Dialectical Theology in the Search for Modern Islam

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Studies on Islam and modernity have grappled with what has happened to Islam in the modern world. As a tradition, culture, or religion, what has become of Islam since the transformation of the globe through industrialisation, capitalism, and colonialism? Has Islam taken on a new form, or does it continue earlier forms and traditions in essential ways? What are the values promoted by Islam and Muslims in the modern world? Most recent studies on these questions find the focus on Islam and modernity too broad and generalised. Preferring local and contextual studies, Islam in modernity in its most general sense has been moved to the background, or into the public sphere. However, terms referring to the broader interaction between Islam and modernity have not been given up. Terms such as “Islamic modernity,” “Islamic modernism,” “modernist Islam,” or simply “modern Islam” have not disappeared completely. To these may be added the plural forms of Islams and modernities, producing a bewildering variety of representations. They still appear repeatedly in the literature, begging for clarification or filling an un-fillable space.

The questions and formulations of modern Islam have been dependent on the use and meaning of “modern” and “Islam.” Both these terms are used extensively, and unavoidably, to identify the particular turn of modern Islam. The use of “modern” ranges from the Marxist, to the liberal, to Weberian, and also to postcolonial and postmodern definitions and inclinations. The Weberian definition and assumptions of modernity have dominated literature on modern Islam, and occupy pride of place. Like the term “modern,” the reference to Islam cannot be taken for granted. The unified and obvious reference to a single tradition breaks down upon closer scrutiny. In his magisterial study of Islam, Hodgson offered a set of terms (Islam, Islamic, Islamicate and Islamdom) that privileged religious foundations, while giving space to cultural and other historical developments. His suggestions have not found great favour among scholars of Islam, least of all among those who work in the study of modern Islam. But the search for a proper term for Islam has continued into the twenty-first century. One persistent suggestion since the 1970s has been the use of “Islams” to reflect the multiplicity of interpretations and cultural formations that constitute
religious experiences (El-Zein 1977). Varisco argued for “Islams” in anthropology to stand for “how Islam is lived in a unique social setting” (Varisco 2005, 140). This contextual focus has become the preferred approach among scholars generally suspicious about the viability of any generalisation that can be made on Islam and modernity. But the use of “modern” and “Islam” persists in the literature, including in the use of the plural. And this usage begs clearer explanation, on how “Islam” or “Islams” in local context are related to each other.

In the following, I propose that these questions on modernity and Islam be placed in the framework of the much longer history of kalām (dialectical theology). Scholars in the modern academy, usually focused on variations of a Weberian framework, were addressing questions that were uncannily similar to those asked by Muslim theologians within kalām in the past. Kalām questions were first posed during political disputes among Muslims after the demise of the Prophet, and then refined further in the encounter of Muslim intellectuals with the Greek Hellenic heritage. The consequent theological disputes turned around questions such as “What is the nature of God?,” “Who is a Muslim?,” “What is Islam and faith?,” and “What are values?” Under the impact of Max Weber’s sociology of religion, scholars have asked similar questions with regard to modernity. Explicitly or implicitly, they often asked if Islam and Muslims were modern, modernisable, or modernising. Their questions too could be summarised as “What is Islam?” and “Who are the Muslims?”

This chapter focuses on modern studies on Islam and examines their theses and perspectives in the framework of kalām. It argues that modern studies on Islam were adding new dimensions to the identity of Muslims and the meaning of Islam. If kalām was an exercise in identifying the true believer, modern studies were separating modern from traditional Muslims. The binary opposition between the modern and traditional became the basis of a new sectarianism, constructed and debated in the same way as earlier sects (firaq) were debated by kalām scholars in the past. Similarly, under the impact of Hellenism, and new intellectual and cultural changes, kalām scholars had defined Islam in relation to custom (sunna), to a mythological past, or to rationality (ʿaql). In modern Islam, Islam was identified as a tradition as opposed to modernity, and later as text and as discourse. Following leads in the social sciences, such perspectives added new meanings to Islam. Modern “Weberian” scholars were admittedly merely describing Muslims in the modern world. From a kalām perspective, however, they will be shown to frame the meaning of being Muslim in the modern world. I pursue this identification and framing, and conclude that justification
and representation were the major pre-occupations of studies of modern Islam. Modern Islam, firstly, was a justification of Islam in the shadow of a Western trajectory of modernisation. Secondly, it was a difficult and eventually failed attempt to represent Islam and Muslims.

1 Working with Modernity and Kalām

Weber is not always quoted at great length in the literature on Islam and modernity, but the questions that he asked of traditions and their relation to the emergence of the modern West abound in the literature on modern Islam. Weber closely examined the theologies and ethics of emerging Protestant cults and sects and their impact on social and economic behaviour. In Max Weber’s sociology, a constellation of theologies, ethics, and economic conditions gave rise to modernity (Weber 1958). In a similar way, he also examined the sociology of other religions, including Islam, and suggested how and why they did not lead to modernisation. Masud and Salvatore have correctly identified this Weberian trend in the literature on Islam and modernity (Masud and Salvatore 2009). They suggested that scholars have investigated the nature of Islam, the values it promotes, the societies it generates, and the identities it upholds. In addition, they proposed that the Weberian framework could be updated and modified to escape Weber’s European bias of the nineteenth century. Islam in the modern world could be examined from the perspective of its impact on social relations (Turner 1974; Eickelman 1981, 269; Salvatore 1997; Stauth 1998).

