

Religion and the Civilizational Dimensions of Politics

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Introduction

It has long been recognized that religious groups and organizations have played a very important role in the political process in most societies, especially in the more developed ones, such as the great empires in which they constituted relatively autonomous social organizations and political actions. It has also been recognized that under some conditions, groups, especially heterodoxies can be a major factor of social change. This was, of course, the leitmotif of Weber's comparative sociology of the world religions.

What has been less recognized or fully confronted are some other implications of Weber's analysis—namely, that at least in the historical civilizations, religions provided some components of the broader civilizational premises and frameworks, and this partly determined the ways in which religious activities and organizations became related to political processes.

The fact that in most historical civilizations the basic premises were couched in religious terms made it difficult to distinguish between the two analytical aspects of the world religions: those aspects that constituted components of the basic cultural or civilizational frameworks of their societies, and, on the other hand, those aspects that, from a later "secular" perspective, could be designated as specifically religious—above all patterns of belief, ritual and worship. This chapter illustrates the importance of this

analytical distinction by focusing on a central problem of classical sociology of religion—namely, the relation between sectarian groups with potentially heterodox orientations and the processes of social change in different societies.

Heterodoxies in Axial Civilizations

Axial Age civilizations¹ (to use Karl Jasper's nomenclature) are those civilizations that crystallized during the millennium after 500 B.C., when new types of ontological visions, of conceptions of a basic tension between the transcendental and mundane orders emerged and were institutionalized in many parts of the world—in ancient Israel, in second commonwealth Judaism, and in Christianity; in ancient Greece; in Zoroastrian Iran; in early imperial China; in Hinduism and Buddhism; and, beyond the Axial Age proper, in Islam.

The crystallization of these civilizations can be seen as a series of revolutionary breakthroughs in the history of humankind, which changed the course of human history. The central aspect of these revolutions was the emergence and institutionalization of new basic ontological conceptions of a chasm between the transcendental and mundane orders. These conceptions, which first developed among small groups of autonomous, relatively unattached "intellectuals," were ultimately transformed into the basic "hegemonic" premises of their respective civilizations, that is, they became institutionalized. They became the predominant orientations of both the ruling as well as of many secondary elites, fully embodied in their respective centers or subcenters.

The development and institutionalization of such conceptions of a basic tension and chasm between the transcendental and the mundane orders, gave rise in all these civilizations to attempt to reconstruct the mundane world—human personality and the sociopolitical and economic order according to the appropriate transcendental vision and the principles of the higher ontological or ethical order.

The given mundane order was perceived in these civilizations as incomplete, inferior, bad, or polluted—at least in some of its parts—and in need of being reconstructed. This reconstruction would take place by bridging the chasm between the transcendental and the mundane orders, according to the precepts of the higher ethical or metaphysical order. In Weberian terms, the goal of "salvation" (basically a Christian term, some equivalents of which

are to be found in all Axial civilizations) made the world an arena for the implementation of a transcendental vision.

The political order as the central locus, or one of the central loci of the mundane order, was usually conceived as lower than the transcendental one and accordingly had to be restructured according to the precepts of the latter.

With such restructuring, the nature of the rulers became greatly transformed. The king-god, the embodiment of the cosmic and earthly orders alike, disappeared, and a secular ruler—even if with sacral attributes—who was in principle accountable to some higher order, appeared. Thus there emerged the conception of the accountability of the rulers and of the community to a higher authority (God, Divine Law, the Mandate of Heaven, and the like). Accordingly, the possibility of calling a ruler to judgment appeared. The first most dramatic appearance of this conception was in ancient Israel, in the priestly and prophetic pronouncements. A different “secular” conception of such accountability to the community and its laws appeared in ancient Greece.

Concomitantly with the emergence of conceptions of accountability of rulers there began to develop autonomous spheres of law as somewhat distinct from ascriptively binding customs and purely customary law. Such developments could also entail some beginnings of conception of rights. The scope of these spheres of law and rights varied greatly from society to society but they were all established according to some distinct and autonomous criteria.

These new modes of continuous reconstruction of the social and civilizational orders gave rise to continuous tensions in their very premises. The root of such tensions lies in the fact the very institutionalization of the perception of the tension between the transcendental and the mundane orders and of the quest to overcome this tension, generates an awareness of a great range of possibilities or visions of the very definition of such tensions; of the proper mode of their resolution as well as an awareness of the partiality or incompleteness of any given problem of institutionalization of such vision. Moreover such institutionalization was never a simple, peaceful process; it has been usually connected with a continuous struggle and competition among many groups and among their respective visions.

It is this very multiplicity of alternative visions that gave rise in all these civilizations to an awareness of the uncertainty of different roads to salvation, of alternative conceptions of social and cultural order, and of the seeming arbitrariness of any single solution. Such awareness has become a constituent element of the

consciousness of these civilizations, especially among the carriers of their great traditions. This was closely related to the development of a high degree of "second-order" thinking, of reflexivity turning on the basic premises of the social and cultural order.

