressed severe reservations about the translation of the sacred text. Both Jews and Muslims are peoples of exegesis. The Talmud and the Fiqh have no equivalent in the reading of the Gospels.

This double principle explains many of the visible features of the two societies. The sacred texts of both can be read as compilations of laws and even as Constitu-

tions (Saudi Arabia proclaims the Koran the Political Constitution of the State) which regulate the details of daily life (personal law, criminal law, civil law, the liturgies), invite the believer to 'renounce his will and submit integrally to that of God' as has been written many times, imagine this life as having to be regulated in all its details in a convent.

The reconciliation of Faith and Reason was carried out within the limits imposed by this double principle, as much with Muslim Ibn Rusd as with his Jewish contemporary Maimonides. And in both cases the traditionalist reaction carried the day, with the return to the Kalam by Ashari and Ghazali, and to Talmudic exegesis with Judah Halevy. Both proclaimed that certainty lay not with Reason but with Revelation. The page of philosophy was turned for the Muslims and the Jews. Accompanying the stagnation, then the decline of the Muslim societies, this abortion of the religious reform was to lead, by force of circumstances and in both cases, to an increase in the formalist, legalist and ritualistic nature of the interpretation of religion. This form of impoverishment found compensation in both cases in the development of mythical sects: Muslim Sufis and Jewish Cabbalists who, besides, have largely borrowed their methods to traditions from India.

If Christianity proved itself more flexible and if, because of this, it eventually broke through the bounds of the debate around the relationship between Faith and Reason, this is at least in part because Christianity never proposed to establish the Kingdom of God on Earth and the Gospels never erected a system of positive laws. One can understand, then, the following paradox: although the Catholic Church is strongly organised and there is an official authority that can impose its interpretation of religion, it did not resist the assaults of the new problematic that separates Reason from Faith, and it is Christianity that has had to adapt to the new emancipative conception of reason, while the lack of such authority in Islam after the Prophet and in Judaism since the destruction of the Temple and the dispersal of the Sanhedrin did not hamper the maintenance of the orthodoxy of the origins.

- The Jews of the Diaspora in Europe could not help but be affected by the radical transformation of the society in which they were living and of conceptions regarding the relationship of this society to religion.

Moses Mendelsohn thus tried in the eighteenth century to carry out a revolution in Judaism comparable to that in which Christian society was already engaged. In interpreting the Torah not as a body of obligatory legislation, but rather as a source of inspiration which each can interpret at his pleasure, Mendelsohn set forth on the road towards laicisation. The evolution of European society contributed to this process of assimilation of the Jews, whose 'nation' was declared defunct by the French Revolution, which knew only citizens possibly of Jewish faith. Consequently, there was great risk for Judaism to disappear gradually in the indifference shared by Western Europe's Jewish bourgeoisie and all its class, including in its Christian believers' fractions.

Persistent anti-Semitism – for all sorts of religious or simply economic and political reasons – above all in Eastern Europe, did not permit this Reform to triumph

in Judaism as among the Christian population. A Counter – Reformation emerged in the ghettos, in the form of Hasidism, which allowed the Jews to find compensation for their inferior status by taking up their humiliation for the love of God.

- Modern culture is neither ‘Christian’ nor ‘Judeo-Christian’, as is written now in the media. This last expression, besides, has strictly no meaning. How can we then explain its widespread use? Very simply in my opinion: Christian Europe had been very anti-Jewish (the term anti-Semite was used when the reference to the pseudo ‘race’ substituted for religion, in the nineteenth century (for reasons whose discussion would go beyond the scope of these reflections). Tardily, after anti-Semitism had led to the horrors of Nazism, Europe, seising then the dimension of its crime, adopted this Judeo-Christian expression in a sympathetic and commendable intent to root out its anti-Semitism. It would have been much more convincing to recognise directly the decisive contributions of so many ‘Jewish’ thinkers to the progress of Europe. Inverted commas are used here simply because modern culture is neither Christian nor Judeo-Christian: it is a bourgeois culture.

