Rethinking world history
ESSAYS ON EUROPE, ISLAM, AND WORLD HISTORY

MARSHALL G. S. HODGSON

Edited, with an Introduction and Conclusion by EDMUND BURKE, III
The role of Islam in world history

Until the seventeenth century of our era, the Islamicate society that was associated with the Islamic religion was the most expansive society in the Afro-Eurasian hemisphere and had the most influence on other societies. This was in part because of its central location, but also because in it were expressed effectively certain cultural pressures – cosmopolitan and egalitarian (and anti-traditional) – generated in the older and more central lands of this society. The culture of Islamdom offered a norm of international sophistication to many peoples as they were being integrated into the hemispheric commercial nexus. It also offered a flexible political framework for increasing numbers of long-civilized peoples. In this world role, the Islamicate society and culture demonstrated persistent creativity and growth, though some periods were more creative than others, until quite modern times; then the development was disrupted, not by internal decadence but by unprecedented external events. These are viewpoints that I have been forced to develop in the course of attempting a general history of Islamicate civilization, viewpoints that seem to emerge cumulatively from recent studies in several particular fields as well as from the synoptic approach I have adopted. I think they are important for historians, even those outside of Islamic studies, to take cognizance of, though neither the full grounds for them nor their precise implications or limitations can be presented completely here.

In the sixteenth century of our era, a visitor from Mars might well have supposed that the human world was on the verge of becoming Muslim. He would have based his judgment partly on the strategic and political advantages of the Muslims, but partly also on the vitality of their general culture.

Their social and political eminence leaps to the eye. In the eastern hemisphere, where lived nine-tenths of mankind, allegiance to Islam was far more widespread than any other allegiance. Muslims, that is persons committed to worshipping God according to the teaching of
Muhammad of Arabia and of the Quran which he brought, formed the majority of the population in areas as far apart as Morocco and Sumatra, as the port cities of the Swahili coast of east Africa and the agricultural plains around Kazan on the Volga, in the latitude of Moscow. In many of the lands between, even where they did not form the majority, Muslims were socially and politically dominant. The eastern Christian and the Hindu and southern Buddhist lands, even when not ruled outright by Muslims (as in most of India and in southeast Europe) were most subject to the cultural and even political attraction of surrounding Muslim states; in most cases, Muslim traders, or other traders from Muslim-ruled states, formed their most active and continuous link with the outside world. In particular, the greater part of the key historic lands of citied culture in the hemisphere, from Athens to Benares, were under Muslim rule. In all the citied regions of the Afro-Eurasian land mass and its dependent islands, only two culture blocs seriously resisted a potential Muslim hegemony: the Chinese and Japanese Far East and the Christian far Northwest.

Some Westerners have thought of Muslims as reaching the peak of their power in 732, when a minor raiding party was turned back by Franks in Northern Gaul. But this is a parochial illusion. On the world scale, the Muslim peoples reached the height of their political power in the sixteenth century, when a large part of Islamdom was ruled under three large empires, whose good organization and prosperity aroused the admiration of Occidentals: the Ottoman, centered in Anatolia and the Balkans; the Safavi, in the Fertile Crescent and the Iranian highlands; and the Mughal or Timuri, in northern India. Westerners have focused on the empire nearest them, the Ottoman; but though it may sometimes have been slightly the strongest of the three, it was not geographically central to Islamdom, nor was it significant culturally as the central empire, the Safavi, or even the Indic empire. The three empires treated each other diplomatically as equals. One of them singlehanded, the Ottoman empire, was able to defeat the allied forces of Christian Europe, and during the sixteenth century it steadily advanced to the northwest.

But Muslim power was not limited to these major empires. In the Indian Ocean, the many little Muslim states faced a serious challenge early in the century. We all know the glory of the Portuguese. When they rounded the Cape, they were fortunate to find in East Africa a Muslim pilot who was no ordinary sailor: he was advocating among Muslims the publication of the trade secrets of navigation in the Indian Ocean, and himself wrote a book on the subject. True to his principles, he guided the Christian newcomers across to India. His principle of the open door was not recipro-
The Portuguese, who had navigated the stormier Atlantic, had gained a certain degree of technical superiority over the Muslims. Only the Chinese shipping from the Pacific was larger and stronger. The Portuguese also had bases in West Africa inaccessible to the Muslims, which gave them a political advantage. They proceeded to attempt to monopolize certain parts of the Indian Ocean spice trade, trying especially to cut off the limited portion of that trade which went up the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean, serving as source of supply for their own European rivals, the Venetians.

It is only now coming to be realized how far the Portuguese were from marking the start of a European hegemony. At first they had some success, partly by taking advantage of rivalries among the Muslim powers. Neither the Ottoman nor the Timuri Mughal power, oriented away from the Southern Seas, proved of much help against them, though the Ottomans sent one expedition as far as Sumatra (and at one time planned to cut a ship canal between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean). But by the later part of the century, the Muslims of the Indian Ocean had themselves matched the Portuguese technical advantages and had succeeded in containing them, reducing them to one element among others in the multinational trading world of the Southern Seas. Muslim political power continued to spread in the Malay Archipelago, and the spice trade up the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf seems to have been as great as ever.¹

In the far north, Muslims were also facing a challenge from Christian Europeans. The Muscovites, who had become independent of Muslim rule in the preceding century, were building up a vast and powerful domain, and actually succeeded during the century in overpowering the Muslim states on the Volga. The Ottomans attempted to turn the tide by cutting a ship canal between the Don and the Volga (at Stalingrad, where, finally, the Soviet Union has in fact cut a canal), so as to ensure regular communications between the Black Sea and the Caspian. They failed, partly through the jealousy of the other northern Muslim powers. But the northern powers themselves actively staved off the Russian advance for a time. The Özbegs of Bukhara helped by sending peasant colonists north to the Irtysh basin (the original "Siberia") so as to stiffen

the Muslim khanate there, which was based on a rather sparse population, against the steady influx of the Russians.²

The Europe of the Renaissance was not yet able to do more than dent the vast mass of Muslim power, and indeed the Christian Europeans themselves (as we know) lived in some dread that "the Turk" might overrun them all. When the French temporarily gave the Ottomans a naval base on the southern coast of France, they were regarded as traitors to the most pressing of common European causes. But, at least late in the century, an extraordinary perceptive visitor from Mars might have been able to foresee a change. Already by the end of the sixteenth century, basic transformations were beginning in Occidental economic and scientific life, transformations that were to result, within two centuries, in the unquestionable supremacy of the Christian European powers throughout the world. During these two centuries, largely as a result of changes in the Occident, the economic and cultural life of Muslim peoples was to be denatured and undermined.

But meanwhile, in the sixteenth century and well into the seventeenth, the Muslims found themselves at a peak point not only of political power but also of cultural creativity. This was especially the case in the old core area of Muslim culture, the Fertile Crescent and the Iranian highlands; but the Muslims of India took a great part and also, to some degree, those of the Ottoman empire. The subsequent time of decline has cast a shadow over the greatness of the age, which by no means leaps to the eye any more; yet it was quite as much Muslim cultural splendor as Muslim political power that might have persuaded the Martian visitor that Islam was about to prevail among mankind, and some of the monuments of that splendor are known even to the relatively casual modern Westerner.

