

Genealogies of Religion

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DISCIPLINE AND REASONS
OF POWER IN CHRISTIANITY
AND ISLAM

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THE LIMITS OF
RELIGIOUS CRITICISM
IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Notes on Islamic Public Argument

Critical Reason, the State, and Religion in the Enlightenment

Non-Westerners who seek to understand their local histories must also inquire into Europe's past, because it is through the latter that universal history has been constructed. That history defines the former as merely "local"—that is, as histories with limits. The contemporary history of political Islam has been defined in just this way.

The European Enlightenment constitutes the historical site from which Westerners typically approach non-Western traditions. That approach has tended to evaluate and measure traditions according to their distance from Enlightenment and liberal models. Thus, Islamic states are typically regarded as absolutist, and the practice of public criticism is seen as alien to them. But how did Europeans in that era of early modernity connect public critical discourse with religion while living under an absolute ruler?

My position is that anthropologists who seek to describe rather than to moralize will consider each tradition in its own terms—even as it has come to be reconstituted by modern forces—in order to compare and contrast it with others. More precisely, they will try to understand ways of reasoning characteristic of given traditions. Such anthropologists will also need to suppress their personal distaste for particular traditions if they are to understand them. Beyond that, they should learn to treat some of their own Enlightenment assumptions as belonging to specific kinds of reasoning—albeit kinds of reasoning that have largely shaped our modern world—and not as the ground from which all understanding of non-Enlightenment traditions must begin.

In this section I look at some aspects of Enlightenment reasoning briefly and mainly as they appear in Kant's famous essay "An Answer to the Question: 'What Is Enlightenment?'" This involves determining the limits imposed on religion by the early modern state. In the next section I begin my extended account of public criticism that takes place in a contemporary religious state: Saudi Arabia. Before concluding, I raise a few general questions regarding critical practices in the political relations between Western and Westernizing societies.

Although I have chosen Kant for initial attention, I do not take him to be representative of the Enlightenment as a whole,¹ any more than I take as representative of all Islam the Saudi theologians whom I discuss later. But in saying this I merely concede that no one text or authorially defined set of texts—or, for that matter, no single generation of authors—can adequately represent a complex, developing tradition of discussion and argument.² Particular texts draw on or resist, reformulate and quarrel with, others that constitute the tradition (see MacIntyre 1988). Thus, the temporal situatedness of all texts (their sequential as well as coexistential links) renders all abstractions partial, provisional, and limited to particular purposes. As an anthropologist or a historian, one approaches the tradition from particular directions and tries to describe the positions taken up by proponents, as far as possible in their own terms. One chooses to describe what is judged to have been historically decisive for the tradition, or to be especially relevant today, or both.

Allowing for this qualification, Kant's text may nevertheless be taken as marking a formative moment in the theorization of a central feature of "civil society," the feature concerning the possibilities of

1. It could scarcely be otherwise, for as Peter Gay (1973, xii) writes in the preface to his monumental study of the Enlightenment: "The men of the Enlightenment were divided by doctrine, temperament, environment, and generations. And in fact the spectrum of their ideas, their sometimes acrimonious disputes, have tempted many historians to abandon the search for a single Enlightenment." And yet, "while the Enlightenment was a family of philosophes, it was something more as well: it was a cultural climate, a world in which the philosophes acted, from which they noisily rebelled and quietly drew many of their ideas, and on which they attempted to impose their program."