The point of reference has been displaced from the old field of the debate (reconcile Faith – a religion – and Reason) to a new terrain which ignores religion. Modern thinkers are fundamentally neither Christian nor Jewish. Bourgeois civilisation is neither the creation of Christianity nor of Judeo-Christianity. On the contrary, Christianity and the Judaism of Western Europe have been forced to adapt to bourgeois civilisation. One waits for Islam to do the same. It is the condition for the participation of the Islamic peoples in the fashioning of a future from which they are excluded only by themselves.

### ***The Reform, an Ambiguous Expression of Adaptation of Christianity to Modernity***

- The Reform is an extremely complex movement in its religious doctrinal dimensions as well as in the scope of the social transformations it came with. Besides, it deploys itself in very different European fields, in some of the most advanced cores in the invention of capitalism (The United Provinces, England) and in backward regions (Germany, Scandinavia). In these conditions, it is dangerous to speak of ‘Protestantism’ in singular form.

On the dogmatic plane, all the great reformers have called to a ‘return to fundamentals’ and, in this spirit have, among others, reestablished the Old Testament which Catholicism and Orthodoxy had marginalised. I have developed above the idea that Christianity was in fact constituted not as a continuation of Judaism but as a break with it. The use, which has become frequent, of the appellation ‘Judeo-Christian’, popularised by the expansion of the US-Protestant discourse, testifies to this shift in the vision of the relations among these two monotheistic religions, with which the Catholics (but still not the Orthodox) have aligned themselves tardily without much conviction, but rather because of political opportunism.

The call to a 'return to fundamentals' is a method that is nearly always found in the movements that identify themselves with religion. But it means quite nothing in itself, the interpretation of the fundamentals in question being always determinant. In the Reform, the fragments of ideologies and the value systems that are expressed in this religious terrain retain all the traces of primitive forms of reaction to the capitalist challenge. The Renaissance had been further ahead in some of these aspects (Machiavelli is one of the most eloquent witnesses to this). Now, then, the Renaissance is deployed in a Catholic terrain (Italy). And the management of some Italian cities as true commercial societies led by the syndicate of the wealthiest shareholders (Venice being the prototype) establishes an even more frank relation with the first forms of capitalism than the relation that will exist between Protestantism and capitalism. Later, the Enlightenment that spreads both in Catholic countries (France) and in Protestant ones (Britain, Low Countries and Germany) is situated more closely in the secular tradition of the Renaissance than in that of religious reform. Lastly, the French Revolution, because of its radical nature, gives secularism its full bloom, deliberately abandoning the terrain of religious re-interpretations in order to situate itself in that of modern politics, which is to a large extent the product of its invention.

One understands, therefore, that according to the circumstances, the Reform may have led to either the institution of national churches at the service of the compromise between the Monarchy, the Ancien Régime and the emerging *grande bourgeoisie* (upper classes), or the withdrawal of dominated classes in sects that develop apocalyptic visions.

Catholicism, which by its structure is organised along hierarchical lines, has been rigid for a long time. However, the challenges of modern time have forced it to eventually open up to the reinterpretation of dogmas, with outcomes that are no less remarkable. I am not surprised, under these conditions, that the new progress in religious interpretation – I mean those represented today by the theology of liberation – found a fertile reflection ground among the Catholics rather than the Protestants. Clearly, the thesis of Weber is not up to much!

- There was also a good example of involution in the religious interpretation associated with the Reform.

The Protestant sects that found themselves compelled to emigrate from seventeenth-century England had developed a very particular interpretation of Christianity which is not shared by either Catholics or the Orthodox, or even – at least not with the same degree of extremism – by the majority of European Protestants, including of course Anglicans, predominant among the leading classes in Britain.

This particular form of Protestantism implanted in New England was destined to leave a profound mark in the American ideology with a strong imprint, up to our days, since it will be the means by which the new society will set off the conquest of the continent, legitimising it with terms drawn from the Bible (the violent conquest by Israel of the promised land, an example repeated to exhaustion in the dominant US discourse). Later, the United States would extend to the entire planet the project

of carrying out the work that 'God' had reserved for them to accomplish, since the Americans perceive themselves as the 'chosen people' – a synonym for the Nazi's *Herrenvolk*, to take that parallel once again. This is where we are today. And this is why American imperialism (not 'empire') is going to be even more savage than were its predecessors (which did not declare that they were entrusted with a divine mission).