In the visual arts, a new tradition of painting (what we usually call the "Persian miniatures"); beginning in the fourteenth century, came to a first climax at the end of the fifteenth century with Behzad, and in the sixteenth century was further developed in several directions - including not only formal illustration but pen-and-ink genre scenes and fine portraiture. At the same time, an architectural tradition was developing whose most famous point of culmination was the Taj Mahal in India, completed in 1653. In the field of letters, the three great Muslim languages were Persian, Arabic, and Turkish, though numerous lesser languages also

² On Ottoman and other Muslim political and economic activity in the sixteenth century, an illuminating recent survey is W. E. D. Allen, Problems of Turkish Power in the Sixteenth Century. (London: Central Asian Research Centre, 1963.)
were developing literary forms in that period. Poetry remained the pre-
eminent form of expression: the sixteenth century was the age of the
"Indian style," later rejected by Persian critics as too recherché in the
unpoetic days of the eighteenth century, but recently being recognized
again for its subtle and creative command of all the resources of allu-
sion that rich Persian poetic tradition has built up in the preceding five
centuries. In Turkish and Persian prose, especially, the old solid tradi-
tion of historical, geographical, and biographical literature was supple-
mented with a new vogue for revealing autobiographies which matched
the portraiture of the time in its interest in the private and personal:
notably the Turkish memoirs of Babur, Timurid conqueror of north
India.3

We have little idea what was being done in the natural sciences. In the
time of the great observatory at Samarqand, in the fifteenth century,
Muslim astronomers certainly were abreast and possibly still ahead of
those in China and the Occident, where, after a peak in the thirteenth
century under Muslim influence, scientific studies had become less ac-
tive in the fourteenth century. But the rows and rows of Arabic and
Persian scientific works of all sorts that survive have scarcely been cata-
logued and still less read since the end of the eighteenth century.4 In
philosophy, however, the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries saw
much vigorous new inquiry, the most prominent figure being Molla
Sadra, whose doctrine of the mutability of essences inspired a series of
philosophic movements still having repercussions among twentieth-
century Muslims.5

It is conventional for modern scholars to assume that Islamicate cul-
ture underwent a decline or decadence after the collapse of the High
Caliphate or, at latest, by the time of the Mongol conquest in the thir-

3 The master study on Persian literature now is that of Alessandro Bausani, in A. Pagliaro
and A. Bausani, Storia della letteratura persiana (Milan: Nuova Academia Editrice, 1960),
which pinpoints the newer insights into sixteenth-century poetry. I might add that Mar-
tin Dickson of Princeton University, though he has not yet published much, has helped
those who know him perceive the cultural vigor and variety of this period.
4 C. A. Storey, Persian Literature: a bio-bibliographical survey (London: Luzac, 1927–1984), the
volumes of which are still appearing, suggests in its sections on the sciences the wealth
waiting to be investigated.
5 The most important recent writer to bring out the importance of Islamic philosophy in
the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is Henry Corbin: perhaps even more revealing
than his works dealing directly with Molla Sadra is volume I of his Histoire de la philosophie
islamique (Paris: Gallimard, 1964). But already the Indian poet and inspirer of Pakistan,
Muhammad Iqbal, in the last pages of his The Development of Metaphysics in Persia (Lon-
don: Luzac, 1908), had indicated to the perceptive reader what active seeds lay in Molla
Sadra especially.
teenth century; and therefore to regard any evidence of vitality or great-
ness in the later periods, notably in the sixteenth century, as somehow
exceptional, as if it were no part of Islamicate culture proper but only a
series of unrelated accidents. I believe this is a misconception, partly due
to the want, hitherto, of any real overview of Islamicate culture as a
whole. In any case, the notion of Muslim decadence cannot be seriously
maintained until the effect is eliminated of a variety of preconditions and
unbalanced procedures of inquiry that would be bound to produce the
illusion of a relatively early decadence, whether there was decadence or
not. I cannot here do more than mention a few of these cases; a compre-
hensive analysis would have to deal with certain prevalent misconcep-
tions of Western history itself and with the relevance to Islamic studies of
certain problems inherent in any historical comparisons as well as with
the peculiar ways in which the study of Islamicate history as such has
been approached.

One natural but unfortunate tendency that has effectively molded our
conceptions of Islamdom has been our concentration on the Mediterra-
nean Muslim lands, since they were nearest to the Occident. Once this
meant focusing on the Ottomans as they entered European diplomatic
history; more recently, it has highlighted the peoples now using the
Arabic language, in part because of a philological interest in the lan-
guage and in classical "origins." A popular identification of Muslims
with Arabs has resulted in an especially pervasive series of misper-
ceptions. In fact, the most creative centers of Islamdom were, in all
periods, mostly eastward from the Mediterranean - from Syria to the
 Oxus basin (and largely in non-Arab territory). It is in these areas that
most men of all-Islamic influence were born, whereas exceedingly few
were born in Egypt, for instance. Many basic institutions seem to have
originated in the farther east of this zone - in Khurasan (the northeast
Iranian highlands): Madrasah schools, Sufi brotherhood organizations,
the acceptance of Kalam theology as integral to Islam, and so on. An-
other source of misconceptions has been the tendency of Muslims them-
selves, since the nineteenth century, to reject the immediate past as a
failure and look to certain earlier "classical" strands in their heritage that
seem to offer resources against modern Western encroachments; a ten-
dency that Westerners have often encouraged for their own reasons.
Thus, Western scholars discuss cultural decline in Islam, attempting to
pinpoint the time and manner of decadence in the arts, religion, philoso-
phy, and science, without really proving that such decadence really ex-
isted, and without evaluating the great works of later periods; the crite-
ria for such cursory evaluation as is made tend to be very subjective.\(^6\) The esthetic and philosophic criteria used are now being challenged in the light of recent Western changes in taste.

Only in the study of the Islamicate economy and of natural science do we have much hope of reasonably detached inquiry. It seems clear that there was a contraction in the economy of most of the central Muslim lands between the ninth and the seventeenth centuries; yet even so we have no real knowledge of the overall picture. In some cases, we know that the contraction was due at least in part to conditions beyond human control at the time; thus, in parts of the Iraq, remarkable feats of engineering were undertaken, but failed to reverse a deterioration in the irrigation system which in part was the result of geological changes.\(^7\) The decline cannot be written off as due simply to a reduction of cultural vigor. Then, even within areas where an economic contraction can be identified in one sense or another, little distinction has been made between the cultural effects of contraction as a process at a given time and those of a lower but stabilized level of economic resources after the contraction has long since happened; or between limitation of resources available for patronage of non-economic cultural activities, which might decline as a result, and an actual reduction in the level of economic technique and sophistication, which in any case would be hard to demonstrate (before the eighteenth century). In short, even to the extent that we can speak of economic contraction, we cannot yet identify surely any cultural correlatives of it, economic or otherwise.

Natural science also is discussed by Westerners, who suggest that though the quality of the best of it remained unsurpassed through the fifteenth and possibly the sixteenth centuries, there was less great work after 1300, and the level of popular manuals declined after 1500. But on investigation, one finds that the data such studies are based on are mostly from the Mediterranean area rather than the more central Islamicate areas; that is, they are largely representative of relatively marginal lands. One may assume that there may have been a relatively less creative period in Islamdom between, say, 1300 and 1450 (as in some other parts of the world at the time – in some respects, even in Western Europe), and yet we find that the crucial blocking of creativity in the overall tradition came only after 1650 or 1700 as a result of competition

---


\(^7\) Robert McC. Adams, *Land Behind Baghdad* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), has shown what was happening in at least one small area.
with a newly transformed West. In this case, one would expect that the greater figures in the centuries just before 1700 would remain unappreciated; for when modern investigation began, to suggest what of the later work was worth reading would be second-rate epigones. Such men would indeed be aware of the famous earlier names, but would incapable of judging among more recent figures, not yet fully winnowed by fame when the best men's attentions were diverted. A picture such as is reported would naturally result, especially in the less central lands. Such evidence as there is would be consistent with this hypothesis. We must await further investigations before we can decide whether, even in the special field of natural science, there was any actual decadence.