2. One is reminded here of Vološinov's strictures against the methods of classical philology, made over sixty years ago: "Any utterance—the finished, written utterance not excepted—makes response to something and is calculated to be responded to in turn. It is but one link in a continuous chain of speech performances. Each monument carries on the work of its predecessors, polemicizing with them, expecting active, responsive understanding, and anticipating such understanding in return" (1973, 72).

open, rational criticism.³ Thus, when Habermas reviewed this and other texts by Kant in his historical account of "the public sphere," he stressed their importance for later liberal theory. In Kant, he writes, "The public of 'human beings' engaged in rational-critical debate was constituted into one of 'citizens' wherever there was communication concerning the affairs of the 'commonwealth.' Under the 'republican constitution' this public sphere in the public realm became the organizational principle of the liberal constitutional state" (Habermas 1989, 106-7). So Kant's ideas of public, publicity, and critical reason have become part of a Habermasian story of the progressively liberating aspects of secular, bourgeois society.⁴

Equally, but from a different perspective, Foucault (1984) has used Kant's text on the Enlightenment to initiate some reflections on the concept of modernity. It is Kant's idea of "maturity" (i.e., of relying on one's own reason instead of on another's authority) that Foucault regards as central to that concept, and that he then goes on to link with Baudelaire's aesthetic of "self-elaboration."⁵ This idea of intellectual and moral autonomy is certainly fundamental to Kant's critical philosophy, although in his case it is based on a metaphysics of reason that is absent in Foucault.

Intellectual and moral maturity, Kant tells us, consists in the ability "to use one's own understanding without the guidance of another" (54). This individualistic conception of understanding presupposes a space of freedom in which the mature individual can make use of his *own* reason in opposition to that of others. Using reason publicly, Kant goes on, is equivalent to addressing an argument, *in writing*, to a scholarly audience.⁶ So for Kant, the arena in which this process takes

3. I have used the translation by Reiss in Kant 1991.

4. In the same tradition is M. Jacob's (1991) study of freemasonry in eighteenth-century Britain, France, and Holland. In this work the author proposes, with a wealth of fascinating detail, that Masonic ceremonies and practices were of major importance in the emergence of libertarian and secular ideals. Her account is deliberately set against the conventional view of the Enlightenment as an intellectual movement, arguing that it should be seen primarily as a social and political movement that provided the basic elements of a new Western identity.

5. Foucault's notion of the autonomous individual can also be traced to Jacob Burckhardt's presentation of the emerging modern self as a "work of art" in his *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860).

6. "The public [Kant] is thinking of," observes Arendt (1982, 60), "is, of course, the reading public, and it is the weight of their opinion he is appealing to, not the weight of their votes. In the Prussia of the last decades of the eighteenth century—that is, a coun-

place is inhabited by self-determined individuals (an extremely small proportion of the citizenry) who are exercising a freedom described as "the most innocuous form of all" because it does not necessarily result in any specific action. Indeed, as Kant puts it: "A ruler who is himself enlightened and has no fear of phantoms, yet who likewise has at hand a well-disciplined and numerous army to guarantee public security, may say what no republic would dare to say: *Argue as much as you like and about whatever you like, but obey!*" (59; emphasis added). He was not alone in this view. Jeremy Bentham, writing at about the same time in what was decidedly *not* an absolutist state, declared: "Under a government of Laws, what is the motto of a good citizen? *To obey punctually; to censure freely.*"⁷

Public argument, then, is connected with obedience to the law and the rules that the sovereign (as the source of law) authorizes. In particular, the performance of a function with which a person is socially entrusted, according to Kant, requires that he or she act in accordance with the rules that define it. In this context, Kant speaks of the private use of reason, for here reason is rooted not in the open process of critical exchange but in the limited workings of an authorized social role. For example:

A clergyman is bound to instruct *his pupils and his congregation* in accordance with the doctrines of the church he serves, for he is employed by it on that condition. But as a scholar, he is completely free as well as obliged to impart to *the public* all his carefully considered, well-intentioned thoughts on the mistaken aspects of those doctrines, and to offer suggestions for a better arrangement of religious and ecclesiastical affairs. And there is nothing in this which need trouble his conscience. For what he teaches in pursuit of his duties as an active servant of the church is presented by him as something which he is not empowered to teach at his own discretion, but which he is employed to expound in a prescribed manner and in someone else's name. (56; emphases added)

try under the rule of an absolute monarch, advised by a rather enlightened bureaucracy of civil servants, who, like the monarch, were completely separated from 'the subjects'—there could be no truly public realm other than this reading public. What was secret and unapproachable by definition was precisely the realm of government and administration."