- In any case, whether we are dealing with Catholic or Protestant societies, with one school or another, I do not give religious interpretation a decisively independent role in the organisation and operation of the dominant real power.

The past does not become by force of circumstances an 'atavistic transmission'. History changes peoples and religious interpretations, even when they persist in apparently 'ancient' and fixed forms, and are themselves subject to the review of their articulation to other dimensions of social reality.

It is because the subsequent historic trajectories of Europe on the one hand, and the United States on the other hand, were different that the European societies and the US society, be they Catholic or Protestant, have today diverging political cultures.

Political culture is the product of history regarded over the long term which, of course, is always specific to each country. That of the United States, on this level, is marked by specificities that break with those that characterised history on the European continent: the founding of New England by extremist Protestant sects, the genocide of the aboriginal populations, the Black slavery, and the displacement of the 'communitarisms' associated with the migratory waves of the nineteenth century.

The 'American revolution', much appreciated by many 1789 revolutionaries and today praised more than ever, was nothing more than a limited independence war with no social impact. In their revolt against the British monarchy, the American colonists did not want to transform their economic and social relations; they just no longer wanted to share the profits with the ruling class of the mother country. They wanted power for themselves, not in order to create a different society from the colonial regime, but to carry on in the same way, only with more determination and more profit. Their goals were first and foremost the pursuit of the westward expansion which implied, among others, the Indian genocide. The maintenance of slavery in this framework also raised no questioning. The big chiefs of the American Revolution were nearly all slave owners and their prejudices in this area were unwavering.

The successive immigrant waves have likewise played their part in the reinforcement of the US ideology. The immigrants are certainly not responsible for the squalor and oppression that stand at the origin of their departure. On the contrary, they are their victims. Nonetheless, circumstances – i.e. their emigration – lead them to renounce the collective struggle to change the conditions common to their classes or groups in their own countries, for the benefit of adherence to an ideology of individual success in the country that receives them. This adherence is stimulated by the American system, which plays its part to perfection. It hinders the acquisition of

a class consciousness which, as soon as it has begun to mature, must face a new wave of immigrants that causes its political crystallisation to be aborted. But at the same time migration stimulates the 'communitarianisation' of US society, since 'individual success' does not preclude a strong insertion in a community of origin (the Irish, the Italians, etc.), without which individual isolation could become unbearable. Now, here too the reinforcement of this dimension of identity – which the American system regains and praises – is carried out to the detriment of class consciousness and of the shaping of the citizen. While in Paris the people got ready to set off to 'take heaven by storm' (I refer here to the Commune of 1871), in the United States the bands constituted by the successive generations of impoverished immigrants (the Irish, Italians, etc.) slaughtered one another, manipulated with perfect cynicism by the dominant classes.

Protestant Europe – England, Germany, Low Countries, Scandinavia – shared initially some fragments of an ideology similar to that of the United States, conveyed by the 'return to the Bible', although most certainly in mitigated forms, without comparison with the extreme forms of the sects which migrated in New England. But in the countries in question, the working class has succeeded in rising to an affirmed class consciousness, sterilised by the successive immigrant waves in the United States. The emergence of workers' parties made the difference. In Europe, it imposed combinations of the liberal ideology and value systems (equality among others) which not only are unknown to it, but even conflicting. These combinations naturally have had their own history, different from a country and a moment for others. But they have maintained the autonomy of the politics in the face of dominant economics.

In the United States, there is no workers' party; there was never one. Communitarian ideologies could not substitute for the absence of a socialist ideology in the working classes. This applies even for the most radical of these, the black community, since by definition, communitarianism is inscribed within the framework of the generalised racism that it intends to fight in the latter's terrain, nothing more.

The absence of a worker's party combined with a dominant 'Biblical' religious ideology that are proper to the historical formation of the US society have finally produced the unparalleled situation of a *de facto* single party, the party of capital.

American democracy constitutes today the advanced model of what I call 'low-intensity democracy.' It is based on a total separation between the management of political life, which rests on the practice of multiparty electoral democracy, and the management of economic life, which is governed by the laws of capital accumulation. What is more, this separation is not the object of any radical questioning, but, on the contrary, is part of what is called the general consensus. This separation eliminates all the creative potential of democratic politics. It neutralises representative institutions (parliament and others), making them impotent in the face of the dictates of the 'market.'