One reason for the assumption of an earlier and ingrained decadence is a question that naturally arises, given the usual notions of world history, in a modern perspective. Westerners often ask what it was that went wrong, that the Muslim lands, once powerful, did not go on to share in the great Western transformations of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and enter modern times on a par with the Occident. We shall deal very briefly with that question later. The answer does not lie, I am sure, primarily in any prior internal failure of Muslim society; and certainly not in any special obscurantism of Islamic religion. On the contrary, before we can properly pose the question of what happened in the eighteenth century, we must first understand how Islam came to have so great a success for a thousand years. This will require that we turn back to the origins of Islam and its history - and this, in turn, will require us to understand the yet earlier Irano-Semitic cultural traditions of which the Muslims were the heirs. And then we will find our way forward to the sixteenth century.

The immediate background of Islam in the Arabian Hijaz, like that of Christianity in Palestine, is significant; but in both cases, the actual formation of the religion took place in a wider setting, which was at least as important as the local milieu of the founder. Islam was first established, as the allegiance of a major community, in the extensive zone of Semitic and Iranian lands between the Nile and the Oxus rivers. Islam has often been interpreted chiefly in terms of its Arabian environment, and elements identifiable as tracing back to sources outside Arabia have been envisaged as borrowings; but it is truer to the dynamic of events to recognize that, from the beginning, its development presupposed and built upon the cultural resources of the whole wider region.

Mecca depended for its existence on commercial ties with the Fertile Crescent and was keenly aware of the shifting political forces in the region as a whole. Muhammad's political policy seems increasingly to
have taken into account the regional balance of power. Though the majority of the local population was pagan, several Arab groups had adopted Jewish or Christian allegiance; Muhammad’s preaching in Mecca presupposed a general acquaintance with the monotheistic traditions, which Muhammad claimed he was sent to confirm – and to correct. Jews were especially strong in Medina, where Muhammad went in 622 to lead an independent community that would put his ideals into practice. Many of the religious disputes that were agitated among Christians and Jews in the region at large found an echo at Mecca and Medina. It is possible to interpret much of the Quran as an attempt to get behind those disputes to common basic essentials, to the faith of Abraham who was before Jews and Christians. Almost immediately after Muhammad’s death in 632, his community made itself master of the whole region from Nile to Oxus. In doing so, it did not enter essentially alien territory. When Islam was announced there, the new doctrine did not seem strange, and indeed increasing numbers found it quite a logical further step in their own religious development.

The conquered peoples were expected, in principle, to carry on essentially in their old ways, maintaining their old religious allegiances. But it was not many generations before the majority of the urban population insisted on adopting Islam, and even those who did not do so tended to use Arabic as a common medium of culture. The Muslim empire had been based on a pastoralist military force, but that force had been led by urban merchants whose outlook was not incompatible with that of the mercantile elements in the conquered lands. In any case, in marked contrast to other pastoralist empires, the one created by the Arabs stayed in one piece and endured; and, as the Arabs were assimilated into the regional population, they did not adopt the local languages and religious systems but instead were able to impose their own language and allegiance on the various peoples they had conquered.

After a century, the empire ceased to be a strictly Arab state; it came to be dominated by the converted peoples in the name of a supranational Islam, though for some time the common language of culture was Arabic. The religion, at first scarcely more than a ruling-class code and a powerful but ill-defined spiritual impetus, was deepened and broadened by the contributions of the various peoples from Nile to Oxus; these included many of the presuppositions of the sharia law.

---

8 The implications of Muhammad’s campaigns toward Syria, in the light of Byzantine-Sasani vicissitudes at the time and of earlier Meccan history, have not yet been fully explored; Wm. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medine* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1956), has gathered much suggestive material.
itself, sometimes thought of as the heart of Islam, which was effectively tied to the Quran only by a relatively late stroke of genius (that of al-Shafi, d. 820). The institutions that the ruling Arabs had begun to build around the religion served to recast all the older Irano-Semitic cultural traditions on a new and more integrated basis. Thus developed a flourishing international Perso-Arabic civilization with its distinctive arts and letters, science and traditions, and manners and mores, which one can call Islamicate culture. As we have seen, this civilization, including its religious core, later spread far beyond the original centers from Nile to Oxus and proved to have so great an appeal that it was accepted even in the heartlands of the Hellenic and Sanskritic cultures. It has continued to follow in the wake of the Muslim trader and missionary ever since, throughout the globe, somewhat as Western ways have followed the modern Christian missionary.

What was it that Islam contributed to the Irano-Semitic heritage to make of it so potent a force? It was partly religion in the stricter sense: a specially satisfying sense of the human relationship to the divine. But associated with this was an unusually flexible social order, which gave anyone who became a Muslim an opportunity to develop his talents on a scale that was relatively unfettered by pre-Modern standards. I believe this social order was rooted in the special geographical and cultural circumstances of the region from Nile to Oxus, but it was reinforced and brought to flower under the aegis of Islam. I have discussed the religious appeal of Islam elsewhere; here I want to discuss more the social side of its power.

For this purpose, I shall be stressing the role of mercantile elements; but it must not be assumed that Islam was essentially a merchants' religion. Other classes played equally important formative roles. Even the strength of the sort of institution associated with mercantile interest was often made possible, indirectly and even directly, only by the special

---

9 The work of Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), brings out the remarkable role of al-Shafi, but we have yet to pin down how it was that the basic expectations about religion that governed the formation of the *sharia* came to be so close to those governing the Jewish *Halakha* law; studies of correspondences in detail between *sharia* and *Halakha* scarcely touch this deeper question. The parallelism cannot simply be derived from primitive Islamic principles, for quite diverse consequences could be and were drawn from those.

role of pastoralist groups. And such central phenomena as popular Sufi mysticism and the men's associations that came to be allied to it must be associated more with craftsmen than with any other one class, though different forms of them appeared on several class levels. But I believe that the strategic position of the mercantile class, and even the activity of its members, accounts for much of the institutional pattern that gave Islamdom its strength. I must add that we know too little of actual social structures in various periods and areas to do more than indicate certain directions of social pressure.

Karl Jaspers has given us a name for that remarkable age from about 800 to 200 B.C., when there were formulated the greatest motifs of the major pre-modern lettered traditions that subsequently dominated all the core culture areas of the old hemisphere: that is, the Chinese tradition in the Far East; the Indic south of the Himalayas; the Hellenic or European tradition in the Anatolian, Greek, and Italian peninsulas; and the post-Cuneiform Irano-Semitic tradition between Nile and Oxus, from Syria to Khurasan (the northeast Iranian highlands). He called that age the "Axial Age," the age of Confucius, Buddha, and Socrates, and of Zoroaster and Isaiah. It is the age in which originated the prophetic tradition of moralistic monotheism which Islam later brought to a certain culmination.

From that time on until the advent of industrializing modernity, the citied zone of the eastern hemisphere continued to be articulated around the core areas that were set off by the four lettered traditions. But the relations among these four traditions altered greatly. For a time, the post-Cuneiform Irano-Semitic tradition seemed to be weak relative to the other three, and it was almost submerged under the Greek and even the Indic traditions. This phenomenon must be seen not simply as an alien imposition upon the region, but as an aspect of the transformation going on within the Irano-Semitic lands themselves. Beginning at the end of the Axial Age, as the massive Cuneiform tradition was being slowly replaced between Nile and Oxus, many aspects of lettered culture were transferred not into the newer local Iranian and Semitic languages, such as Aramaic, but into Greek, a language less overshadowed by the prestige of the Cuneiform, and used for relatively cosmopolitan purposes by many persons of local, non-Greek cultural background. The shift was

\[11\] I have tried to pinpoint the relations among these lettered traditions as forming a world-historical phenomenon in "The Interrelations of Societies in History," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 5 (1963), pp. 227–50.
especially notable, of course, in the tradition of natural science, which had been making important advances in the Axial Age within the Cuneiform tradition itself. Greek prevailed as the cultural language even at Iranian royal courts. Later when the Indic tradition (especially as carried by Buddhism) was proving so widely influential in the hemisphere, Sanskritic culture rivalled Greek in much of the region from Nile to Oxus.