Out of these tensions there emerged another element common to all these civilizations—that of the utopian vision or visions, the visions of an alternative cultural and social order beyond any given place or time. Such visions contain many of the millenarian and revivalist elements that can be found also in pre-Axial or non-Axial "pagan" religions, but they go beyond them by combining these elements with a vision based on the emphasis on necessity to construct the mundane order according to the precepts of the higher one, with the search for an alternative "better" order beyond any given time and place.²

The development and institutionalization of the perception of the basic tension between the transcendental and the mundane orders were closely connected with the emergence of a new social element, of a new type of elites, of carriers of models of cultural and social order, of autonomous intellectuals—such as the Jewish prophets and priests, the Greek philosophers and Sophists, the Chinese literati, the Hindu Brahmins, the Buddhist sangha, and the Islamic ulema.

Once such a conception of a tension between the transcendental and mundane orders became institutionalized, it was also associated with the transformation of political elites, and turned the new scholar class into relatively autonomous partners in the major ruling coalitions and protest movements. The new elites, intellectuals, and clerics were recruited and legitimized according to distinct, autonomous criteria, and were organized in autonomous settings, potentially independent of other categories of elites and social groups. But at the same time they competed strongly with them, especially for the production and control of symbols and media communications.

The nonpolitical cultural elites and the political elites each saw themselves as the autonomous articulators of the new order, with the other type potentially inferior and accountable to themselves. Moreover, each of these groups of elites was not homogeneous; and there developed a multiplicity of secondary cultural, political, and educational elites. These different elites in general and the intellectuals in particular constituted also the most active element in the movements of protest and processes of change that developed in these societies, and above all in the construction of a new type of such movements—sects and heterodoxies that upheld different

conceptions of the resolution of the tension between the transcendental and mundane orders, and of the proper way of the institutionalization of such concepts, of various alternative conceptions of the social and cultural order.³

The transformation of such alternative conceptions into heterodoxies was effected by their confrontation with some institutionalized orthodoxy. The continuous confrontations between orthodoxy and antinomian heterodoxy have thus become crucial components in the history of humankind.

There emerged in these civilizations the possibility of structural and ideological linkages between different movements of protest and foci of political conflict, and above all among rebellions, central political struggle, and religious or intellectual heterodoxies. These linkages were effected by different coalitions of different secondary elites and different religious and intellectual sects and heterodoxies. Accordingly, there developed the possibility of the greater impingement of all such movements, especially of sects and heterodoxies, on the center or centers of the society.

Thus, there developed a new type of civilizational dynamics. It transformed group conflicts into potential class and ideological dynamics. It transformed group conflicts into potential class and ideological conflicts, cult conflicts into struggles between the orthodox and the heterodox. Conflicts between tribes and societies became missionary crusades for the transformation of civilizations. The zeal for reorganization informed by each society's concept of salvation made the whole world at least potentially subject to cultural-political reconstructin, and in all these new developments the different sectarian movements and movements of heterodoxy played, because of the reasons outlined above, a central role.

Varieties of Sectarianism and of Heterodoxies and Their Institutional Impact

Beyond all these characteristics common to all the Axial Age civilizations, there developed among them far-reaching differences in the structuring of sects and heterodoxies and in their overall civilizational impact.⁴ The most crucial difference is, of course, between those civilizations to which it is legitimate to apply the term *heterodoxy* and those in which it is more appropriate to talk only about sects and sectarianism. The term *heterodoxy* is applicable only to cases when one can talk about orthodoxy. This term, in its

turn, implies a certain type of both organizational and cognitive doctrinal structures.

With respect to both the organizational and the doctrinal aspects, the major difference among the Axial Age civilizations is that between on the one hand the monotheistic civilizations and Christianity⁵ and, on the other hand, Hinduism and Buddhism⁶ with Confucian China constituting a sort of in between.⁷

It is within Christianity that these organizational and doctrinal aspects of orthodoxy developed in the fullest way. Thus, it was in Christianity that there developed full-fledged churches that constituted potentially active and autonomous partners of the ruling coalitions. In Judaism and Islam there developed powerful, but not always as fully organized and autonomous organizations of clerics. But of no lesser importance is the fact that in Christianity and to a smaller, but yet not insignificant, degree also in Judaism and Islam, there developed strong tendencies to structure relatively clear cognitive doctrinal boundaries.