The US state is, for this reason, at the exclusive service of the economy (that is to say of capital, whose faithful and exclusive servant it is, without having to concern itself with other social interests). It can be so because the historical formation

of US society has – in the popular classes – blocked the maturing of political class consciousness, of real citizen consciousness.

In counterpoint, in Europe the state has been (and could again become) the compulsory meeting ground of the confrontation among social interests and can, as from there, favour the historical commitments that give meaning and real scope to democratic practice. If the state is not compelled to perform this role by class struggles and political struggles that preserve their autonomy in the face of the exclusive logic of the accumulation of capital, then democracy is transformed into a derisory practice, as it now is in the United States.

Like all ideologies, the US ideology is faced with the test of time in the ‘quiet’ periods of history – marked by good economic growth accompanied by social benefits that are deemed satisfactory – the pressure the ruling class must exert on its people weakens. From time to time then, depending on the needs of the moment, this ruling class ‘boosts’ the American ideology always using the same means: an enemy (always external, the American society being declared good by definition) is designated (the Evil Empire, the Evil axis) enabling the ‘full mobilisation’ of all the means for annihilating it – it was communism yesterday, through McCarthyism (forgotten by the ‘pro-Americans’) – to engage in the cold war and subordinate Europe. It is ‘terrorism’ today, an obvious pretext (September 11 resembles so much the Reichstag fire), that gets the real project of the ruling class through: securing military control of the planet.

But let there be no misunderstanding about that: it is not the would-be religious fundamentalist ideology that is at the controls and that would impose its logic to the real holders of power – the capital and those who serve it within the state. It is the capital that takes alone all the decisions that suit it, then mobilises the American ideology in question to put it at its service. The means used – unparalleled systematic disinformation – are then efficient, isolating the critical spirits, and submitting them to permanent and odious blackmail. The power then succeeds in manipulating easily an ‘opinion’ maintained in its stupidity.

### ***Political Islam***

- Modernity is based on the principle that human beings must and can, individually and collectively, create their own history and that, to that effect, they have the right to innovate and to disregard tradition. Proclaiming this principle meant breaking with the fundamental principle that governed all the pre-modern societies, including of course that of Feudal and Christian Europe. Modernity was born with this proclamation. It had nothing to do with rebirth; it was simply a question of birth. The qualification of Renaissance that Europeans themselves gave to history in that era is therefore misleading. It is the result of an ideological construction purporting that the Greek-Roman Antiquity was acquainted with the principle of modernity, which was veiled in the ‘Middle Ages’ (between the old modernity and the new modernity) by religious obscurantism. It was the

mythical perception of Antiquity that in turn paved the way for Eurocentrism, whereby Europe claims to go back to its past, 'to return to its sources' (hence, the Renaissance), whereas in fact, it is engineering a break with its own history.

The European Renaissance was the product of an internal social process, the solution found to contradictions peculiar to the then Europe through the invention of capitalism. On the other hand, what the Arabs by imitation referred to as their Renaissance – the Nahda of the 19th Century – was not so. It was the reaction to an external shock. The Europe that modernity had rendered powerful and triumphant had ambiguous effect on the Arab world through attraction (admiration) and repulsion (through the arrogance of its conquest). The Arab Renaissance takes its qualifying term literally. It is assumed that, if the Arabs 'returned' to their sources, as the Europeans would have done (that is what they themselves say), they would regain their greatness, even if debased for some time. The Nahda does not know the nature of the modernity that enhances Europe's power.

This is not the place to refer to different aspects and moments marking Nahda's deployment. I will just state briefly that Nahda does not forge the necessary break with tradition that defines modernity.

In constructing their 'Renaissance', the Europeans have situated their origin, be it mythological, before Christianity, in Ancient Greece. This invention will help them relativise the religious dimension of their 'specificity'. Contrarily, the Arabs in their construction by analogy will situate their origin in Islam. They need therefore to erase of their inheritance the contribution of the civilisations of Ancient Orient, called 'Jahiliya', that is, impious time.