Even under Greek domination, however, the Irano-Semitic tradition pursued a distinctive development, based on the work of the monotheistic prophets of the Axial Age. While the Greek lettered tradition had become the vehicle of many aspects of culture from Nile to Oxus, new traditions of Irano-Semitic origin, developing in diverse ways the heritage of the prophets, captured its urban conscience. Such traditions proved strong enough, especially in the form of Christianity, to mold much of the religious life of the European region itself. But within the central Iranian and Semitic lands, the monotheistic allegiances played an especially formative social role. Increasingly, the cultural life of the region was articulated in a series of autonomous religious communities, relatively independent of territorial state formations, and many of them (for instance, the more popular Christian sects) identified with the ordinary town population as against any agrarian aristocracy. We shall see that Islam maintained this communal articulation while overcoming its divisiveness.

The communal articulation affected all the lettered traditions of the region. Greek was unchallenged in its European peninsulas, from Anatolia to Italy; Latin played there for centuries a culturally secondary and imitative role. Sanskrit was unchallenged in the north Indian plains, and of its several rivals only Pali, used by some Buddhists, achieved a limitedly independent life. Chinese was unchallenged throughout the realm of the Han empire. But between Nile and Oxus, no one language gained such a position – not even Greek. Aramaic, the Semitic language of the Fertile Crescent, came to form different literary languages for Jacobite Christians, Nestorian Christians, and Jews. Parthians and Persians used different forms of Middle Iranian. Gradually, in the early centuries of our era, all aspects of the culture of the region were embodied in these several literary languages, which differed not merely in religious allegiance but in cultural orientation generally. Thus the Nestorian form of Aramaic carried one branch of the philosophical and astronomical tradition, while the Jacobite form of Aramaic carried a different branch, and in Middle Persian still a different philosophical synthesis was evidently
being attempted, in association with official Zoroastrianism. All these traditions had most of their cultural roots in common, but they did not "speak the same language"; the monotheistic religious allegiances, which afforded what cultural integration each had within itself, divided them implacably from one another, even within the same political comity. Such a division was not paralleled within the ordinary population of Greek and Latin peninsulas, even though they were also adopting a monotheistic religious tradition, Christianity.

At the same time, in the early centuries of our era, the role of these Iranian and Semitic populations commercially and even politically in the hemisphere was becoming more important. Not only between Nile and Oxus was Greek yielding (even as language of science) to the several communal languages. In the wider commercial network which joined India and the Mediterranean basin, Greek was losing its commercial position, and Iranian and especially Semitic groups were coming to the fore. It was in the same period when Greek was ceasing to be used in western India that the historic Jewish and Christian colonies, later to be joined by Muslims, were forming on the southwest Indian coast. In the opposite direction, though Greek was not ousted from its home soil in the Mediterranean basin, traders in the west Mediterranean lands came to be thought of as "Syrians" and as Jews. In Central Eurasia, also, Indic influence was rivalled by that of Aramaic groups. The East African trade was dominated by Semites with ties to Syria. The expansion of the Irano-Semitic culture thus began some time before Muhammad.

The communal articulation of the Irano-Semitic traditions and their simultaneous outreach into the wider Indo-Mediterranean regions are to be explained, I think, in part by two features of the region between Nile and Oxus; features that were accentuated in Islamic times. As compared with the Mediterranean peninsulas and the north Indian plains, the region was sufficiently arid to make for insecurity, as time went on, in any system of agrarian aristocracy. Marginal lands could easily pass into and out of cultivation, and desperate peasants could shop around for advantageous terms. At any rate, it was never so easy to fix the peasants to the soil in most areas between Nile and Oxus as it was in Europe or even in much of India: Irano-Semitic (and then Islamicate) society there-
fore was founded on a relatively free peasantry, bound by neither manor nor caste. (Political literature of the region is full of warnings against so abusing the peasantry that they will leave the land.) Correspondingly, the position of the agrarian gentry was necessarily more readily put in question. This became increasingly the case over the millennia, as possibilities of independent pastoral life were developed, first among the horse nomads to the north and then among the camel nomads to the south. Pastoral use of farmlands became an ever-present alternative to agricultural use; indeed, a certain proportion of the peasants themselves eventually came to be settled pastoralists, retaining their ties to nomadism, and ready to return to it at need. And eventually a pastoralist privileged class came to form a standing alternative to the established agrarian class.

While the tenure of the agrarian gentry was less secure, on the average, than in the other core regions, the position of the mercantile classes, again on average, was economically more secure, for they had special sources of strength. In no other region was there such a concentration of bottlenecks of long-distance trade in all directions with such varied and extensive areas, east and west, north and south. Through cities like Nishapur and Balkh in Khurasan (northeastern Iran) passed almost all the external land trade from the Indic region: up through the Khaibar pass and westward toward the Mediterranean, northward to the Volga and Irtysh plains, eastward to China. Through them also passed the most used land routes between China and the Mediterranean. The central cities of western Iran likewise carried the land trade between the Mediterranean on the one hand and either India or China on the other; and much of that between the Southern Seas and the Caspian land and water routes northward to the Volga-Irtysh regions. In the Fertile Crescent, finally, or next door in Egypt, converged many of the land routes mentioned above, as well as all the routes between the far-flung Southern Seas and the Mediterranean region, with its northern (European) hinterlands and also the Sudanic lands to the south. As a region, the Semitic-Iranian lands were the only one of the great core cultural areas in direct contact with each of the others, as well as with the great frontier areas – the Eurasian fluvial plains, the Sudanic lands, and the Far South East.

Long-distance trade was never the chief source of urban income; and not all of these routes were of equal importance at all times. But cumulatively over the centuries they seem to have afforded the leading mercantile classes of the principal cities in these regions a strongly cosmopolitan orientation and, frequently, the opportunity to build a relatively depend-
able source of wealth relatively independent of local agrarian conditions at any given time. At the same time, they were not politically independent. As in all the pre-Modern agrarian-based societies, the classes that controlled the land had a dominant position in the society as a whole over any large territorial region; though here and there, as on the coasts of the Mediterranean or of the Indian Ocean, mercantile cities would be self-governing. The relative accessibility of most cities to large-scale military campaigns from an agrarian hinterland prevented the formation of independent city states in most areas and forced each city to work out its cultural patterns in intimate union with the wider territory around it.

This tendency to a qualified independence in the mercantile classes, like that to relative insecurity in agrarian tenure, likewise increased with time. The commercial network across the Afro-Eurasian citied regions expanded fairly steadily over the millennia — steadily, if gauged at five-hundred-year intervals, that is — both as to range of relatively direct contacts and as to variety and potential importance of the trade. In Babylonian times, long-distance trade through the Fertile Crescent was scarcely to be distinguished from trade between the Iraq and Syria. Then, even after a larger commercial network had established itself, the network continued to grow. The Malaysian islands, for instance, from way stations when the southeastern sea routes were first opened up at the beginning of our era, were gradually developed into important sources of varied products and then, as citied life developed there, into complex markets. With time, the variety of goods handled in long-distance trade increased, and hence its importance in any one area; while dependence of the long-distance commercial network as a whole on any one region or trade route lessened.