In this chapter, I consider the Weberian questions from a different perspective. I ask if these Weberian questions may be matched with what Muslims have done in an identifiable, discursive tradition in the past and the present. The Weberian questions may be placed alongside similar questions that Muslims have asked in kalām (dialectical theology) when it emerged as a scholarly discipline on the meaning of Islamic beliefs, practices, and values. How have these Weberian studies framed Muslim identities, and religious objectives and goals? To which identities of Muslims, and which aspects of Islam, have they directed our attention?

Kalām emerged as a discipline in response to political disputes among Muslims, and then later in response to the impact of Hellenistic philosophy and the expansion of the Islamic Empire into territories previously dominated and occupied by the Sassanian and Byzantine Empires. Thus, one of the first and persistent questions challenging the Islamic community was the status of a believer who committed grave sins. Does such a person remain
a Muslim? Was a Muslim, thus, definable in relation to his or her works? The eponymous founder of the Hanafi legal school, Abu Hanifa (d. 148/767) is reported to have favoured the view that belief and works were distinct, and that the final judgement should be left to God. This became known as a *murjiʿa* position, literally meaning “bringing hope” (in the mercy of God). It implied that God would forgive a believer on the Day of Judgement, in spite of his or her misdeeds. Abu Hanifa was opposed to the position that declared that belief and works (especially grave sins) may not be separated (Rahman 1979, 85). This was the position taken by the early radical Kharijite groups who opposed what they regarded as iniquitous rulers that assumed authority in the Islamic state. Their iniquity rendered them disbelievers, the Kharijites claimed, and thus unfit to govern. Such political questions were developed into comprehensive theologies that progressively incorporated questions of free will, predestination and everything to do with human agency. These queries may be said to be deliberations and intense debates on the nature and identity of a Muslim: what makes a Muslim? What makes a heretic? What distinguished a true Muslim from another?

Another set of questions emerged from thinking about human obligations in a changing environment. The expansion of political authority outside Arabia created new conditions, and thus new questions for the early Islamic state and society. They included questions on what to do with spoils of war, but also how to manage social relations, trade agreements, and ritual obligations. In response to these questions, schools (*madhāhib*) developed in the important towns such as Medina, Mecca, Damascus, Basra, and Kufah (Schacht 1959). Al-Shafiʿi (d. 204/820), the eponymous founder of another important juridical school, attempted to limit the use of independent reason, and subject all decisions to the Qurʾan and the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad. In particular, he circumscribed the application of *qiyās* (analogy) and *ijtihād* (juristic reasoning) used by his contemporaries and predecessors (Al-Shafiʿi 1940, 1961; Calder 1983). Other scholars took a different stand, proposing that revelation and reason were compatible with each other. In their view, the opinion (*raʾy*) of a believer need not only be controlled by devotion to tradition. It could also be disciplined by the exercise of reason. Such a view was held by the Muʿtazilites of Iraq, the earliest theologians in Islam, who developed an elaborate theology based on the equivalence of revelation and reason. Many of them held that the exercise of reason constituted the first duty of a Muslim. The nature of God and his attributes, the meaning of good and evil, and the obligations of a believer should and could be developed from revelation on the basis of rational reflection (Watt 1962, 47). These debates on the merits of texts, traditions,
and rationality became the foundation of a discursive tradition on the fundamental meaning of Islam, and the absolute necessity of key beliefs that should be adopted by all Muslims. This was the discourse of kalām that was eventually also shared with Christian and Jewish theologians in the Middle Ages.

Modern scholars have offered interesting perspectives on the purpose and objectives of these questions and debates among kalām scholars. Gardet suggested that kalām was “a defensive apologia, the function of which [was] firmly to establish religious beliefs by producing proofs, and to cast aside doubts” (Gardet 1995, 592). Moreover, reason (ʿaql) was used to “purify the idea of God from all anthropomorphism,” the aim being to “justify it against the enticements of Greek thought and the attacks of the zanādiqa (free thinkers)” (Gardet 1995, 592). Kalām, then, was a discourse that defined Islam (God, values) and Muslims. Hodgson offers a more expansive and comparative perspective of kalām as a vision of religious experience. Kalām, he says, rejected the vision of timelessness offered by Platonic philosophy at the time, and offered a religiosity that embraced the historically significant events of revelation (Hodgson 1974, 437-442). Martin, more radically, does not see kalām as an alternative vision of religion, but a practice that stood in place of one. Whereas Islam meant peace, the opposite (pathos) was war and violence. The disputation of kalām, according to Martin, took its place between Islam and pathos: “a powerful mode of discourse for constructing and maintaining those sectarian and political boundaries that would ideally have to be overcome for Muslims to realise their eschatological vision of world order and peace” (Martin 1988, 111). Kalām for Martin, then, was not itself a spiritual engagement, but an important means of overcoming obstacles towards one. In the medieval world, schisms and sectarian divisions stood in the way of this vision. Some of the essays in Tim Winter, ed., The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology (2008) follow a similar but more direct analysis. The history and success of kalām was a long and necessary path to return Muslims to the essential message of revelation (Mayer 2008; Michot 2008). Notwithstanding the finer points of detail, it is clear that kalām became a discursive tradition pursuing the answer to two major questions: “Who is a Muslim?” and “What is Islam?”