One can thus understand why Nahda does not recognise the meaning of secularism, in other words, separation between religion and politics, the condition to ensure that politics serves as the field for free innovation, and for that matter, for democracy in the modern sense. Nahda thinks it can substitute for secularism an interpretation of religion purged of its obscurantist drifts. At any rate, to date, Arab societies are not adequately equipped to understand that secularism is not a 'specific' characteristic of the western world but rather a requirement for modernity. Nahda does not realise the meaning of democracy, which should be understood as the right to break with tradition. It therefore remains prisoner of the concepts of autocratic State; it hopes and prays for a 'just' despot (al moustabid al adel) – even if not 'enlightened' and the nuance is significant. Nahda does not understand that modernity also promotes women's aspiration to their freedom, thereby exercising their right to innovate and break with tradition. Eventually, Nahda reduces modernity to the immediate aspect of what it produces: technical progress. This voluntarily oversimplified presentation does not mean that its author is not aware of the contradictions expressed in Nahda, nor that certain avant-garde thinkers were aware of the real challenges posed by modernity, like Kassem Amin and the importance of women's emancipation, Ali Abdel Razeq and secularism, and Kawakibi and the challenge posed by democracy. However, none of these breakthroughs had any effects; on the contrary, the Arab society reacted by refusing to follow the paths indicated.

Nahda is therefore not the time marking the birth of modernity in the Arab world but rather the period of its abortion.

Since the Arab States have not yet embraced modernity, whereas they bear the brunt of the daily challenge, Arabs still accept to a large extent these principles of autocratic power, which maintains its legitimacy or loses it in fields other than its non-recognition of the principle of democracy. If it is able to resist imperialist aggression – or to give that impression – if it is able to promote a visible improvement of the material living conditions of many, if not all, the autocratic power enjoys guaranteed popularity even if it now appears as an enlightened despotic power. It is also because Arab societies have not embraced modernity that the latter's brutal pompous refusal presented as the sole ideological theme placed at the centre of the Islamic project can find a favourable echo as powerful as it is known to be.

Beyond this non-modernity principle, the autocratic power therefore owes its legitimacy to tradition. In some cases, this could refer to a tradition of national and religious monarchy like that of Morocco or of a tribal monarchy in the Arabian Peninsula. But there is another form of tradition – the one inherited from the Ottoman Empire dominant in the territory between Algeria and Iraq, and therefore influencing the largest segment of the Arab world – which I describe as the tradition of 'Mameluke power'.

What is it about? It is about a complex system that associated the personalised power of warlords (relatively structured and centralised, or otherwise scattered), businessmen and men of religion. I emphasise men, since women are obviously not allowed to assume any responsibilities. The three dimensions of this organisation are not merely juxtaposed; they are actually merged into a single reality of power.

The Mamelukes are men of war who owe their legitimacy to a certain concept of Islam that places emphasis on the opposite of Dar El Islam (Muslim world – a community governed by the rules of peaceful management) / Dar El Harb (an extra-Muslim world, the place for the pursuit of Jihad, 'Holy War'). It is not by chance that this military concept of political management was fabricated by the conquering Seldjoukide Turks and the Ottomans, who called themselves 'Ghazi' – conquerors and colonisers of Byzantine Anatolia. It is not by chance that the Mamelukes' system was built from the era of Salah El Dine, liberator of the Lands occupied until then by the Crusaders. Populist powers and contemporary nationalists always mention the name of Salah El Dine with respectful admiration without ever considering or making any allusion to the ravages of the system from which it originated. At the end of the Crusades, the Arab world (which became Turkish-Arab) entered into a military feudalisation and isolation process reflecting a decline that put an end to the brilliant civilisation of the early centuries of the Caliphate while Europe was beginning to discard feudalism and preparing to embark on the invention of modernity and move on to conquer the world.

In compensation for this service as protectors of Islam, the Mamelukes gave the men of religion monopoly in the interpretation of dogmas, of justice rendered in the name of Islam and in the moral civilisation of the society. Relegated to its

purely traditional social dimension – respect for rites being the sole important consideration – religion is absolutely subjugated by the autocratic power of men of war.

Economic life is then subject to the mood of the military-political authority. Whenever possible, the peasantry is directly subjected to the whims of this ruling class and private property is jeopardised (the related principle being indisputably sacralised by the fundamental texts of Islam). The proceeds of trade are no less tapped.