This tendency was rooted first of all in the prevalence, within the monotheistic civilizations in general and within Christianity with its stronger connections to the Greek philosophical heritage in particular, of strong orientations first of all to the cognitive elaboration of the relations among God, man and the world. Second, this tendency was rooted in the fact that, in all these monotheistic religions, with their other-worldly orientation, the mundane world was seen—even if in different degrees—as at least one focus of other-worldly salvation, and hence the proper designation of such activity became a focus of central concern and of contention between the ruling orthodoxies and the numerous heterodoxies that developed within them.⁸

The importance of the struggle between orthodoxies and heterodoxies, of the structuring of such cognitive boundaries, of the elaboration of visions, of the reconstruction of the mundane world according to transcendental other-worldly vision, is best seen—in a negative way—in the case of Hinduism and Buddhism.

In both these cases we find, despite a very strong transcendental and other-worldly orientation, that the structuring of cognitive doctrines (as distinct from ritual) and above all, of their applicability to mundane matters, did not constitute a central aspect or premise of these religions or civilizations. Hence even when, as in Buddhism, it is not impossible to talk about something akin to church—albeit a much more loosely organized one—it is very difficult to talk about heterodoxy. At the same time sectarianism abounds—Buddhism itself being in a sense a sect developing out of Hinduism.

These differences between sects and heterodoxies are not just matters of scholarly classification. They are closely related to the impact of these sects or orthodoxies on the dynamics of their respective civilizations. It would not be correct to state (in misreading Weber) that it was only in Christianity (or perhaps, stretching it, in the monotheistic civilizations) that sects and heterodoxies had far-reaching consequences on the structure of mundane fields.

Given the strong other-worldly orientation, Buddhist sects were not oriented—as was the case in Islam or in the other monotheistic civilizations—to the reconstruction of the political centers of their respective societies.⁹ Nevertheless, the various Hinduist sects, and Buddhism itself, did indeed have a far-reaching impact on the structuring of the mundane spheres of their respective civilizations.¹⁰ First, they extended the scope of the different national and political communities and imbued them with new symbolic dimensions.¹¹ Second, they changed some of the bases and criteria of participation in the civilizational communities, as was the case in Jainism,¹² in the Bhakti movement, and, of course, above all, in Buddhism when an entirely new civilizational framework was constructed.

Buddhism also introduced new elements into the political scene, above all that special way in which the sangha, usually politically a very compliant group, could in some cases, as Paul Mus¹³ has shown, become a sort of moral conscience of the community, calling the rulers to some accountability.

This impact was of a different nature from that of the struggles between the reigning orthodoxies and the numerous heterodoxies that developed within the monotheistic civilizations of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. While the reconstruction of political centers was not the major orientation of Buddhist sects, yet even in these societies there did develop a mode of involvement in the political arena with potentially subversive challenges to the authorities. Above all Buddhist (and Hindu) sects had a great impact on the construction of the boundaries of the respective national collectivities.

From all these points of view Confucian China constitutes a rather mixed case, paradoxically somewhat nearer to the monotheistic than to the other Axial civilizations.¹⁴ There did not develop in China an elaborate religious doctrine, as distinct from the "secular" precepts of Confucianism. These precepts—in which there was almost no reference to God or to other-worldly concerns—did, however, entail very strong transcendental albeit this-worldly orientations with a very explicitly cognitive elaboration of the

precepts according to which the mundane world had to be constructed. Similarly, while there did not exist in China any official church, the stratum of literati and the bureaucracy, in coalition with the emperor, exercised not only strong political control, but also control over the communication of the major symbolic reference orientations, over official rituals, and over the major channels of education.

The mode of the involvement of the Confucian elites in the political centers in China, Korea, and Vietnam developed in a rather different direction from that of the Buddhist sangha, and was in many ways closer to the sectarian activities in the montheistic civilizations. Confucianism was indeed very strongly oriented to the political centers. Given the strong, almost exclusively this-worldly orientation of Confucianism, however, the potentially heterodox groups of literati rarely challenged the political center and order. They were, however, as we shall see, politically very active, and often engaged in intensive discourse and moral criticism of the rulers.¹⁵

As in all other Axial Age civilizations, there did develop in China numerous secondary "religions" (like Buddhism and Taoism) with strong other-worldly orientations, as well as numerous schools from within the central Confucian fold. As the official Confucian "orthodoxy" was not greatly concerned with their other-worldly orientations or pure speculation, these sects never developed into heterodoxy in the doctrinal sense, and so long as they did not impinge on the basic institutional implications of the imperial order with the political-cultural predominance of the literati and bureaucracy, they were more or less left alone. But once some of these sects did attempt—as was the case with the Buddhists under the Tang—to impinge on these premises of the Confucian order to construct the world according to their own premises, the Confucian literati and bureaucracy behaved just as any other "monotheistic" orthodoxy, engaging in fierce political struggle and far-reaching persecutions.¹⁶