Coming from two very distinctive traditions, dialectical theologians and Weberian scholars asked these overlapping questions. I present a map of studies on modern Islam, as they documented and analysed the meaning and role of Islam in modern societies. I identify their unique approaches to modernity, and also their approach and understanding of culture and religion. I show that they were progressively applying new ideas in the
social sciences to identify Islam and Muslims. At each stage, I analyse this identification from a *kalām* perspective.

### 2 Modern Islam: The Field of Study

I divide the literature into three approaches in terms of their approach to modernity. Firstly, earlier twentieth-century scholars worked with standard modernisation theories where Enlightenment values and European social and political formations were accepted as normative, and in turn confronted and challenged traditional ideas and societies. In this first framework, Islam as tradition was bound to disappear in the face of modernity (Lerner 1958). Later historians like John Voll focused on the encounter between Islam and the modern West. This second approach was open to the possibility of a transformed tradition in the modern world, similar to what had happened in the past between Islam and the Greek intellectual tradition, or Islam and the Persian Empire. A third group challenged the Weberian conception of modernity, proposing constructivist approaches to modernities in different cultural contexts (Taylor 1993; Eisenstadt 2000; Salvatore 2009). In this third group, we may speak of Islamic modernity or modernities.

#### 2.1 Modernity Confronts Islam: The Impossibility of Islamic Modernism

Hamilton Gibb, W.C. Smith, Kenneth Cragg, and Gustave von Gruebaum regarded Islam as a culture and civilisation that reached a high level of maturity in the past, but was challenged and threatened by the values and systems of Western modernity. In their work, modernisation was associated with both Western culture and Western political and economic power. Islam and Muslims were identified as traditional, the antithesis of modern, and sometimes even non-modernisable. Some suggested that Muslims could modernise if they adopted some features of modern Western culture. Others were less hopeful, and advocated that Muslims ought to fundamentally redefine Islam for a modern world.

Ignaz Goldziher, William Montgomery Watt, and Kenneth Cragg were among those aware of the attempts by contemporary Muslims to produce new interpretations of Islam, and they give us a glimpse of the possibilities available. Goldziher’s book *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law* presents a strong argument for the ability of Islam’s adaptation to new ideas and institutions. Taking a long historical view, he shows that Islamic
Theology systematically opposed new ideas but then incorporated them in its expansive embrace through consensus (ijmāʿ). Historical examples of these included the celebration of the birthday of the Prophet (mawlid), dialectical theology, and the cults of saints. In modern times, he suggested, the same process was at work. Muslims, for example, at first resisted government bonds and printing presses, but then accepted them through consensus (ijmāʿ). Goldziher does not forget to remind his readers, though, that there was a strong and persistent tendency to resist change in Islam. This tendency was symbolised most clearly by the Hanbali school of law and its followers who regularly invoked a return to the example of the Prophet (Goldziher 1981). Such a tendency committed Muslims to the past, and thus posed an obstacle to their modernisation.

Watt and Cragg accepted the main outline of Goldziher’s model, but pointed to some new approaches developed by Muslims. While Goldziher referred to the mechanism of consensus (ijmāʿ) that almost imperceptibly accommodated Muslims to new developments, they pointed to attempts to create indigenous Islamic modernisms. Watt admired Iqbal for his imaginative approach, but for which “the time was not ripe for further theological speculation” (Watt 1962, 162). Cragg also reviewed a large number of Muslim modernists grappling with modernity and modernisation – presenting a synopsis of developments since the nineteenth century. In conclusion, though, he suggested that Muslims might follow the example of Christianity in responding to the philosophical challenge of modernity. As Christians had adopted the cross as a key symbol, Muslims may similarly focus on the compassionate God in the Qur’an (Cragg 1967, 193).

Von Grunebaum and Gibb were even less hopeful for an Islamic modernity than Goldziher, Watt, and Cragg. Von Grunebaum certainly recognised Islam’s adaptation to new contexts, but argued that the ideal itself was a problem. For Von Grunebaum, it was an immutable ideal that fixed the gaze of Muslims on the past (Von Grunebaum 1962, 209). Gibb presented a history of Islam as a pendulum swing between transcendentalism and immanentism. At times, Muslims focused on God as transcendent, and they developed attitudes, values, and practices accordingly. At other times, God as immanent produced tendencies towards inwardness and personal orientations. In the modern period, transcendent Islam was dominant and, according to Gibb, incompatible with the immanentist mood of modernity (Gibb 1947, ch. 2). Gibb seemed to give Islam the benefit of the doubt, but his general prognosis was sombre, and it emerged clearly in three essays published in 1970 and 1971 on the “Heritage of Islam in the Modern World.” In these essays, Gibb focused on the modern nation-state as the greatest
challenge to Islam. The latter was held together, according to Gibb, by a “sense of community and community values [that] always have been the strongest motive force in the internal history of Islam.” This sense of community, Watt went on, was “largely responsible for the remarkable degree of success which it achieved ... as a socio-religious system” (Gibb 1970a, 4). However, it was now challenged by the nation-state and nationalism, against which it had no real response. All the achievements of the past were helpless against the tide of nationalism (Gibb 1970a, b, 1971).

These studies did not all explicitly follow Max Weber. They hardly ever presented a detailed or general study of the ethics, economics, and values of Muslims during this period. However, the studies were directly concerned with Islam’s contribution to the development of modern societies. There was some hope for modern Islam if Muslims maintained a judicious adaptation of the legacy, against the example of the Prophet. Alternatively, they could re-examine the sources to find something valuable, akin to the history of modern Christianity (Cragg and Watt). The sub-text is a clear sense of the difficulty or impossibility of Islam’s experience in the modern world.