7. *A Fragment on Government*, 1776 (in Gay 1973, 142; emphasis in original).

Kant's distinction between the public use of reason and its private use in effect reflects a primary distinction between the principle according to which one should judge and the principle according to which one should act (Arendt 1982, 48ff.). It is concerned, therefore, not just with political freedom but also with the rational limits of individual thought, as well as with its social limits.

To sum up so far: A crucial part of the liberal tradition to which Kant contributed is the distinction between two quite separate conceptual realms: one in which unquestioned obedience to authority prevails (the juridical definitions upheld by the state); the other consisting of rational argument and exchange, in which authority has no place (the omnicompetence of criticism). Kant therefore proposes both a *sociological* limit (the literate, scholarly minority to whom the privilege of public criticism belongs) and a *political* one (the conditions in which one must refrain from open criticism).

I do not want to be taken as saying here that all liberals have the same view as Kant on this matter. They do not. What the liberal tradition shares is precisely a continuing argument over the proper boundary between the authority of the law, on the one hand, and the freedom to speak and criticize publicly, on the other, as well as about who, among those qualified to engage in the criticism, deserves special attention. Kant's was merely an early and famous statement of that problem.

The rationality of criticism, according to Kant, consists in the fact that the statuses and passions of those involved have nothing to do with judging the truth of an argument. The validity of any judgment requires that one abstract oneself from all empirical interests. Yet, significantly, the idea that arrival at the truth depends on public argument, on free and open examination that is independent of social conditions, does not always appear to prevail with the Enlightenment thinker. In an unpublished justification of his promise to the king not to write again on religious matters, Kant noted: "Repudiation and denial of one's inner conviction are evil, but silence in a case like the present one is the duty of a subject; and while all that one says must be true, this does not mean that it is one's duty to speak out the whole truth in public" (cited in Reiss 1991, 2). In this case, it seems, (religious) truth stands independently of public argument because it has been translated as *belief* (which, unlike *knowledge*, is based on personal experience), and public expressions of personal belief (although not

the belief itself) must always defer to that public authority which is known as the state. For belief in the final analysis is not "objective knowledge" (science), it is merely "opinion." Thus, no damage is done to truth if opinion is denied free play in public.

This position was in keeping with Kant's Pietist upbringing, which, according to Cassirer, gave its adherents "that calm, that cheerfulness, that inner peace that is disturbed by no passion" (cited in Gay 1973, 328). "As a consequence [writes a historian of the Enlightenment] even Kant—who repudiated all but the most abstract religion, who condemned enthusiasm and refused to engage in any religious observance—even Kant himself paid Pietism the unconscious tribute of incorporating some of its teachings into his work: . . . its conviction that religion depends not on dogma or ritual or prayer but on experience" (Gay 1973, 28–29). Of course, Pietism was not the major form of Protestant religion, either then or in succeeding centuries. But the apolitical, noninstitutional character of early German Pietism was not exceptional in the development of eighteenth-century European religiosity.⁸

Historians of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe have begun to recount how the constitution of the modern state required the forcible redefinition of religion as belief, and of religious belief, sentiment, and identity as personal matters that belong to the newly emerging space of private (as opposed to public) life. In the eyes of those who wanted a strong, centralized state, the disorders of the Reformation proved that religious belief was the source of uncontrollable passions within the individual and of dangerous strife within the commonwealth. It could not, for this reason, provide an institutional basis for a common morality—still less a public language of rational criticism. More aggressively, Hobbes contended that institutionalized religion—but not the prince—was a vested interest, and that consequently it had to be subordinated to the monarch.⁹ In

8. I say early Pietism because some historians have shown that Pietism in the nineteenth century contributed significant intellectual and emotional elements to the development of German nationalism. See Pinson 1968.