Such considerations were surely marginal; the region from Nile to Oxus, like other regions, continued to support a primarily agrarian-based society, with all the limitations on historical development which this implied. Nevertheless, these conditions, tending on the average to exalt the mercantile role in the society at the expense of the agrarian, seem to have had their effects. It is surely in part because of the secular tendency toward an increased mercantile bias, as the zone of citied culture expanded over the hemisphere, that in the Indo-Mediterranean regions the early eminence of the Mediterranean commercial tongue, Greek, gave way before a greater dominance by the more centrally placed peoples.

A more interesting indicator of the mercantile bias can be traced in the history of the Irano-Semitic monotheisms. With time, the egalitarian and cosmopolitan tendencies in these traditions became more prominent:
their tendency to reject hierarchical or aristocratic ties; to devalue local
time-bound symbolisms; to stress interpersonal, moral norms at the
expense of the esthetic or symbolically emotional sides of religious expe-
rience; and to exalt the saving community of the faithful over any other
social structuring.

As so often, a most sensitive index of this development lay in art,
where the rise of iconophobia plots out the curve. I refer not only to its
development among the Jews and many Christians—especially the
Monophysites—but also to the tendency among Mazdeans to use ab-
stract symbols, like fire, and the limitation to aristocratic circles among
them of the use of images, which were associated with older nature-
bound cults; so that with the fall of the court such elements scarcely
survived among Zoroastrians. As we shall see, cult images seem to have
been associated sometimes with aristocratic luxury, sometimes with the
worship of nature gods rather than the one moral God; but in any case
they seem to have been increasingly rejected by the various religious
communities, even those with Mazdean connections. And along with
the stress on more abstract symbolization of divinity went an emphasis
on the all-sufficiency of the religious community as sole legitimate chan-
nel of human social and cultural efforts; this led to the canalization of all
cultural life into these communities and their communal languages, men-
tioned above.

In the middle of the first millennium of our era, then, the Irano-
Semitic peoples between Nile and Oxus were becoming increasingly
prominent in the commercial life of the expanding Afro-Eurasian citied
complex; and internally their culture was developing a relevant variant
on the religious orientation common to all the core areas. They were
working out the prophetic impulses of the Axial Age within increasingly
communal channels, with an increasingly egalitarian and cosmopolitan
bias; and this bias was singularly appropriate to the relatively rootless
merchant classes, with few ties to nature and to its gods, with a distrust
of aristocratic excellences and subtleties and a preference for social orga-
nization autonomous from the gentry, and with a strong need for an
egalitarian market morality. The chief empire in the region, the Sasanian
(ruling all the Irano-Semitic core area save the Syrian end of the Fertile
Crescent), was indeed founded on an aristocratic and agrarian form of
the monotheistic traditions. The Zoroastrian priesthood formed a high
aristocracy. But it had to allow for the existence and often the predomi-
nance in its cities of less aristocratic communities; and in its last century
the empire underwent serious upheavals, both religious and political,
which apparently badly undermined the position of the agrarian gentry on which it was founded.\textsuperscript{13}

At this point Islam appeared, establishing not only a new common religious allegiance but also a new policy where the Sasanian had stood. Both the new religion and the new polity and its conquests were largely the work of merchants of a cosmopolitan outlook. Originated by a merchant in an independent mercantile town engaged in long-distance trade, it became the rallying-point of a rather complex political movement. One thread in this movement was the extension of a political and economic system which the Meccans had already established to control the routes between Syria and the Yemen.\textsuperscript{14} The prosperity of Mecca seems to have been founded with the help of tribesmen along the route to Syria, who in Muhammed's time were within the Roman sphere of influence; but Mecca had thrived by painstakingly maintaining its neutrality between the three centers of agrarian power that surrounded Bedouin Arabia: the Iraq, Syria, and the Yemen. When Muhammad took over the Meccan system of tribal contacts, he made a special point of trying to absorb into it the tribesmen at the Syrian end of the west Arabian trade route, who incidentally had formed a military reservoir for the Romans; when his successors finally won those tribesmen over, all Syria capitulated and thenceforth cooperated faithfully - a fact that made possible the other conquests. The outcome was that the early Muslim empire was ruled, from Syria, by the leading merchant family of Mecca (the Umayyads), a family that had been engaged specifically in the Syrian trade.

I mention such points, however, chiefly to remind us that the establishment of Islam was, from its origin, not reducible to a supposedly recurrent wave of surplus and nomad population stirred to martyrdom by tales of black-eyed maidens - a conception both ecologically and psychologically most improbable. In fact, whatever the form it took at the moment of conquest, the history of the first century of the Muslim empire

\textsuperscript{13} The most ambitious attempt to analyze these events from a world-historical viewpoint, that of Franz Altheim, \textit{Utopie und Wirtschaft} (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1957), comes to a very different conclusion from the present essay; it suffers from a drastic schematism as well as an arbitrary interpretation of details - its analysis of Muhammad, for instance, is weirdly anachronistic; but it has suggestive data.

\textsuperscript{14} The several works of H. Lammens, notably \textit{La Mecque a la veille de l'hégire}, (Beirut: Imprimerie catholique, 1924), which pointed out the extensive dimensions of the Meccan system, are full of over-daring suggestions and have been justly criticized; but their main conclusions still stand and have not even been fully replaced by the several subsequent studies in a similar vein.
was the history of its gradual reconstitution as an Irano-Semitic agrarian empire such as the Sasanian had been. But the advent of Islam made several enduring differences. Because of the special circumstances of the conquest, an even greater degree of social mobility was introduced than is usual in such cases. At the same time, the area of the former Sasanian imperial structure was somewhat enlarged. Partly for this reason but partly also because of the pressure of other social elements, the old Sasanian gentry, though it was converted to Islam, lost its supremacy. Indeed, the effort to maintain an effective agrarian bureaucratic order partly foundered because it proved impossible, under the conditions of high social mobility which the Arab conquest had brought about, to exclude cosmopolitan mercantile elements from the administration. In the long run (by 945) this meant the collapse of the Irano-Semitic imperial tradition itself.

But this would probably not have ensued without reinforcement of the political fluidity by the more positive effects of Islam itself as a religious allegiance. Islam fulfilled in a remarkable way the moralistic, egalitarian, and communal tendencies that had been growing in the Irano-Semitic monotheisms. Indeed, Bedouin Arabia, as something of a mission field for the several monotheistic traditions, had displayed in a most direct way the paradoxes of the communal plurality that was fragmenting the region from Nile to Oxus into a multiplicity of lettered traditions. A sensitive observer could soon learn there how the various prophetic traditions had come to contradict one another, as we have noted, much of the Quran can be read as an exhortation to reject all the varying communal traditions and to hearken to God alone, the God of Abraham, who was a true believer before any of the communities arose. Yet Islam had its own effective communalism. Already as developed in Muhammad's time, Islam seemed to fulfill in an unparalleled way the ideal of a total egalitarian community dedicated to godly moral norms.

Under the special circumstances of the conquest, Islam was further developed as an autonomous total community. Those who were developing Islam as a set of social ideals soon found themselves in bitter opposition to those who were developing the political heritage of Muhammad in practice; and in particular to the tendency to organize the Islamic society as an agrarian absolutist empire. When the representatives of Islamic idealism found, despite an apparently successful revolution (in 749-50), that they could not guide the representatives of Islamic power into their own ways, they set about at least to make them harmless. The Islamic *sharia* law was largely an expression of the responsibility of individuals not only for their personal life but for the whole ordering of
society: public offices, as such, were ruled out; everything became the responsibility of the community as a whole and therefore of the individuals who made it up. The Caliph might have a function, but it was, in principal, minimal. Wherever Muslims were found in sufficient numbers, the *sharia* law would allow them to constitute their own fully legitimate social structure in all needful respects. And the authority of the *sharia* law was such that (though several other sorts of laws were used alongside it) no alternative institutions, which might have neutralized its effect, could achieve legitimation and hence long-run durability.