Moreover, throughout the various periods of Chinese history there have been continuous attempts by the ruling literati to define the limits of Confucian orthodoxy. Such attempts were often related to a reaction to many important attempts at reform grounded in Confucian and neo-Confucian visions that abounded in China, especially from the Sung period onward, and which were greatly influenced by Buddhism and in some ways constituted a response to it. Neo-Confucian groups were closely concerned with the reconstruction of the imperial order, in accordance with the metaphysical and moral visions they articulated, and they had far-reaching impact

on some aspects of policy (land allotment and taxation) and to some extent also on some of the details of the examination system itself.¹⁷ They were continually politically active, and often critically engaged in the political discourse. Unlike the Islamic sects or heterodoxies or those of other monotheistic civilizations, however, the Confucian literati have but rarely challenged the basic political premises of the regimes, the very foundation of the imperial order. This was probably to no small extent due to the fact that they conceived the political arena or political-cultural arenas, as the main, possibly only, institutional arena (as distinct from the more private, contemplative one) for implementing the Confucian transcendental vision.

The differences between sects, sectarian organizations, and heterodoxies, and their impact on their broader social settings as they developed in different ways in these civilizations are rooted not only in their respective belief systems or in the concrete power relations between them and the political powers. They are rooted also—and perhaps above all—in the different ways in which various components of religious beliefs became incorporated into basic premises of these respective civilizations and influenced their basic institutional derivatives.

The Expansion of Islam

The importance of “civilizational” factors in the structuring of the political impact of religious sects and heterodoxies can be best seen in the analysis of the expansion of religions in selected Axial civilizations. Within all these great religions there developed strong tendencies to expansion—tendencies that were rooted in their universalistic and potentially missionary orientations. The story of such expansions is too well known to need documentation or exposition here. Here we shall provide only some illustrations that will indicate how such processes of expansion underline the difference between, on the one hand, the spread or expansion of religious belief and patterns of worship and of religious behavior, and on the other hand, their acting as components of transformation of the basic ontological vision and premises of the social order—or in other words, of the premises of the respective civilizations or societies into which they have expanded.

The first case we shall analyze will deal with the expansion of Islam. We shall examine the differences between the mode of such expansion in Central and East Asia (India, Indonesia, Malaysia) up to the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the

twentieth century with that of expansion of Islam in the classical period of Islam, as well as the different modes of spread of Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa.¹⁸

In a very broad and simplified way it can be said that, while in classical Islam from the seventh to the tenth centuries, and later in some African societies, it was the civilizational component of Islam that was here predominant, while in Eastern Asian and South African societies it expanded mostly as a system of belief and worship without greatly affecting the civilizational frame of these societies, even when it was adopted by the rulers as their official religion.

In the classical period of expansion of Islam, especially in the transition from the Umayyad to the 'Abbasid caliphs in the mid-eighth century, whatever the degree of adherence of different sectors of the conquered populations, or for that matter of some of the conquerors, to the beliefs and patterns of worship of Islam, Islam created a new civilization with very distinct premises. It generated new institutional formations to a large extent shaped by the basic ontological vision, cultural orientations, and societal premises of "classical" Islam, as well as new specific dynamics of religious organizations in general and of sects in particular.

Among the basic ontological conceptions that crystallized in the Islamic realm, the following were the most important for the shaping of the institutional formations: the strong distinction or tension between the cosmic transcendental realm and the mundane one; the emphasis on overcoming this tension by total submission to God and by this-worldly above all, politicomilitary activity; the strong universalistic element in the definition of the Islamic community; the ideal of the *umma*, the politicoreligious community of all believers, distinct from any ascriptive, primordial collectivity; the principled autonomous access of all members of the community to the attributes of the transcendental order, to salvation, through submission to God; and the closely connected emphasis on the principled political equality of all believers.

This ideology entailed a complete fusion of politicoreligious collectivities, collective identity, and elites. The original vision of the *umma* assumed complete convergence between the sociopolitical and religious communities. Many of the later caliphs (such as the 'Abbasids and Fatimids) and other Muslim rulers came to power on the crest of religious movements that upheld this ideal, and legitimized themselves in such religicopolitical terms. They sought to retain popular support by stressing the religious aspect of the authority and by courting the religious leaders and religious

sentiments of the community. Concomitantly, political problems were central to the development of Islamic theology.

In the implementation of all these orientations, Islam evinced the characteristics of a "totalitarian movement," or as Maxime Rodinson has put it, of a revolutionary political party strongly oriented to the reconstruction of the world and very militant in this pursuit.¹⁹

This emphasis on the reconstruction of a combined politico-religious collectivity was connected with the development of a strong ideological negation of any primordial element within this sacred politicoreligious identity. Among all the Axial Age civilizations, especially the monotheistic ones, Islam was ideologically the most extreme in its denial of the legitimacy of primordial dimensions in the structure of the Islamic community—although in practice, as Bernard Lewis has shown, the story was often markedly different.²⁰

Given the basic premises of Islam, Islamic civilization had a very strong tendency to develop imperial regimes with very distinct institutional patterns—new centers permeating the periphery, autonomous political and religious elites and institutions, and specifically Islamic patterns of urban life.²¹