These reflections and propositions of modern Islam take on an interesting meaning from the perspective of kalām. Two aspects of the kalām question “What is Islam?” are worth noting. Islam was located within a dominant binary logic of the time. In this view, Islam was clearly part of tradition, as opposed to the modernity of the West. Most of the scholars examined, in fact, do not define modernity or tradition very explicitly. They work with the presumption of an obvious modernity represented by Europe. Modernity implied change, progressive development, and the status quo. Tradition was its opposite, and it was associated with negative qualities. Islam was clearly defined as traditional. Whereas Muslims previously had answered this question by presenting a list of duties or beliefs, or argued the rationality of God’s essences and attributes, these studies place Islam in the world of tradition. This binary opposition added a new dimension to the meaning of Islam. Henceforth, questions pertaining to Islam were not limited to reason, justification, and belief, but to its modern or tradition-like characteristics.

One direct consequence of this reflection on the modernisation of Islam was the splitting of Islam between its ideal and reality. From Goldziher to Gibb, we were reminded that Islam could be separated between its ideal and reality. Islam was more clearly identified with its ideal in the past, best represented by the community of Muhammad. This perspective reflects the approach of Muslim intellectuals in the nineteenth century who claimed to go back to the pious ancestors (al-salaf), reflecting a familiar historical reference to the past (Moosa and Tareen 2012). They turned away from the
existing “traditions” of Islam to the original model of Islam. In the perspective of these studies, however, the future of a modernised Islam did not lie with this ideal. Muslims would and should adopt contemporary traditions and turn away from this ideal. Historical Islam’s redeeming feature had been its tendency to adapt to local circumstances, away from this fixed, complete, and unchangeable ideal (Von Grunebaum). For Goldziher, also, modernist Islam might be successful if it was not too faithful to the ideals of the past. For modernist Islam, thus, the ideal past should be an anti-vision. Unlike European modernity, which found its visions in Greece, Muslims will modernise by adopting and adapting Western models. The origin of Islam, unlike Athens, did not offer a recipe for modernisation.

The literature on Islam and modernity divided Muslims into modernists and traditionalists. Religious scholars are repeatedly identified as those who most resist change, while modernisers receive the most attention as they represent a promising future. In general, though, the binary division of modernists and traditionalists replaces the sectarian divisions of Islam. In the literature, they constitute a new sectarianism for Islam in the modern world.

### 2.2 Islam Meets Modernity: Modern Islams

Voll, Hoebink, and Lapidus offered a very different approach to Islam and modernity (Voll 1982; Hoebink 1998; Lapidus 1997). They did not see a one-sided meeting of Islam and modernity, leading to an inevitable end. They focused on a productive encounter, producing multiple responses. Drawing on the longer durée of Islamic history, they also compared the Islamic encounter of modernity with early experiences. These earlier encounters did not lead to the destruction of Islam, but were, in fact, productive and fertile for dynamic change.

Voll’s study, first published in 1982, presented a general overview of Islam and its encounters. For Voll, there was a stable core around which Muslims responded to modernity and similar challenges in the past. For Voll, “Islam is not just religion, it is a total way of life” and “to be a Muslim is not simply a matter of individual belief; it means participating in the effort to implement God’s will on earth” (Voll 1982, 4, 8). It is this vision that faced modernity, as it had faced earlier challenges. The first challenge, according to Voll, was the death of the Prophet, who had to be replaced with someone to lead the community. This was followed by the building of an empire, new cultural and intellectual encounters with Hellenism, and challenging political and social conditions (Voll 1982, 17-21). In each case, Muslims adapted and
developed the original vision of Islam as a “way of life.” In the first, for example, Muslims were preoccupied with identifying the kind of leaders that should replace the Prophet. Out of this experience emerged new ideas of charismatic succession (Shi‘ite imams, Sufi teachers) and communal boundaries and instruments (salaf, jamāʿa, ijmāʿ). Such developments grew out of the original vision of Islam meeting new conditions. Voll’s framework offers a constantly changing and developing vision of Islam as a “way of life.”

The other significant aspect of Voll’s study is his identification of Muslims in these encounters. He divided Muslims in terms of their response to these encounters: “the pragmatic adapters, the conservatives, the fundamentalists, and those who emphasize personal charisma” (Voll 1982, 12). Voll called these “basic styles” and “forms of Islam.” Pragmatic adapters were those who were willing to reinterpret the original message, finding elements that had not been seen there before. On the other extreme, fundamentalists resisted change and put up a defence for a primordial Islamic way of life. Conservatives were in the majority, who adapted more slowly and often imperceptibly. Those who emphasised personal charisma focused on inspired and guided individuals who were regarded as the carriers of the “way of life” in their persons.

According to Voll, modernity was a complex set of changes and institutions that dominated the world over the last few centuries. It included capitalism, the modern state, and general Western influences on a global scale. Muslims were divided in their responses to these developments, and they drew on the above-mentioned styles of action. Voll does not define modern Islam any further than pointing to the diversity of responses. The vision of “implementing the will of God” was kept alive, in different forms by diverse groups.