Because *sharia* law was formed and maintained by the private initiative of private persons, special provision had to be made to ensure uniformity and predictability. It was widely held that a jurist must declare himself the adherent of one or another of a handful of recognized schools of law, and if a particular point had been agreed on by the majority of his school in the past, he had to follow the majority. Such requirements have been regarded as enforcing excessive rigidity. But if one looks not at the elementary textbooks but at the authoritative collections of legal decisions, it turns out that in each of the main legal schools ways were found to adapt to changing circumstances at a pace sufficient for pre-modern needs.

One consequence of this autonomy and exclusiveness in the *sharia* law was an undermining of the legitimacy of any agrarian absolutist authority, including the Caliphate itself. But another consequence rather made up for this; to give a religious community as such a viable total political role as the basis for society. This gave the Irano-Semitic populations at last a common vehicle for their traditions, representing, as their several religious communities had long begun to do, the populistic urban ideals over against any agrarian government. Into the Islamic framework and the Arabic language were transferred — and often directly translated — most of the more vital elements of the Irano-Semitic heritages: the elements of monotheistic religion, of course (the old popular lore, and much of the more élite wisdom, received an Islamic dress); but also belles-lettres, history, science, and philosophy. Nestorians and Monophysites learned Arabic to write their medical treatises even when they did not turn Muslim. At last the region from Nile to Oxus had its common literary language, like the other great regions. That language was built up precisely upon the prophetic heritage; and now its communalism, which before had fragmented the region, united it.

The Muslim *sharia* law represented the most radical of the old tendencies. It was highly egalitarian, and therefore, perhaps, what may be called contractualistic. A very wide range of relations were left to con-
tracts between responsible individuals — including, in theory, even the whole range of politics. In principle, no man was properly a ruler till he had been accepted in covenant by the representatives of the Muslim community; and even then — again, in principle — what we would call public duties were potentially the obligation of every Muslim if no one Muslim was fulfilling them. More generally, and more effectively, the directive offices of society were never filled on the basis of fixed heredity, but normally by designation and/or consultation, even when they were filled from a given family. Remarkably little was left, in the *sharia* law, to ascribed status, which was so very important in the two great "idolatrous" regions that flanked the Nile to Oxus region, Europe and India.

Even the marriage law, in which ascribed status played a relatively large role, reflected this egalitarian contractualism. It is not just that marriage was not a sacrament, but that it was a simple contract. Muslim and Occidental law deviated from what may be called a common norm in opposite directions. In pre-Modern societies, wealthier males often maintained several women, as sex partners, one of whom commonly received special status as chief wife while the others were secondary. For Occidentals, the secondary partners (who were maintained as "mistresses" in the Occident also, of course) were held to be no different from common prostitutes; in principle (though not in practice), neither they nor their children had any rights at all; all rights were reserved to an undivorceable materfamilias and her sons — especially her eldest. For Muslims, it was the undivorceable materfamilias whose special status was ruled out. In principle, no partners were subordinated at all: all of them, with their children, were given full equality among themselves, and their treatment could legally differ only so far as varying arrangements were provided for in the marriage contract.

Such an egalitarian orientation left little to the hereditary dignity of a landed aristocracy; and one consequence, broadly speaking, was at last to throw into military hands such governmental tasks as were still recognized to require a common commander. It was long characteristic among Muslims to say: "the military hold the land"; not "the landholders form the military." But this was more than compensated for by the tremendous flexibility which was often left to the Muslim community as a whole, and particularly to the mercantile classes. Apparently it was largely merchants that drew up the *sharia* law in the first place, in the earlier Muslim centuries; and the scholars of the law, the *ulama*, were often of mercantile families or even merchants themselves. It was generally the mercantile classes that were the most faithful supporters of the law. (Indeed, they were often the only classes that were governed pri-
The role of Islam in world history

The indefensible position of sole source of legitimacy which it long held in all Muslim lands was a triumph of mercantility. It was the Agrarian Age, and the predominant power always remained, save in a few city-states, with those who controlled the land. But these latter were forced to recognize the sharia law as the sole valid norm, and their own several military laws as secondary and transitory at best. In most areas, the merchant classes did not gain local independence but they did possess a certain veto power in the society as a whole.

In consequence, during the greater part of the Muslim period, the Irano-Semitic society maintained an organic unity which crossed all "political" boundary lines. By the sixteenth century, when the Muslim society extended far beyond the original Irano-Semitic limits, new sorts of institutions were arising. But at least till then no parochial corporate entity was allowed a permanent status, neither castes as in India nor estates and municipalities as in the Occident - even guilds were relatively weak. Nor was any bureaucratic state administration allowed to gain too great a predominance, as in Byzantium or in China. By way of individual ties of contract and of patronage, governed by a common universal law to which all Muslims were subject wherever they might be found, urban society proceeded on its own, with a minimum of reliance on the garrisons in which ultimate power rested but whose chief essential function was to prevent bloodshed among rival fashions within the towns. Complementing the external bonds of the sharia law, which assured every Muslim a privileged legal status wherever he went, was the more inward bond of Sufism: of the spiritual discipline of the consciousness. Its exponents were not only universally respected, but worked out organizational patterns - the Sufi brotherhoods - which answered perfectly to the contractualism of the sharia law. Without benefit of a church or even of tightly organized monastic orders, they were capable of extending something of a sense of spiritual adventure universally to the ordinary Muslim of a pious turn of mind.

Muslim society, like all agrarian-based societies, was indeed stratified; but relatively speaking, especially before the sixteenth century, there was a high degree of social mobility and also of geographical mobility: almost every figure known in Muslim history travelled widely. Even

---

15 Ira Lapidus, in *Muslim Cities in the Later Middle Ages* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1967), has studied how, in Mamluk Syria, the garrisons were in fact drawn into the urban structure of contract and patronage; so complementing the fundamental analysis of the separation of the occupying garrisons from the civilian life made by H. A. R. Gibb. (He has also noted the intershading of merchant and ulama families.)
military commanders, defeated in one spot, might take their troops to a distant region and establish a garrison there instead. Accordingly, wherever any Muslims settled, soon whole cadres of Muslim society and culture were set up, partly through the arrival of immigrants, partly through conversion of local people – for, on conversion to Islam, any office was open to a man. In non-Muslim territories, once such cadres were set up, ruled automatically by the *sharia* law and given inner cohesion through *Sufism*, only the right occasion had to be awaited for Muslim solidarity to make itself felt as political power. When, then, the Muslims became the dominant elite in a place, further conversion by the adventurous or the ambitious naturally followed. Conversion by violence did occur, mostly contrary to Islamic principles, but it played a very minor part in the expansion of Islam; it was not needed.

We can now see something of the role Islam played in the Afro-Eurasian historical complex at large, where even before Islam the Semitic and Iranian peoples were making themselves felt. Islam, in its religious ideals and then in its influence on social patterns, reinforced just those traits of the Irano-Semitic heritage that encouraged egalitarian contractualism and social mobility. It did so by way of the trans-territorial autonomy of the religious community as a total moral society. By denying legitimacy to alternative social norms, it encouraged the development of institutions that made it easier for the Irano-Semitic cultural traditions to be received far and wide in the hemisphere. Able to maintain local and even international solidarity independent of any particular political establishment, able to draw at once on the skills and habits of migrants from the lands from Nile to Oxus and also on the talents and local expertise of converts everywhere, the Muslims were ready to launch their great expansion just about the time when, in the tenth century, undermined by the new social patterns formed in its womb, the early Caliphate was collapsing. That expansion soon reached into almost every part of the hemisphere, far beyond the original limits of the Caliphate, and it tripled the area of Islamdom.