Yet it was only in the 'Abbasid Empire, in such regimes as the Fatimid and later in the Ottoman, that the imperial pattern became relatively predominant. In most other cases there developed mostly sultanic, patrimonial regimes with less autonomous religious elites and less religiously committed political elites, such as military slaves, an institution unique to Islam. In other parts of the Islamic world, such as in North Africa and Central Asia, it was seemingly, as was shown already by Ibn Khaldun,²² tribal regimes often moving into a sultanic direction that became the most prevalent ones.²³

It is a rather paradoxical but central fact of Islamic history that the final crystallization of this universalistic ideology and institutional format took place with the so-called 'Abbasid revolution,²⁴ involving a shift in the legitimation of rulers in Sunni Islam from direct descent from the Prophet and consensus of the community to seniority and ultimately the fulfillment of the Prophet's will. It also spawned in close relation to the institutionalization of this universalistic vision, a de facto separation between the political and religious leadership.²⁵ It was also at the end of the 'Abbasid period that military rulers and a caste of military slaves started to become predominant²⁶—and it was after that period that patrimonial or tribal regimes became relatively predominant in the realm of Islam.

Yet all of these seemingly patrimonial or tribal regimes evinced some very distinct characteristics that distinguished them from

other such regimes, be they those of the ancient Near East, or of ancient Southeast or Central Asia, or Mesoamerica.

The most important distinctive feature of these regimes was the nature of political dynamics that developed within them—and above all the place of sectarian activities in the political process. These political dynamics were indeed rooted in the basic ontological-social vision of Islam, above all in the undying vision of a unified political religious community, the *umma*. Yet there was the failure, going back to the very first stages of Islam, to implement that view.²⁷

It was the combination of the de facto impossibility of institutionalizing the *umma* with the strong latent religioideological orientation toward such unification, the fusion of religious and political spheres and elites, and the reconstruction of a union between them, that was at the core of many of the political and religious developments of Islam—and it was manifest above all in the nature of Islamic sects and in the central role played by these sects in the potentially strong “semirevolutionary” sectarian activities, in the expansion of Islam, and in the political dynamics of different Islamic regimes.

At the core of these special traits of the basic religious orientations of the Islamic sects was the importance of the political dimension. The emphasis on this dimension could be oriented toward active participation in the center, its destruction or transformation; or toward a conscious withdrawal from it—a withdrawal that, as in the case of Sufism and Shi'ism, often harbored potential political reactivation. But whatever its concrete manifestations, the political orientation was potentially inherent in any Islamic religious setting, and generated some of the major movements, political divisions, and problems in Islam, starting with the Shi'a.²⁸ In appropriate historical circumstances it could be activated by new and dynamic political elements. One distinctive characteristic of Islamic societies was that the internal sectarian political impact was often connected with the problem of the expansion of Islam and especially with the continuous impingement of tribal elements as the carriers of the original idea of Islam and hence, also to some degree, of the pristine Islamic polity and vision.

True, Islam never developed a concept of revolution.²⁹ But at the same time, as Ernest Gellner has shown in his interpretation of Ibn Khaldun's work, a less direct yet very forceful pattern of accountability of rulers arose, manifest in the possibility of rulers being disposed by the combination of sectarian groups with the resurgence of tribal revival against corrupt or weak regimes.³⁰ Such possible subsequent regeneration out of new tribal elements, either from

within Arabia itself, or from new elements converted to Islam in Central Asia or in North Africa.

It was this specific dynamic element that distinguished the Islamic regimes from other patrimonial or tribal ones, and the Islamic sects or orders from those of other religions, however much they may seem to have in common.

It was exactly this element of the active transformation of the religious beliefs into components of an ever-reaching hegemonic ontological vision of civilizational premises that was for a long time lacking or at most very weak in Southeast Asian Islam.³¹ Even when Islam was adopted by the rulers, not only did it often develop in a rather syncretic mode, but—above all—it did not, for a very long time, give rise to a restructuring of the basic ideological and institutional premises of these civilizations.

The acceptance of Islam by the rulers did not give rise here to reconstruction of the political arena, of the traditional, pre-Islamic, patrimonial patterns in the political realm. Such acceptance did not give rise to a new pattern of accountability of rulers and to the emergence of a new autonomous political elite. The Islamic teachers became mostly religious specialists at the courts of the rulers or in other sectors of the society, but did not develop as an autonomous political elites. Nor did the Islamic merchants who were among the main carriers of the expansion of Islam in those societies. The original Islamic ontology and conception of political and social order never became culturally hegemonic. The various Islamic religious organizations or groups tended on the whole, to be mostly confined in the context of these civilizations to what may be called the “private” religious sphere. Sects or sectarian tendencies were relatively few. At the same time there arose numerous individuals with some semisectarian, especially mystical orientations and tendencies, but they were on the whole politically passive and basically not oriented to the political arena.³²

This weakness of such political sectarian dynamic in these countries at least up until the end of the nineteenth century attests to the fact that such sectarian dynamics were much more attached to its specific patterns of belief, ritual, and worship than to the overall civilizational vision of Islam. Later in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and above all in the post-World War II period, these orientations were greatly transformed. Such transformation took place when there developed new types of elites who aimed at creating overall Islamic civilizational patterns.