9. "For who is there that does not see, to whose benefit it conduceth, to have it believed, that a King hath not his Authority from Christ, unlesse a Bishop crown him? That a King, if he be a Priest, cannot Marry? That whether a Prince be born in lawfull Marriage, or not, must be judged by Authority from Rome? . . . That the Clergy, and Regulars, in what Country soever, shall be exempt from the Jurisdiction of their King, in cases criminall? Or who does not see, to whose profit redound the Fees of private

this way, Hobbes postulated the unity and sovereignty of the modern state.

Scholars are now more aware that religious toleration was a political means to the formation of strong state power that emerged from the sectarian wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries rather than the gift of a benign intention to defend pluralism. As contemporaries recognized, the locus of intolerance had shifted. "L'heresie n'est plus auourd'huy en la Religion," insisted a French jurist of the period, "elle est en l'Estat" (cited in Koselleck 1985, 8).

According to Lipsius (Oestreich 1982), the influential religious skeptic writing at the end of the sixteenth century, the prince should follow any policy that would secure civil peace regardless of moral or legal scruples. If religious diversity could be *forcibly* eliminated, so much the better, Lipsius urged; if that was impossible, then religious toleration should be *enforced* by the state.¹⁰ Locke's famous argument for religious toleration a century later was similarly motivated by a concern for the integrity and power of the state: it was because he considered the beliefs of Catholics and atheists dangerous to civil peace that he thought they should not be tolerated by the state (Mendus 1989, 22-43).

Not only were religious beliefs now constitutionally subordinated to the state, but the principles of morality were henceforth to be theorized separately from the domain of politics.¹¹ In practice, of course, things were always more complicated. Some historians have even argued that the Enlightenment broke precisely on this point with absolutism and initiated a new tradition. Thus, according to Koselleck (1988), the philosophes (including Kant) helped to push the demands of a transcendent secular moralism into the domain of political practice.¹²

Masses, and Vales of Purgatory; with other signes of private interest, enough to mortifie the most lively Faith, if (as I sayd) the civill Magistrate, and Custome did not more sustain it, than any opinion they have of the Sanctity, Wisdome, or Probity of their Teachers: So that I may attribute all the changes of Religion in the world, to one and the same cause; and that is, unpleasing Priests; and those not onely amongst Catholiques, but even in that Church that hath presumed most of Reformation" (Hobbes 1943, 62).

10. See Tuck 1988. Tuck's thesis is that in early modern Europe religious skeptics were no more inclined toward tolerance than religious believers were. They drew the force of their intolerance, he suggests, from their distrust of all passion. See also in this connection Levi 1964, especially the chapter on Montaigne and Lipsius.

11. This liberal tradition is reflected in Weber's famous opposition between "an ethic of responsibility" and "an ethic of ultimate ends" (1948).

12. J. S. Mill's moralized utilitarianism is central to this liberal tradition. For a dev-

By the time we get to Kant, one can see how a private religion of sentimental sociability was beginning to take the place of a public religion of passionate conviction. It has become a commonplace among historians of modern Europe to say that religion was gradually compelled to concede the domain of public power to the constitutional state, and of public truth to natural science.¹³ But perhaps it is also possible to suggest that in this movement we have the construction of religion as a new historical object: anchored in personal experience, expressible as belief-statements, dependent on private institutions, and practiced in one's spare time.¹⁴ This construction of religion ensures that it is part of what is *inessential* to our common politics, economy, science, and morality. More strongly put: religion is what actually or potentially divides us, and if followed with passionate conviction, may set us intolerantly against one another.

Of course, the concepts and practices of religion and state have not remained unchanged since Kant. But liberals continue to invoke his principle of the public use of reason as the arbiter of true knowledge (even when they do not accept all his philosophical doctrines) and remain alert to the disruptive possibilities of religion as defined—for Christian as well as non-Christian traditions—by the Enlightenment.