The Mameluke ruling class naturally aspired to the dispersion of its autocratic power. Formally responsible to the Sultan-Caliph, the Mamelukes took advantage of the long distance then separating them from the capital (Istanbul) to personally exercise full powers within the radius of the land under their control. In areas with an age-old tradition of State centralisation, such as Egypt, there have been successive attempts to discipline the whole military corps. It is not by chance that Mohamed Ali established his centralised authority by massacring the Mamelukes, but only to re-establishing a military-real estate aristocracy under his personal authority from that time onwards. The Beys of Tunis tried to do likewise on a more modest scale. The Deys of Algiers never succeeded in doing so. The Ottoman Sultanate did so in turn, thereby integrating its Turkish, Kurdish and Armenian provinces of Anatolia and its Arab provinces of historic Syria and Iraq under an authority ‘modernised’ that way.

Just modernisation? Or just a modernised autocracy? Enlightened despotism? Or just despotism? The fluctuations and variants are situated in this range, which does not usher in anything making it possible to go beyond.

Certainly, the typical autocratic model of Mameluke had to reckon with the numerous and diverse realities that always defined the real limits. Peasant communities that took refuge in their fortified mountains (Kabylans, Maronites, Druzeans, Alaouites, etc.), Sufi brotherhoods almost everywhere and tribes obliged the dominant authorities to reach a compromise with and tolerate the rebellious groups. The contrast in Morocco between Maghzen and Bled Siba is of a similar nature.

Have the forms in which power was exercised in the Arab world changed so much to justify the assertion that those described here belong to a distant past? The autocratic State and the related forms of political management certainly exist to date. However, they are beset with a profound crisis that has already curtailed their legitimacy, as they were increasingly incapable of meeting the challenges posed by modernity. Some of the testimonies in this regard are the emergence of political Islam, overlapping political conflicts as well as the resumption of social struggles.

- The fatal error lies in thinking that the emergence of mass political movements identified with Islam is the inevitable outcome of the rise of culturally and politically backward people who cannot understand any language other than that of their quasi-atavistic obscurantism. Discourses based on the prejudice that only the West could invent modernity, while the Muslim peoples are believed to be locked inside an immutable ‘tradition’ that makes them incapable of understanding the scope of the change needed.

Muslims and Islam have a history, just like those of the other regions of the world. It is a history fraught with diverse interpretations concerning linkages between reason and faith, a history of mutual transformation and adaptation of both society and its religion. However, the reality of this history is denied not only by Eurocentric discourses but also by the contemporary movements associated with Islam. In fact, the two entities have the same cultural bias whereby the 'specific' features ascribed to the different careers of their own peoples and religions are allegedly intangible, infinite and trans-historical. To the Western world's Eurocentrism, contemporary Political Islam solely opposes an inverted Eurocentrism.

The emergence of movements claiming to be Islamic is actually expressive of a violent revolt against the destructive effects of the really existent capitalism and against its attendant unaccomplished, truncated and deceptive modernity. It is an expression of an absolutely legitimate revolt against a system that has nothing to offer to the peoples concerned.

The discourse of the Islam proposed as an alternative to the capitalist modernity (to which the modern experiences of the historical socialisms are clearly assimilated), is political by nature, and by no means theological. The 'integrist' and 'fundamentalist' attributes often ascribed to Islam by no means correspond to this discourse, which, moreover, does not even allude to Islam, except in the case of certain contemporary Muslim intellectuals who are referred to in such terms in western opinion more than in theirs.

The proposed Islam is in this case the adversary of every liberation theology. Political Islam advocates submission and not emancipation. It was only Mahmoud Taha of Sudan who attempted to emphasise the element of emancipation in his interpretation of Islam. Sentenced to death and executed by the authorities of Khartoum, Taha was not acknowledged by any 'radical' or 'moderate' Islamic group, and neither was he defended by any of the intellectuals identifying themselves with 'Islamic Renaissance' or even by those who are merely willing to 'dialogue' with such movements.