A rather similar distinction can be identified in the expansion of Islam in Africa. The difference between the expansion of Islam

as a system of belief and worship and as a civilization can be perhaps even more clearly identified in the modes of Islamization of various African societies.³³

These different patterns of expansion of political dynamics in Islam were closely related to very important differences in the composition and characteristics of the Islamic carriers and elites.

Insofar as merchants and rather dispersed clerics and religious specialists constituted the major carriers of expansion of Islam, Islam tended to expand as a system of beliefs and worship while the expansion of Islam as a civilization has been usually predicated on the activities of highly organized and cohesive religious elites or orders in close cooperation with new types of political elites. It is such religious and political elites that often exhibited very strong sectarian tendencies.

But it is not just the "occupational" composition of the carriers of Islam that is of crucial importance, but their internal structure as well as their place in the ruling coalitions of their societies. Thus, for instance, in the indigenous African Islamic states (and in the parallel cases in Southeast Asia) the Islamic elites were nonautonomous, secondary partners in existing "traditional" coalitions, highly embedded in the ascriptive communities of their societies, while in the Jihad states they were highly autonomous, independent partners in coalitions of relatively autonomous elites, very often generating new types of such political elites.

It is these different types of elites that generated different modes of sectarian activities and dynamics. In the indigenous African states there developed few full-fledged sectarian activities, certainly almost none with any strong political orientations—even less than in Southeast Asia. The Jihad states on the other hand were essentially created by tribal elements that had developed very intensive sectarian-like orientations and activities, promulgating the pristine Islamic civilization model.

The Expansion of Confucianism and Buddhism

Parallel—although obviously not identical—differences between the "religious" and civilizational components can be identified with respect to the expansion of Confucianism, as well as of Buddhism, in Asia.

The crucial difference is between the impact of expansion of Confucianism on the respective institutional and ideological formats of Korea and Vietnam on the one hand, and on Japan's on the other.

The institutionalization of Confucianism first of all in China itself and then in Korea and Vietnam has transformed the basic institutional premises of the social and political order in these societies, in the structure of their centers and their ruling strata in comparison with preceding periods of regimes.³⁴ This was not the case, however, in Japan.

In both Korea and North Vietnam there have developed new regimes as a result of expansion or adoption of imperial Confucianism, of centers, the like of which persisted in South Vietnam, even if not as fully articulated as in China, as well as new types of structure of the ruling elites and the systems of stratification.³⁵ This change was effected by the transformation of "feudal" or rather feudal-patrimonial ruling groups into something similar to the Chinese literati, to an autonomous bureaucratic-cultural elite, recruited according to distinct, independent criteria and organized in relatively autonomous frameworks.

It is true that in Korea the elite have never achieved the degree of autonomy and independence that characterized the Chinese Empire, and the aristocratic and patrimonial tendencies were here indeed strong. In Korea the Confucians encountered very strong Buddhist opposition in alliance with large parts of the older aristocracy and some of the rulers.³⁶ Once, however, the Confucian institutions and elites became predominant, even the aristocracy became "Confucianized." It is also true that aristocratic families and lineages continued to be much more important in Korea than in post-Tang China. Their importance, however, was manifest in the success in monopolizing or at least in semimonopolizing the Confucian bureaucratic literati positions or in reverting to a distinct "semifeudal" aristocratic type of polity. In other words they played already on the Confucian playgrounds, according to Confucian rules, even if they manipulated those rules to their advantage. In North Vietnam the Confucian state was even more coercive than in Korea and in some ways more analyzed than the Chinese one.³⁷

The story of Confucianism and Buddhism in Japan is radically different. True enough, both Confucianism and Buddhism have greatly influenced the entire cultural and social ambiance of Japanese society. Their influence was indeed very far-reaching and it is, as well known, impossible to understand the history of Japanese society and culture without taking this influence into account. Confucianism and Buddhism were also very important in generating many arenas of cultural creativity as well as in the constitution of the realm of private meaning of many sectors of Japanese society. They have greatly contributed to the cultural and

religiocultic life in Japan, have greatly influenced the pattern of creativity in these areas, and were also of great importance in transforming the general cultural ambiance and climate.³⁸

Institutionally, however, neither Confucianism nor Buddhism has changed the structure of the center, or of the ruling elites. In Japan, the "importation" of Confucianism did not develop those central institutional aspects that shaped the Confucian regimes in China, Korea, and Vietnam—the examination system and the crystallization through this system of the stratum of the literati and of the imperial bureaucracy.