The formation of strong state power in the contemporary Middle East has a very different genealogy. In most cases, strong states have inherited colonial forms; a few owe their formation to Islamic movements. In such polities, there is no public use of reason in Kant's sense, nor are religious truth and religious criticism typically regarded by their public spokesmen as matters properly confined to the personal domain. This is not to say that non-Enlightenment societies do not know what reasoned criticism is, or that nonliberal governments

astating critique of Mill's concept of a secular "religion of humanity," see Cowling 1990.

13. It is sometimes forgotten, however, that in the world outside Europe, evangelical Christianity often played a central political role in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see, e.g., Stokes 1959; Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). Missions were also extremely important in the modernization of secondary and higher education in the Middle East. Local Christian minorities, educated and sometimes converted by European missionaries, not only played a notable part in popularizing Western ideas of history, archaeology, politics, and so on, but their role in adapting Western nationalist ideologies to local conditions was also outstanding (see, e.g., Hourani 1962; Farag 1969).

14. For a discussion of the idea of "spare time" as a category of industrial capitalist society, see Dumazedier 1968.

can never permit the public expression of political dissent. On the contrary: institutionalized forms of criticism, made accessible to anonymous readers and listeners, are integral to many non-Enlightenment states. Among them is contemporary Saudi Arabia.

Islamic Religious Orthodoxy: An Irrational Opposition to Change?

The kingdom of Saudi Arabia was built on a historical alliance between two families, the House of ash-Shaikh (descendants of the eighteenth-century Najdi religious reformer Muhammad bin 'Abdul-Wahhāb) and the House of Sa'ud (now the royal clan, descendants of a Najdi tribal chief). This origin appears to correspond to a neat complementarity between two ruling principles: (religious) reason and (political) power. In reality, things are less tidy.

Although the religious establishment is no longer primarily recruited from the House of ash-Shaikh, it remains basic to the structure of the contemporary Saudi kingdom. The kingdom was formally set up in 1932 with the incorporation of the Hijaz (a province that belonged to the Ottoman Empire until its collapse in World War I) by the Najdi chief 'Abdul-'Azīz. The enormous flow of oil wealth during the last few decades has led to many social changes in Saudi Arabia—including the formation of a substantial middle class—but apparently not to any diminished reliance on Islamic authority by the state. The continuing prominence of Islamic legal and educational practices, as well as of Islamic rhetoric used by the government, has encouraged numerous Western writers to see Saudi Arabia as a fundamentalist state¹⁵—a state whose elites reaffirm “traditional modes of understanding and behaviour” in a modernizing environment (Humphreys 1979, 3).

This official commitment to upholding “traditional Islam” in a

15. For example: (a) “Among the major Arab states . . . Saudi Arabia is the only one which most closely approximates the Fundamentalist criteria” (Humphreys 1979, 8); (b) “The Hanbali School of Law constitutes the foundation of Wahhabi fundamentalism—the ideology of the Saudi Kingdom” (Dekmejian 1985, 15); (c) “Saudi Arabia is often viewed in the West as the epitome of ‘fundamentalist’ Islam, and in many ways it is. The government is explicitly based on Islamic law, and infractions of this law are, in principle, severely punished” (Munson 1988, 74). I hold that the notion of a fundamentalist Islam is a product of lazy thinking, and one that also happens to be convenient to many policy makers (and would-be policy advisers) in Western governments.

society undergoing rapid modernization is regarded by Western observers as the source of serious tensions. The seizure of the Haram (Sanctuary) in Mecca in 1979 by mahdist (i.e., millenarian) insurgents, and their social and religious condemnation of the regime, was identified as dramatic evidence of those tensions. One Western writer put it as follows: “Suddenly a tightly controlled country, where the free expression of dissent was nearly impossible, was shown to have a significant opposition, one willing to die for its religious position” (Ochsenwald 1981, 284; emphasis added).