Michel Hoebink also adopted the framework of an encounter, but was more specific on the cultural challenge of modernity posed to Islam and Muslims. Working with the hermeneutical strategies of contemporary Arab thinkers, he identified the face of modernity as secularisation according to Western models, and the nature of the modern state. These were the key issues that Arab thinkers were grappling with in their works. Emerging from the Enlightenment, modernity was closely associated with secularism, the modern state, and a generally a-religious or anti-religious view of life. The hermeneutics of Islam was founded on diametrically opposed foundations, and Arab thinkers were finding a way to resolve or resist such changes. Hoebink, however, did not regard Western modernity as unique and distinctive, and did not think that this was the first hermeneutical challenge faced by Muslims. Modernisation, according to Hoebink, was “a cultural
adaptation to social change – a process which occurs continuously and in all cultures” (Hoebink 1998, 30). In this perspective, Muslims encountered “modernisation” in the past. In response to such challenges, Muslims differed among themselves on their willingness to interpret the essential message of the Qur’an: modernists adopted continuous interpretation; fundamentalists opposed interpretation in principle; while conservatives supported change to a limited extent. With contemporary modernity, a similar process was under way. Muslims in the modern context were finding appropriate responses to the challenges of secularism and the modern state.

Both Voll and Hoebink offered an approach that did not lead to the capitulation of Islam to modernisation. The encounter between Islam and modernity was not as inevitable as it seemed to someone like Von Grunebaum or Gibb. They did not assume the superiority of the modern West, and certainly did not portray the dire consequences for a tradition that failed to respond adequately to these challenges. Nevertheless, modernity challenged the vision of Islam (Voll) or the meaning of its sacred text (Hoebink). Muslims responded to these challenges as they had done in the past. Modernity, in this framework, was domesticated to Islam’s longer history. It was merely the latest of the challenges that first began with the death of the Prophet Muhammad. The resources of history were employed to respond to modernity.

Voll and Hoebink stress different aspects of modernity, elucidating different aspects of modern Islam. Focusing on general historical changes brought along by capitalism and globalisation, Voll focuses on how the community (umma) met these challenges. Unlike Gibb, who saw only the threat of nationalism to the umma, Voll stressed that Muslims were producing new ways of thinking of the original vision (“implementing the will of God on earth”). Hoebink focused on the threat of secularisation to Islam, and similarly showed how Muslims responded with hermeneutical inventions. Modern Islam, according to Hoebink, was an intense grappling with the production of or resistance to a new hermeneutic.

Voll and Hoebink offered new answers to the kalām question “What is Islam?” Islam was a unified symbol, more clearly specified. For Voll, Islam was a community seeking to implement the Will of God on earth. For Hoebink, Islam represented a hermeneutical engagement with revelation. This specificity relating to “a vision” or “a hermeneutic” replaced a general reference to Islam in the work of their predecessors as a grand civilisation or a religion. From both Voll and Hoebink, however, the vision and the hermeneutic were in a state of continuous change, periodically adapting and modernising themselves. In fact, Muslims were by definition re-inventing the vision
and hermeneutic in history. Islam re-invented itself as a new hermeneutic (Hoebink) or a new vision of implementing the will of God (Voll). “What is Islam?” gained more specificity, but it was by definition changing.

The frameworks proposed by Voll and Hoebink also offered new answers to the question “Who is a Muslim?” Voll and Hoebink split the dichotomous modernist-traditionalist binary pair, and pointed to multiple responses of Muslims. In response to change, Muslims were conservatives, traditionalists, adaptationists and focused on personal models. Voll and Hoebink suggested new foundations for modern Muslim identities. Moreover, all such responses were modern by definition. Adaptationists, conservatives, and fundamentalists were constituted in their encounter with modernity. They were all modern, even if their responses appeared to be tradition-like. A Muslim was still identified through the encounter, but her identity had been fully absorbed into modernity.

2.3 Constructing Islamic Modernities

More recent reflections have developed Voll and Hoebink’s approaches. Drawing on a postcolonial mood that emphasised multiple and constructed modernities, they have asked how Muslims produced modernity or modernities. They have taken one further step from modernity as defined and normalised by the West, whilst still engaged with it. Richard Martin and Armando Salvatore provide two contrasting approaches to this engagement. Martin worked with the implications of modern hermeneutics on the study of Islam. Salvatore turned to the “Axial Age” of Jaspers, predating both Islam and the modern West, to focus on how Muslims created discourses. If Voll and Hoebink’s work can be seen as turning around Muslim responses to challenges, Martin and Salvatore worked with Muslim engagements. The difference between the two lies in the elevation of Muslims as agents, and the disappearance of the West as principal actor.

Richard Martin has promoted the study of Islam within the comparative study of religions. In two key essays, he put forwards a proposal for the study of Islam in modern contexts that elucidates his model (Martin 1982, 1984). He built his proposal on the work of the anthropologist Clifford Geertz who defined religion as a system of symbols that negotiated the gap that inevitably arose between a world view and ethos. World view was a society and community’s conceptual map that was passed down over time, and ethos represented the particular historical conditions in which world view was actualised. Symbols in general, and religious symbols in particular, created a semblance of reality through synthesising “a people's
ethos ... and their world view” (Geertz 1966, 3). Martin suggested that this symbolic system from anthropology could be applied to the comparative study of religions. Geertz himself was not overly concerned with the history of the Islamic cultural system in general. He was more focused on the difference between cultural systems in Morocco and Indonesia. For Martin, the historical legacy of Islam could not be ignored in the study of Islam in context. The historical legacy of texts, theologies, and rituals was inherited through a variety of formal and informal ways, and it impacted upon local contexts. In the Geertzian model, the world view of Muslims was the sum total of Islam inherited over time. This was the ideal, the moral vision and the tool of interpretation that were identified respectively by Goldziher, Voll, and Hoebink, among others. Martin asked scholars of Islam to pay attention to how this world view was used, appropriated, and translated in modern local contexts.