Buddhism too in Japan developed some very distinct characteristics that distinguished it from those of Buddhist communities in India, China, and Southeast Asia. The most important of these characteristics was the development of very strong this-worldly orientations and a very sectarian familistic organizational structure of Buddhist groups or sects. On the organizational level, Buddhist sects developed in highly personalized and familistic directions. Buddhist sectarianism in Japan was rooted not in a strong transcendental orientation but in its having become embedded in the strong emphasis on personal "enlightenment" on the one hand and on concrete social nexus, on "groupism" with tendencies to hereditary transmission of leadership roles on the other.³⁹

In close relation to such far-reaching institutional changes some of the major premises or concepts of Confucianism and Buddhism were also transformed in Japan. We have noticed already above all how Buddhist orientations become transformed in a highly this-worldly direction. The ontological conceptions that stressed (as in all Axial civilizations) the chasm between the transcendental and mundane orders, between "culture" and "nature," went in a more "immanentist" direction,⁴⁰ with a much stronger emphasis on the mutual embeddedness of the cultural and natural orders and on nature as given.

It is, however, probably with respect to the conception of the national collectivity and its relation to the broader Confucian and Buddhist civilizations as well as with respect to conceptions of authority, especially imperial authority, that the ideological transformation of Buddhism and Confucianism is most fully manifest. The crux of this transformation was the redirection of the universalistic orientations of Buddhism and Confucianism into a more particularistic primordial direction.

Buddhism, as well as Confucianism, had indeed a powerful impact on the definition of the overall "national" Japanese community and on the basic conceptions or premises of authority in

Japan (the strong emphasis on commitment to center, hierarchy, and group solidarity). Confucianism and Buddhism imbued these definitions with a very strong moral or metaphysical dimension. But the impact of Buddhism and Confucianism did not change the basic institutionalized patterns. Above all, it did not change the strong sacral particularistic components of Japanese collective self-definition and of the system of legitimation of authority within it—contrary to the case in Vietnam and Korea, not to speak of China itself. If anything it has strengthened these definitions and the legitimation of the social and political order in such sacral-primordial ties by combining them with strong ethical dimensions.⁴¹

True enough, the encounter with Confucianism and Buddhism did give rise to continuous reformulations and reconstructions of the definitions and symbols of the Japanese collectivity, but such reformulations have never changed the basic ontological and social import of these symbols. The first encounter of Japan with Buddhism transformed the older sacred kingship into a sacred liturgical particularistic community, rooted in the older “Shinto” conception; all the subsequent formulations of the nature of this community have only strengthened this conception.⁴² At the same time, however, the strong universalistic orientation inherent in Buddhism, and more latent in Confucianism, was subdued and “nativized” in Japan.⁴³ Japan was defined as a divine nation—a nation protected by the gods, a chosen people in some sense, but not a nation carrying God’s universal mission.⁴⁴

Parallel developments took place with respect to the basic conception of political authority and accountability of rulers. These conceptions were also greatly transformed from the original Chinese-Confucian conceptions prevalent in China, Korea, and Vietnam.

Unlike in China (and Korea and Vietnam),⁴⁵ where in principle the emperor, even if a sacral figure, was “under” the mandate of heaven, in Japan he was sacred and seen as the embodiment of the gods and was accountable to nobody. Only the shoguns and other officials—in ways not clearly specified and only in periods of crises, as for instance at the end of the Tokugawa regime—could be held accountable.

The difference between the modes of expansion of Confucianism and the impact of such expansion on institutional structures in China, Korea, and Vietnam, and of Buddhism in different countries of mainland Asia, on the one hand, and of both Confucianism and Buddhism in Japan, on the other hand, are closely related to differences in the structure and composition of their respective

elites, as well as of the orientations and activities of their respective sects. These differences are very close to those we have identified in the Islamic case, to differences in the structure, especially of the relative autonomy, of the "cultural" elites, their relation to the ruling elites, and their place in the ruling coalitions.

On mainland Asia, the Confucian and Buddhist elites were highly autonomous. The Confucian elites constituted a new, distinct, autonomous politicocultural stratum that was, in principle if not always in practice, recruited through the examination system.⁴⁶ The Buddhists, at least in the religious arena, were also highly autonomous and not in the existing structures of power or family.

In contrast to this in Japan both the Confucian scholars and the Buddhist sects were highly embedded in the existing power, kinship, and family settings. Yet while the Confucian academies in Japan were often relatively independent institutions, they were highly dependent on the rulers for any offices.⁴⁷ The Confucian scholars served in Japan at the courts of the rulers according to the criteria set up by the rulers, and they served at the ruler's will. The Buddhist sects became, as we have seen, strongly embedded in the familistic setting predominant in most sectors of Japanese society.