This social flexibility was reinforced by a sophisticated and, above all, cosmopolitan high culture. Opened up to be reconstituted creatively in the course of transference into Arabic (and later Persian), the Irano-Semitic traditions of high culture offered to the restless a rich corpus of arts and sciences. This built not only on the several Irano-Semitic heritages themselves – including their originally Greek components – but on whatever seemed most readily exportable in the Indic and even the Chinese traditions. Thus for a time Muslim astronomers, building not only on their own Babylonian and Greek heritage but also on Sanskrit
developments, were teachers of astronomers everywhere from the Latin West to China; and the Muslim Sufis (or mystics) were perhaps the most sophisticated and certainly the most universal-minded of all the explorers of the place of human consciousness in the cosmos. The rich traditions of Persian poetry and of abstract art likewise proved to have a universal appeal.

None of this was tied to clerical elites or other special status groups. Uncontrolled by church or caste, the carriers of these heritages disciplined themselves in such a way that their accessibility to all did not result in intellectual anarchy. The custodians of the sharia law presented, along with it, official, generally accepted intellectual patterns, to which the ordinary person, brought to learning without necessarily having any preparatory family background, was directed. These were matter-of-fact, even prosaic, in tone. Whatever was subtle or paradoxical – even more closely nuanced symbolical range of thought – was kept explicitly esoteric and disguised from the public view; a person of any background could learn such lore, but only if he were accepted as competent by a master. This trait, to be sure, has not lightened the task of modern rediscovery of the culture.

There is some evidence that Islam and the social and cultural pattern associated with it not only reinforced dynamic tendencies within the Semitic and Iranian peoples, but appealed directly and selectively to certain analogous strains of culture elsewhere, which had been relatively weaker within their own original settings. Buddhism seems early to have had a populistic, egalitarian and perhaps mercantile appeal within the Indic tradition somewhat corresponding to the appeal of the less aristocratic monotheisms in the Irano-Semitic traditions. One gets the impression that in Sind, in Benghal, and probably in other places from the Oxus basin to Java, Islam inherited much of the Buddhist element in the population – possibly fulfilling their spiritual and social needs more fully than did the Buddhist tradition, often still tied, despite itself, to the more aristocratic Sanskritic nature gods and social forms.

The expansion of Islam then went into three sorts of areas. It followed most of the major long-distance trade routes – notably around the Indian Ocean basin, across Central Eurasia, and across the Sahara. Along these routes, merchants were culturally of special importance, and merchants tended to be Muslims; in this sort of area the only effective rivals proved to be West Europeans and Chinese, and they only in limited regions. Islam also tended to be adopted in frontier areas just opened to cityed life, where only parochial, tribal cults had prevailed and a religious consciousness was required that could make sense of the opening wider
horizons (often such areas coincided partly with the hinterlands of trade routes): in sub-Saharan Africa, in the Volga and Irtysh river basins, in the Malaysian islands, and in such marginal areas as Bengal and even Yunnan in China. Finally, Islam came to prevail politically and socially in the lands of most ancient civilization: in the old core area of Sanskrit culture, in north India; and in most of the old core area of Hellenic culture, in the Anatolian and Balkan peninsulas. Here conquest came first, and the Muslim cadres came only later to reinforce it and make it irreversible. By the sixteenth century, most of the East Christian, Hindu, and Theravada Buddhist peoples found themselves more or less enclaved in an Islamicate world where Muslim standards of taste commonly made their way even into independent kingdoms, like Hindu Vijayanagar or Norman Sicily.

Speaking very broadly, then, and referring only to certain dynamic points, we can say the role of Islam in Afro-Eurasian history was to institutionalize the more egalitarian and cosmopolitan tendencies in Irano-Semitic culture, giving to urban and communal expectations associated with mercantile prominence a key role (though, indeed, not a master role). This made possible the spread of the Irano-Semitic traditions across the hemisphere under the aegis of a single order bound together by a common allegiance. This social order, finally, formed the chief part of the wider world context impinging on the other societies of the hemisphere – which were able to offer adequate alternatives to it only in the extreme northeast and northwest of the Afro-Eurasian land mass.

We can hardly, then, look on the middle periods of Islamicate history – the centuries between about 945 (the collapse of the Caliphal state) and about 1500 (the rise of new major bureaucratic empires) – as decadent, despite their decentralization and militarization. The tremendous expansive power of Islamicate society in those centuries shows that even politically the decentralized system was extraordinarily successful; for it answered the needs of an increasingly cosmopolitan world. It was an effective development of the cultural tendencies that had produced Islam itself and its Caliphate. Given the pre-Islamic communal developments between Nile and Oxus, the High Caliphal state can (in one perspective) be regarded almost as an interlude, a transition from the agrarian monarchy of the Sasanians to a more decentralized social order long since increasingly congenial to the region, to its special expansive strength and creativity.

Culturally, likewise, we must be hesitant to write off the later forms of Islamicate art or literature (especially the Persian literature, more widely
dominant then than the Arabic) or religious speculation and practice as decadent, merely because they served different needs from those we have been accustomed to honoring. It can be argued that Islamicate culture, if less excitingly innovative than in an earlier period, was more substantial and mature and perhaps enduringly valuable in those later periods.

We are coming to realize that the speculation of Ibn al-Arabi (d. 1240), for instance, which formed the starting point for so much of the thinking of the next two centuries, was not the passive monism that has been imagined, but a powerfully stimulating synthesis in which the human person, as microcosm in an infinitely meaningful cosmos, was assigned vast potentialities in every sphere of activity. It can be speculated that his expansive and optimistic mood, known in Raymond Lull, may indirectly have contributed to the expansiveness of such men as Lull's admirer Giordano Bruno and hence to Bacon and the Western moderns. Certainly it contributed to a remarkable wave of optimistic efforts at reform and revolution among the Muslim themselves in the late fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries, when the urban aristocratic elements that had found their ruthless champion in Timur (Tamerlane) and his artistically gifted descendants were pitted against revolt after bold revolt of chiliastic or antinomian idealists, not all of whom proved unpractical. The brilliance of the Persianate culture of the late fifteenth century, epitomized in the famous court of Herat in present Afghanistan (which reminds one so of Florence in the contemporary Italian Renaissance), was no "last gasp" but a central expression of a culture that was vital also in other ways and that developed naturally into the greatness of the sixteenth century.

The Muslim social order that had emerged from the Caliphate was extraordinarily appropriate to a mercantile society. But like any strong system it had its chronic weakness — the precariousness of any established local corporations and of government generally, undermined by their illegitimacy in sharia Muslim eyes. As compared with China or Byzantium or even with Western Europe, the militarized governments tended to be arbitrary and unpredictable. The sorts of investment merchants made could survive such conditions reasonably well, if only be-

---

cause their investment was commonly dispersed and movable; industrial investment, fixed in one spot and requiring continuous enlightened governmental protection, was less favored. In late Agrarian times, new conditions began to make themselves felt that made this particular weakness more significant. When the Afro-Eurasian commercial complex was reaching its maximum extent and complexity and when the steady accumulation of techniques developed all over the hemisphere, and gradually spread widely in it, had vastly altered the technical resources of all the regions as compared with Sumerian times – then (and possibly by way of consequence) began to develop, at least in Sung China and a bit later in western Europe, a new role for industrial investment. In limited areas and fields, industrial investment began to be as important an economic determinant of social patterns as commerce. Both China and the Occident began to impinge unprecedentedly on the Indo-Mediterranean regions; the Occident did so with especially effective results because it was essentially a new territory (it began symbolically somewhere between Amalfi and Florence, for our purposes), never of much consequence before, and yet was at the very doorsteps of the older regions. The Franks limited Muslim commerce and naval power in the Mediterranean at a period when these were still strongly expansive almost everywhere else.