Martin went one step further, and reminded his readers that Husserl and Heidegger offered two ways of reading the legacy of Islam. With Husserl, scholars of Islam retrieved the legacy as a model and world view with sufficient bracketing and empathy. Geertz followed this line of interpretation. However, with Heidegger, scholars might also reproduce the legacy in every new reading. Whether one preferred Husserl or Heidegger, the inherited world view was read and re-read in modern contexts. Martin asked that scholars of Islam take into consideration these hermeneutical strategies of reading an inherited world view. Working with the example of the Qurʾan, he argued that the ritual could be read as an attempt to connect Qurʾan recitation to its performance, exegesis, and meaning to the past, the present, and the future. This history impacted upon a particular reading in a new context – negotiating between the past and the present. In this case, Martin also suggested that reading the Qurʾan in new contexts was a re-enactment of the Qurʾan recited first by the Prophet Muhammad in the presence of Gabriel (Martin 1982, 384). Martin was offering a phenomenological perspective of a modern recitation of the Qurʾan, one that mirrored the first recitation between Muhammad and Gabriel. Modern Islam, then, would be a re-construction of primordial experiences of Prophetic times. Martin was asking scholars of Islam to recognise this phenomenology. It seems that Martin was not specifically asking academic colleagues to pay attention to how modern Muslims were reading this inherited world view from texts and practices as hermeneutical exercises. He was focused on the theoretical models available to academic scholarship.

Martin did not particularly focus on the uniqueness of modernity. He assumed a radical alterity of each experience, however, and his application
of Geertz’s model suggests a construction of an Islamic experience in the modern world. Following different approaches and different fields, other scholars have traced the production of modern Islam in similar ways. Aziz al-Azmeh’s widely read book, *Islams and Modernities*, identifies Muslim responses to modernity as a form of Romanticism (Al-Azmeh 1993, ch. 2). Examining Islamist criticism of the West, Euben argues that they were producing critiques of modernity that should be compared with similar Western critiques (Euben 1997). Working with political formations, Schulze recognised familiar political ideologies in Arab societies since the nineteenth century, pointing to the modernity of these formations (Schulze 2000).

Salvatore has taken a very different approach to Islamic modernity, one that shies away from the phenomenological direction of Martin’s work, and also the critical readings of others that I have mentioned above. Working with a structural approach to modernity, he has followed two distinctive but related paths. In the first, he worked with the ideas of Max Weber and pushed the limits of his theoretical application to the history of Islam. In the second, he has worked with Dale Eickelman on the idea of the public sphere. Both converge around the discursive construction of alternative Islamic modernities. With regard to the first, Salvatore joined other scholars of Islam who proposed an updated Weberian approach, one that expunged the latter’s limited or prejudicial understanding of Islam. According to Salvatore, Weber offered a dynamic approach to culture and religion, within which the history of modern Islam may be reconstructed. Salvatore engages in a rich theoretical engagement with Weber, showing how an Islamic modernity may be imagined. He begins, however, with Jasper’s theory of the “Axial Age” that began 5,000 years earlier. The key transformative ideas of the “Axial Age” were the absolute separation between the human and divine, and the pursuit of happiness (salvation) in an otherworldly imagined realm. Salvatore argued for an Islamic engagement with these foundational ideas, producing two distinctive features for society. In theology, philosophy, and mysticism, he suggested, the individual believer and his or her engagement with salvation was placed above everything else. Moreover, the Islamic legacy was marked by diversity and the pursuit of consensus through discourse. Salvatore focuses on the history of Islam as a continuing contribution to deep cultural changes inaugurated before Muhammad (Salvatore 2009). He appeals to scholars to recognise Islam’s engagement with these ideas. He sees modern Islam, in turn, as a continuing engagement with the “Axial” ideas within new contexts and new possibilities. Muslims were producing a unique modernity with these ideas, as Europe too had
done. Both were continuing engagements with key ideas inaugurated in the “Axial Age.”

With specific respect to the modern period, Salvatore worked closely with Dale Eickelman to apply the theory of Jürgen Habermas for Islam in the public sphere. They brought a number of scholars together to reflect and write on what they call “public Islam” and “Muslim publics.” Public Islam referred to

highly diverse invocations of Islam as ideas and practices that religious scholars, self-ascribed religious authorities, secular intellectuals, Sufi orders, mothers, students, workers, engineers, and many others make to civic debate and public life. In this “public” capacity, “Islam” makes a difference in configuring the politics and social life of large parts of the globe, and not just for self-ascribed religious authorities. (Salvatore and Eickelman 2004b, xii)