The heralds of the said 'Islamic Renaissance' are not interested in theology and they never make any reference to the classical texts concerning theology. Hence, what they understand by Islam appears to be solely a conventional and social version of religion limited to the formal and integral respect for ritual practice. The Islam in question would define a 'community' to which one belongs by inheritance, like ethnicity instead of a strong and intimate personal conviction. It is solely a question of asserting a 'collective identity' and nothing more. That is the reason why the term 'Political Islam' is certainly more appropriate to qualify all these movements in the Arab countries.

Modern political Islam had been invented by the Orientalists in the service of the British authority in India before being adopted intact by Mawdudi of Pakistan. It consisted in 'proving' that Muslim believers are not allowed to live in a State that is itself not Islamic – anticipating the partition of India – because Islam would ignore the possibility of separation between State and Religion. The Orientalists in

question failed to observe that the English of the thirteenth century would not have conceived of their survival either without Christianity!

Abul Ala Al Mawdudi therefore took up the theme stipulating that power comes from God alone (*wilaya al faqih*), thus repudiating the concept of citizens having the right to make laws, the State being solely entrusted with enforcement of the law defined once and for all (The 'Shariah'). Joseph de Maistre had already written similar things, accusing the Revolution of inventing modern democracy and individual emancipation.

Refuting the concept of emancipative modernity, Political Islam disapproves of the very principle of democracy – the right of society to build its own future through its freedom to legislate. The Shura principle is not the Islamic form of democracy, as claimed by Political Islam, for it is hampered by the ban on innovation (*ibda*), and accepts, if need be, only that of interpretation of the tradition (*ijtihad*). The Shura is only one of the multiple forms of the consultation found in all pre-modern and pre-democratic societies. Of course, interpretation has sometimes been the vehicle for real changes imposed by new demands. However, the fact remains that by virtue of its own principle – denial of the right to break with the past – interpretation leads into deadlock the modern fight for social change and democracy. The parallel claimed between the Islamic parties – radical or moderate, since all of them adhere to the same 'anti-modernist' principles in the name of the so-called specificity of Islam – and Christian-Democrat parties of modern Europe is therefore not valid, strictly speaking, even though American media and diplomatic circles continue to make allusion to the said parallel so as to legitimise their support of possibly 'Islamist' regimes. Christian-Democracy is an element of modernity of which it upholds the fundamental concept of creative democracy as the essential aspect of the concept of secularism. Political Islam refuses modernity and proclaims this fact without being able to understand its significance.

Hence, the proposed Islam does not deserve at all to be qualified as 'modern' and the supporting arguments advanced in this regard by friends of 'dialogue' are extremely platitudinous: they range from the use of cassettes by its propagandists to the observation that these agents are recruited from among the 'educated' classes – engineers for instance! Moreover, these movements' discourse solely reflects Wahabite Islam, which rejects all that the interaction between historical Islam and Greek philosophy had produced in its epoch, as it merely turned over the unimaginative writings of Ibn Taymiya, the most reactionary of the theologians of the Middle Ages. Although some of his heralds qualify this interpretation as 'a return to the sources' (or even to the Islam of the time of the Prophet), it is actually a mere reference to the notions that prevailed two hundred years ago, notions of a society whose development has been stalled for several centuries.

The contemporary Political Islam is not the outcome of a reaction to the so-called abuses of secularism, as often purported, unfortunately.

It is because no Muslim society of modern times – except in the former Soviet Union – has ever been truly secular, let alone appalled at the daring innovations of

any 'atheistic' and aggressive power. The semi-modern State of Kemal's Turkey, Nasser's Egypt, Baathist Syria and Iraq merely subjugated the men of religion (as it often happened in former times) to impose on them concepts solely aimed at legitimising its political options. The beginnings of a secular idea existed only in certain critical intellectual circles. The secular idea did not have much impact on the State, which sometimes retreated in this respect when obsessed with its nationalist project, thereby causing a break with the policy adopted by the Wafd since 1919, as testified by the disturbing evolution inaugurated even at the time of Nasser. The reason for this drift is perhaps quite obvious: whereas the democracy of the said regimes was rejected, a substitute was found in the so-called 'homogeneous community', with its danger obviously extending to the declining democracy of the contemporary Western world itself.