However, for a long time this had only marginal consequences. As late as the sixteenth century the Muslim peoples were still, on the whole, expanding. We may perhaps hypothesize some early effect of the new balance that was emerging when we see the tendency toward decentralization in Islamdom being reversed about 1500. Around that date, prosperous centralized bureaucratic monarchies were restored not only in the southeast European region (the Ottoman empire centered in formerly Greek Anatolia and the Balkans) and the north Indian region (the Indo-Timuri empire) but even in the Irano-Semitic heartlands (the Safavi empire, which included the Iraq at first and at some moments later). But the solidity of these empires can more immediately be accounted for by other considerations, notably the use of gunpowder weapons, which required an expensive corps of specialists and a constantly improving technique – weapons which seem to have developed pari passu in Islamdom and in Christendom from the thirteenth century on (the much better Occidental documentation offers instances a couple of decades

---

17 Robert M. Hartwell, in a doctoral thesis at the University of Chicago in 1963, has made clear the comprehensive extent of the abortive industrial revolution in Sung China; thus throwing revealing light on the phenomenal cultural flowering in Tang and Sung China.
earlier in many cases for the Occident, but the whole development can be attested in internal Muslim materials).  

In any case, the empires, as we have seen, scarcely represent a decline; rather they took up the positive cultural developments of the preceding several centuries and carried them further – notably in the Isfahan of Shah Abbas the Great in Iran and the Agra of the Emperor Akbar in India. The empire of Akbar marvelously impressed Western visitors for its prosperity and urbanity even though by the end of Akbar’s life the great transformations in the West were already getting under way; but its greatness cannot be ascribed simply to Akbar’s eccentricities. All the notable ideas on which he built his empire and which his successors long maintained, such as the doctrines of *sulh-e kull*, universal conciliation, were foreshadowed among Muslims in the preceding two centuries, though never before so fully worked out as by men like Fayzi and Abulfazl in Akbar’s time.

Yet the more industrial society of the Occident was even then beginning a further internal transformation which, by the end of the eighteenth century, had destroyed all the older bases of historical life in the Afro-Eurasian complex. Until that point, the level of social power in the Afro-Eurasian citied lands had advanced at a fairly even pace across the hemisphere. The technical resources and social complexity of the Spaniards, the Ottomans, and the Chinese in the sixteenth century were about equally removed from those of the ancient Sumerians – or of the Aztecs – and would have allowed any one of those powers to overwhelm such a less highly developed society. For though development was always very uneven, yet in the conditions of the Agrarian Age, if any given cultural bloc caught up with the others within four or five centuries, the rough balance could be maintained. But in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the pace of change was enormously accelerated within one of the cultural blocs. What happened in Christian Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries doubtless emerged in part from the increased role of industrial investment there that had begun earlier; and it presupposed the special florescence of the time of Renaissance and Reformation. But even that florescence did not pass beyond the sort of agrarian-based limitations on the historical processes that had prevailed since the Axial Age, even since Sumer. It was no more innovative than like earlier florescences – those of the Axial Age every-

---

18 For the development in a relatively backward part of Islamdom, Egypt, see David Ayalon, *Gunpowder and Firearms in the Mamluk Kingdom* (London: Valentine, Mitchell, 1956).
where, or those of Gupta India, of Caliphal Islamdom, and of Tang-Sung China. Correspondingly, it did not bring the Occidental peoples to a basically higher level of social power than the other culture blocs had attained, though here and there Occidentals might have temporary advantages—such as Muslims had had earlier.

But at the end of the sixteenth and the start of the seventeenth century emerges a pattern of investment (of time and of funds) in multiple, interdependent, large-scale technical specializations; a pattern that dominated, at first, crucial sectors of science and industry, but soon gave its tone to Occidental society as a whole. A technicalization of institutions that before had been sporadic (and as common elsewhere as in Europe) thereby became self-propelling and resulted in a drastically accelerated pace of social change in all fields that could profit by such interdependent large-scale technical specialization. Once this technicalization was under way, it resulted in a decisive increase in the level of social power available to Westerners; and the increase proceeded ever more rapidly.  

It was this phenomenon—starting not around 1500 but around 1600—that set off the Occident from the rest of citied mankind as effectively as the citied societies had been set off from the pre-liberate tribal peoples. And as soon as it became effective in the West, it had corresponding effects on the rest of the commercial and historical complex in the Afro-Eurasian citied zone of which the Occident was an integral part. In the first instance, the effect was a matter of relative power: unless the other blocs had undergone the same transformations—by some improbable historical sleight-of-hand—at exactly the same moment, they must necessarily quickly be left hopelessly behind; for, before being transformed themselves, they could not even borrow at the requisite pace of innovation. But they were not merely left behind.

Competition with technicalistically produced goods from the West proved increasingly difficult for local craftsmen, and this by itself was ominous for a society in which mercantile interests played so crucial a role. The top levels of the bourgeois classes were among the first to be ruined, and with them the balanced social structure was undermined. Intellectually, the effects were subtler but equally sure: by the eighteenth century, that handful of brightest minds on which basic advance depends were discovering that Western medicine, astronomy, and science

---


20 The writings of Gunner Myrdal on the contrast between "backwash" and "spread" effects of increased investment in any given area are an invaluable introduction to the plight of the non-Western societies, especially since the Industrial Revolution.
generally were already well beyond what the Islamicate tradition could yet offer; and they were discovering also that the new advances depended on a large-scale investment in multiple specializations – notably the "instrument-makers" and the technology on which they in turn depended – not available to a non-Westerner. Further advance in the old traditions was pointless, but adoption of the new traditions was impossible. Creativity, intellectual as well as economic, was almost imperceptibly strangled.

It was at this point – at the end of the sixteenth century, that the long-standing ecological and historical foundation of the greatness and creativity of the Islamicate version of Irano-Semitic culture disappeared; for now it no longer answered the social and intellectual needs of a world increasingly cosmopolitan on a mercantile basis, but rather faced a transformed world whose cosmopolitanism was on a quite new basis.

Unable to keep up or to insulate themselves, most of the non-Western societies were instead undermined and overwhelmed. In the sixteenth century, the Muslim peoples, taken collectively, were at the peak of their power, by the end of the eighteenth century they were prostrate. The Safavi empire and even the Timuri empire of India were practically destroyed, and the Ottoman empire was desperately weakened; and such weaknesses could no longer be compensated by internal developments at the old pace, but invited Occidental intervention – which occurred massively, directly and indirectly, by the beginning of the nineteenth century. If it was any consolation, even the unparalleled power, wealth, and culture of the Chinese were subjected to the same fate.21

The fate of the Islamicate civilization is not, then, an example of a biological law that every organism must flourish and then decay; for a civilization is not a organism. If anything, that fate exemplifies, rather, an economic principle that a successful institution may invest so heavily in one kind of excellence, adapted to one kind of opportunity, that it will be ruined when new circumstances bring other sorts of opportunity to the fore – perhaps as a result, in part, of the very excellence with which the first opportunity was exploited.