The different modes of expansion of Confucianism in different societies had some very important repercussions on the nature of the sectarian activities that developed within them. In many ways this was also parallel to the developments in Islam analyzed above. It is true that, from the very beginning, the entire development of sectarianism in Confucianism and Buddhism differed greatly from that of other monotheistic civilizations, including Islam. But both Buddhist sects and groups of Confucian (especially neo-Confucian) literati participated in mainland Asia in the political arena, constituting at least potentially, a challenge to the existing political regimes—even if in modes that differed greatly from the Islamic patterns.

It was indeed this strong, often critical political involvement, with political challenges to the regime, which disappeared almost entirely in Japan. Here most Buddhist sects and Confucian schools became either supporters of the existing political orders, performing religious or cultural functions for the powers that be, imbuing the political process with proper Buddhist (or Confucian) ethical values and orientations, or politically passive.

The major new sectarian orientations that have developed in Japanese Buddhism most clearly manifest in the Pure Land sect were, in principle, oriented to the perfection of the individual, seemingly without any direct political orientation—certainly without

attempts to change the premises of the political realm. Insofar as they had any orientations they were also very strongly oriented to the strengthening of the national community, but they could, contrary to the Confucian teaching, be political passive or withdraw.⁴⁸

The Religious-Civilizational Framework of the Great Revolutions

We shall conclude with an analysis of the religious-civilizational frameworks of the "great revolutions" that ushered in the modern era in Europe and in the world: the Great Rebellion in England, the American and French revolutions, and the later revolutions in China and Russia. The Turkish and Vietnamese revolutions can probably also be included in this category.⁴⁹

The analysis of revolutions has become in the last decade or so a very important focus of research in the social sciences, especially in political and historical sociology. Most of these studies were very closely connected with the emphasis on the growing recognition of the autonomy and distinctiveness of the state. This growing recognition of the autonomy and distinctiveness of politics and the state developed in several directions, such as, for instance, the emphasis on the autonomy of political agents and especially civil servants in the formulation and execution of policy,⁵⁰ in the development of corporative practices,⁵¹ or in the various "objectives" (especially structural) characteristics of the state, particularly its relation to other social groups and the ways in which these characteristics and relations tend to influence the development of different modes of economic conflict,⁵² class formation and social movement (especially revolutions),⁵³ or in the analysis of different forms of modern states, defined not in constitutional terms but in terms of their strength and modes of activity, both in Europe and beyond.⁵⁴ Yet another approach, of special interest from the point of view of our analysis, represented above all in the work of John Meyer and his colleagues,⁵⁵ saw the modern state as an autonomous ideological and institutional entity, continuously expanding the scope of its activities, both internally and in the international nexus.

These works have indeed provided a more extensive analysis of the relations between political control and manifold types of social processes, and also of the formation of economic and social policies, the structure of social movements of classes, modes of conflict resolutions, and the like. Yet the tendency to the reification of the state led to a rather limited conception of the political process, which

was seen chiefly in terms of a struggle among real actors over distributive resources, with scant attention paid either to the symbolic and ideological dimension of this process or to the framework of rules within which such struggle takes place.

At the same time, the basic conception of the state, especially the modern state, predominant in many of these works, was couched in terms of the European experience; the structural characteristics of this experience were taken as common to all states. Thus, for instance, the variations among different states were often conceived (to use M. Mann's expression)⁵⁶ in terms of the relations between state and civil society, and were expressed in terms based at least implicitly on this historical experience. This combination of the reification of the state with the predominance of the European model of the state was connected with a failure to consider the importance of the cultural dimension in the political process and in the formation of the state. Even when the importance of the cultural dimension began to be recognized (e.g., by John Meyer and his collaborators), the emphasis was more on the specific ideological dimension of the modern state system as it developed in the West and expanded throughout the world. Even these important suggestions about the importance of the specific ideological dimension of the modern state have not been fully explored—in analytic and comparative terms—in most works that emphasize the autonomy of the state.

This impoverished conception of the political process can perhaps best be seen in the analysis of one central aspect of this process, emphasized by many of these scholars: protest. Most of these analyses focus on protest and on patterns of distribution and allocation of resources, but pay little attention to the symbolism of protest as a relatively autonomous dimension of such movements, or to the possibility that such symbolism may be important in the impact of such movements on the political process, particularly in democratic societies—chiefly by effecting changes in the basic rules that regulate political struggle and conflict.

The same neglect can be found in many recent works in comparative historical sociology, such as, for instance, those of John Hall, Michael Mann, and Jean Baechler,⁵⁷ which have taken up again the problem of the origins of the West in a broad comparative framework. Most of these works analyze, often in a very sophisticated way, various structural factors such as power relations among different groups, various politicoecological conditions, and above all intersocietal relations.