Political Islam intends to perfect an evolution already well established in the countries concerned and aimed at restoring a plainly conservative theocratic order associated with a political power of the 'Mameluke' type. The reference to this military caste that ruled up to two centuries ago, placed itself above all laws (by pretending to know no law other than the 'Shariah'), monopolised profits from the national economy and accepted to play a subsidiary role in the capitalist globalisation of that era – for the sake of 'realism' – instantly crosses the mind of anyone who observes the declined post-nationalist regimes of the region as well as the new so-called Islamic regimes, their twin brothers.

From this fundamental point of view, there is no difference between the so-called 'radical' movements of Political Islam and those that wanted to appear 'moderate' because the aims of both entities are identical.

The case of Iran itself is not an exception to the general rule, despite the confusions that contributed to its success: the concomitance between the rapid development of the Islamist movement and the struggle waged against the Shah who was socially reactionary and politically pro-American. Firstly, the extremely eccentric behaviour of the theocratic ruling power was compensated by its anti-imperialist positions, from which it derived its legitimacy that echoed its powerful popularity beyond the borders of Iran. Gradually, however, the regime showed that it was incapable of meeting the challenge posed by an innovative socio-economic development. The dictatorship of 'turbaned' men of religion, who took over from that of the 'caps' (military and technocrats), as they are referred to in Iran, resulted in a fantastic degradation of the country's economic machinery. Iran, which boasted about 'doing the same as Korea', now ranks among the group of 'Fourth World' countries. The indifference of the ruling power's hard wing to social problems facing the country's working classes was the basic cause of its take-over by those who described themselves as 'reformers' with a project that could certainly attenuate the rigours of the theocratic dictatorship, but without renouncing, for all that, its principle enshrined in the Constitution ('wilaya al faqih'), which formed the basis of the monopoly of a power that was therefore gradually induced to give up its 'anti-imperialist' postures and integrate the commonplace compradore world of capital-

ism of the peripheries. The system of Political Islam in Iran has reached deadlock. The political and social struggles in which the Iranian people have now been plunged might one day lead to the rejection of the very principle of 'wilaya al faqih', which places the college of the men of religion above all institutions of the political and civil society. That is the condition for their success.

Political Islam is in fact nothing other than an adaptation to the subordinate status of the compradore capitalism. Its so-called 'moderate' form therefore probably constitutes the principal danger threatening the peoples concerned since the violence of the 'radicals' only serves to destabilise the State to allow for the installation of a new compradore power. The constant support offered by the pro-American diplomacies of the Triad countries towards finding this 'solution' to the problem is absolutely consistent with their desire to impose the globalised liberal order in the service of the dominant capital.

The two discourses of the globalised liberal capitalism and Political Islam do not conflict; they are rather complementary. The ideology of American 'communitarianisms' being popularised by current fashion overshadows the conscience and social struggles and substitutes for them, so-called collective 'identities' that ignore them. This ideology is therefore perfectly manipulated in the strategy of capital domination because it transfers the struggle from the arena of real social contradictions to the imaginary world that is said to be cultural, trans-historical and absolute, whereas Political Islam is precisely 'communitarianism'.

The diplomacies of the G7 powers, and particularly that of the United States, know what they do in choosing to support Political Islam. They have done so in Afghanistan by describing its Islamists as 'freedom fighters' (!) 'against the horrible dictatorship of communism', which was in fact a project of enlightened, modernist, national and populist despotism that had the audacity to open schools for girls. They continue to do so from Egypt to Algeria. They know that the power of Political Islam has the virtue – to them – of making the peoples concerned helpless and consequently ensuring their compradorisation without difficulty.

Given its inherent cynicism, the American Establishment knows how to take a second advantage of Political Islam. The 'drifts' of the regimes that it inspires – the Taliban for instance – who are not drifts in any way but actually come within the logic of their programmes, can be exploited whenever imperialism finds it expedient to intervene brutally, if necessary. The 'savagery' attributed to the peoples who are the first victims of Political Islam is likely to encourage 'Islamophobia' and that facilitates the acceptance of the perspective of a 'global apartheid' – the logical and necessary outcome of an ever-polarising capitalist expansion.

The sole political movements using the label of Islam, which are categorically condemned by the G7 powers, are those involved in anti-imperialist struggles – under the objective circumstances at the local level: Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine. It is not a matter of chance.