“Public Islam” referred to articulations on Islam within public spaces. These voices and gestures produced new possibilities of both agreement and disagreement, but most importantly contributed to the production and maintenance of discursive worlds (Salvatore and Eickelman 2004a, 16). The net effect of “public Islam” was the production of “Muslim publics,” which by definition were discursive spaces within cities, regions, nations, and the global cyber-world. In any one place and time, multiple publics were deliberating on notions of the common good on various issues. Two features stand out in the production, as reflected in the work of Salvatore, Eickelman, and their collaborators. The role of new media was crucial, beginning with print and continuing in the era of virtual worlds. Modern media made religious texts more widely available, provided access to present one’s views, and increased the possibility of sharing such ideas with others across space. Secondly, non-specialists joined in the production of “public Islam” and the constitution of “Muslim publics.” Participation in “public Islam” was not limited to those who studied Islamic sciences over many years. Anyone with access to media could and did participate in the production. Participation in “Muslim publics” was not even limited to Muslims. In an early book, Salvatore had suggested how an open and cumulative discursive engagement between Arab and European observers and social scientists had produced “political Islam” for the public sphere (Salvatore 1997). Salvatore was suggesting that modern technology provided another step in the path of Islam’s engagement with “Axial” values. Its earlier focus on the individual believer was further consolidated by
technology’s ability to extend access to each and every participant in the discourse.

Taking the two lines of argument together, we can see Salvatore drawing on the theory of the “Axial Age” to locate the intellectual history of Islam. He then employed the idea of the public sphere to indicate how modern Islam was being produced as publics. New political structures and technological innovations were presenting opportunities for the elaboration of this longue durée of Islamic engagement. Modern Islam was thus presented as an alternative modernity, the modernisation of Europe being one particular instance of this engagement.

In different ways, Martin and Salvatore approached modern Islam as a language game in the Wittgensteinian sense of the term. Martin developed Geertz’s approach for a religious tradition with a long history, with a focus on the role of symbols. His model suggested that Muslims worked with symbols, and modern experiences should be appreciated for this symbolic work. Similarly, Salvatore proposed that Islam was a discursive tradition that engaged with “Axial” values, and was now re-imagining those values in an age with different experiences and technological possibilities. For both Martin and Salvatore, one aspect of the question “What is Islam?” was answered: Islam is a language. It is a specific application of the proposal by Talal Asad to regard Islam as a discursive system. Asad had been critical of Geertz and others who regarded Islam as a closed and distinctive cultural system, and argued for a discourse that managed and produced selves, communities, and values (Asad 1986). With Islam as language and discourse, Martin and Salvatore put Muslims at the centre of modern Islam. Muslims read and wrote Islam.

While the meaning of Islam was clearly identified as language, it lost any specific substance, however. By definition, Islam was what its language participants made it to be. Martin reminded us about the complexities of reading a language and texts that others have produced. The hermeneutical reflections of Husserl and Heidegger made it hazardous to guess what Islam was at any one particular time. In the essays studied, Martin’s approach focused on the re-enactment of the Prophetic period that gave modern Islam a focus. He was following a Husserlian approach to the phenomenology of recitation. However, his general model did not prevent a scholar of Islam from taking a Heideggerian approach to reading the legacy of Islam. Modern Islam potentially becomes a hermeneutical exercise that does not simply repeat the approaches of the past (as Hoebink seems to suggest). Salvatore’s discursive approach was equally centrifugal around core “Axial” values. The public sphere prepared opportunities for multiple values and discourses that
were not bound and limited to the legacy of Islam. No longer controlled by
religious leaders or even by Muslims, the discourse of Islam was thrown
wide open. In both Martin and Salvatore, “What is Islam?” lost its centre
in Islam, as it revolved around the meaning of Islam that each participant
brought to the language and discourse at play.

No special group of Muslims or even believers were privileged in these
models of engaging in the language of modern Islam. The question “Who is
a Muslim?” was not directly connected with modernity or modernisation.
Yet, each participant was engaged personally and directly in constructing
a modern religious experience. The modernists, the traditionalists, and
the groups in between have been dropped in the models. Both Martin and
Salvatore want to pay attention to the engaged participant. The public
sphere dimension of “public Islam” and “Muslim publics” does not even limit
the engagement to Muslims. “Who is a Muslim?” has lost any specificity
apart from a presumed interest or experience.

3 Discussion and Conclusion

Studies on modern Islam have offered fascinating insights into what has
become of Islam in the modern world. I have tracked their journey that
began with a search for an Islamic modernism, to the pursuit of personal
engagements in discourse. At each stage, new perspectives were offered
on questions that were first formulated by Max Weber about the history
of religious traditions. The binary opposition of modernity and tradition
was used by earlier twentieth-century scholars, but then progressively
replaced with more sophisticated and nuanced approaches to change and
modernisation. Similarly, earlier Western assumptions of modernity were
moved from the centre to the periphery, and Islam and Western modernity
were placed in a rubric that went beyond them both. The literature, from
one perspective, may be seen as a progressive grappling with modernity
and its meaning in relation to Islam. And this chapter has shown how more
nuanced models of modernity were used implicitly and explicitly to define
and identify Islam in the modern world.

My main purpose, however, has been to put these Weberian reflections
under the framework of kalām questions. From the perspective of kalām,
what was the search for modern Islam telling us about the identity of Muslims
(“Who is a Muslim?”) and the meaning of Islam (“What is Islam?”)? I propose
that two main preoccupations are present in the literature. The first was
a form of justification that behaves any good theological discourse. While
earlier kalām was concerned with justifying revelation against reason, the study of modern Islam could not escape justification against modernity. Secondly, the study of modern Islam has been a search for representation that has become progressively more difficult. The representation of Islam suffered the fate of all representations in the social sciences and humanities in the twentieth century. For Islam in the modern world, the story of representation has been a progressive and perpetual postponement of being Muslim, and of Islam itself.

The justificatory preoccupation of the literature of modern Islam is most clearly evident among the first group of scholars mentioned above. From Goldziher to Gibb, modern Islam was justified against the successes and achievements of modern, Western Europe. As in the past, when Muslims found a rational basis for belief, scholars of modern Islam were examining the possibility of an Islamic theology or interpretation of modernity that would be similar or compatible with modern Europe. Most invariably found that Muslims, even modernist Muslims, failed in this endeavour. There were, however, some who believed that a truly modernist Islam was available and within reach. As Muslims had produced arguments for the rational basis of Islamic beliefs and values in the past, a similar exercise might be possible for Islam in the modern world.

This explicit justification of modern Islam was avoided by those who used different models of modernity and of religion/culture. Voll and Hoebink took the first step to relativise Western modernity. From the perspective of Muslim responses, they referred to other “modernities” in the past that had prepared Muslims for the present. Salvatore took a bigger step, as he proposed an alternative Weberian model for Islam and Europe that reached into the “Axial Age.” These attempts to move beyond the shadow of the West reflected a change in world politics, and also a change in social sciences and the humanities. Europe and the West were no longer the models against which developments were measured in the rest of the world. And these studies in modern Islam were clearly successful in their endeavour to show this new mood. However, Western experience was not completely displaced. Voll and Hoebink avoided an obvious comparison between the West and modern Islam, but Western experience and history loomed large against which Muslims responded. Salvatore, too, did not go beyond the impact of the West as a parallel model that preceded the history of modern Islam. Modern Muslims as such were responding to major changes and challenges emanating from the West. There is more than a hint of justification that continued to pervade the discourse. Modern Islam, as pursued in the literature, was by definition tied to the coat-tails of a Western experience. Just as
reason could not be shrugged off in *kalām* in the past, the West cannot be
ignored or avoided in the definition of modern Islam and modern Muslims.

If the search for justification was clearly uneasy, another preoccupation
was more widely shared. The search for modern Islam was a quest or desire
to find the most adequate representation of Islam in the modern world. This
was the self-evident task of scholars of Islam such as historians, philologists,
and social scientists. From a *kalām* perspective, however, this preoccupation
takes on some revealing dimensions. The quest began with great clarity,
but concluded with an almost total obliteration of Islam and Muslims. The
answers to “What is Islam?” and “Who are Muslims?” became progressively
impossible.

For those working with modernity as a normative model of the West,
Islam was represented as tradition. In this perspective, Muslims were
classified according to their willingness and readiness to modernise. For
those who placed an emphasis on Muslims responding to the challenges
of modernity, however, the definition of Islam became opaque. Islam was
a perpetual adaptation to successive challenges that had first emerged
with the death of the Prophet Muhammad. Modernity was only the latest
challenge to which Muslims were responding, adapting, and resisting.
They adopted different styles of action (Voll) or hermeneutical strategies
(Hoebink). The third group of scholars, applying a constructive perspective
to modernity, also contributed to this opaqueness. As language, text, and
discourse, Islam lost any specific meaning with regard to belief, ritual,
or value. Islam had been emptied of all contents. What started as a clear
definition of Islam in the binary logic of modernity and tradition ended with
elimination of any recognisable feature, ritual, or practice. Focus shifted
from the “thingness” of Islam, to responses and engagements.

Similarly, the representations of Muslim identities (“Who is a Muslim?”)
ended the same way. Goldziher and others replaced the earlier sectarian
divisions among Muslims, and between Muslims and other religious groups,
with identities determined by Western modernity. In this perspective, mod-
ernists and traditionalists replaced Sunnis, Shiʿis, Alawis, apostates, and
heretics. Voll and Hoebink broke the stranglehold of the binary logic, and
focused on multiple responses to modernity. Where Muslims were previ-
ously divided between modernists and traditionalists, they were henceforth
respondents, and all modernists. They were perpetually modern and always
responding to challenges. The Muslim had lost his and her centre of identity.
Salvatore turned to the “Axial Age” to search for an Islamic engagement
that ran parallel to the West’s engagement with the same tradition. Such
a parallel modernity defined a particular Muslim and Islamic engagement
in public spheres. Modern technology made it possible for an increasing number of individuals to participate in these discourses (Salvatore). The Muslim public became invocations of Islam. The Muslim was emptied of fundamental notions of modernity, but also of any tangible belief and of action. Identity moved from the person to the “invocations of Islam” in the public sphere. In Salvatore’s model, the Muslim also disappeared. Like Islam, the meaning of being a Muslim also lost any tangible reference. Muslims were defined by their engaging and reading discourses and texts respectively. The centre had fallen through.

Together with justification, then, representation occupied a central role in the quest to identify modern Islam. Islam and Muslims had been placed in the twilight shadow of Western modernity. The shadow was lifted, but enough to mark an outline. More critically, as the quest for representation had come under the challenge of Foucault in general, and Edward Said on the study of Islam in particular (Foucault 1980; Said 1995), representation became impossible. The meaning of Islam and Muslims became responses and engagements around activities and beliefs. From the perspective of kalām, such “representations” emptied Islam and Muslims of any clear and tangible centre. There was no belief, or ritual, or narrative that held Islam or Muslims together. The meaning of Islam, and of being Muslim, dissolved from any specific belief, act, or value. All was language, deferred progressively and perpetually. The meaning of modern Islam and Muslims were subject to the fate of all postmodernist definitions of terms.

Bibliography