“A tightly controlled country” sounds very much like the kind of place Kant lived in, where one was obliged to obey the king’s command not to write on religious matters. And yet although as an expression of dissent this violent incident is without parallel in Saudi Arabia, there has, of course, been criticism of the government both before and since. The story of how the *'ulamā* (divines) unsuccessfully opposed the introduction of radio and television into the country has often been told. Typically, a Western historian observes: “These episodes may serve to illustrate the traditional opposition of the ulama to modernization in the kingdom. Besides the question of harming religious values, the innovations could contribute to the creation of a new class of leaders, not of religious origin, and thus give rise to a direct threat to the ulama” (Bligh 1985, 42). What is interesting about such explanatory accounts is precisely the manner in which particular *episodes* of dissent are presented as *illustrations* of a self-evident general thesis; the Saudi *'ulamā* (sing., *'ālim*), being traditional, reject any change in the status quo, because refusal to change is the essence of tradition. The implication is that this was not *reasoned* criticism but simply irrational rejection of everything “modern.”¹⁶

16. The rejection by militant Muslims of changes that we who live (or aspire to live) in the modern world find reasonable and attractive is often characterized in Western accounts as irrational and distasteful. For example: “Everything from the inflow of ever-larger quantities of Western consumer goods to changes in feminine dress and behaviour, often resented by traditionalist men, to Western films and TV is seen as part of a veritable plot to undermine local ways and products and to make of third world men and women consumers of the least useful and most degrading of Western imports and customs” (Keddie 1982, 276). The trouble with the use of impressionistic terms such as “resentment” or the facile imputation of paranoia (“seen as part of a veritable plot”) to account for complex social phenomena is that it tells us more about the writer’s notions of psychological and political normalcy than about the actual motives of those involved or the persuasive power of their discourses.

Actually, innumerable foreign techniques *were* absorbed into Saudi society even before the oil boom in the seventies with little or no objection from the *'ulamā*: new forms of transport including paved roads, new modes of building and printing, electricity, new medicines and types of medical treatment, and so forth. Clearly, something more complicated is involved here than "a traditional opposition" to modernization by the *'ulamā*.¹⁷ As a start I would propose that what the *'ulamā* are doing is to attempt a definition of orthodoxy—a (re)ordering of knowledge that governs the "correct" form of Islamic practices. In effect, what we have today is essentially part of the same process by which *long-established indigenous practices* (such as the veneration of saints' tombs) were judged to be un-Islamic by the Wahhabi reformers of Arabia (see 'Abdul-Wahhāb A.H. 1376, 124–35) and then forcibly eliminated. That is, like all practical criticism, orthodox criticism seeks to construct a relation of discursive dominance.

I argue that the critical discourses of Saudi *'ulamā* (like those of Muhammad 'Abdul-Wahhāb before them) presuppose the concept of an orthodox Islam. Muslims in Saudi Arabia (as elsewhere) disagree profoundly over what orthodox Islam is, but *as Muslims* their differences are fought out on the ground of that concept. It is too often forgotten that the process of determining orthodoxy in conditions of change and contest includes attempts at achieving discursive coherence, at representing the present within an authoritative narrative that includes positive evaluations of past events and persons. Because such authority is a collaborative achievement between narrator and audience, the former cannot speak in total freedom: there are conceptual and institutional conditions that must be attended to if discourses are to be persuasive. That is why attempts by social scientists at rendering such discourses as instances of local leaders manipulating religious symbols to legitimize their social power should be viewed skeptically. This is not simply because "manipulation" carries a strong sense of

17. Of course, writers who speak of modernization in this context are invoking an old model of social development, which specifies more than the adoption of modern technology. But the model of an integrated society, in which industrial production goes hand in hand with particular political and legal institutions, as well as particular forms of sociability and styles of consumption, has long been criticized for confounding a normative model with a descriptive one. This fact does not appear to discourage those who continue to draw on the oversimplified notion of modernization in writing about the Middle East today.

cynical motivation, even in cases where evidence for such an imputation is not forthcoming, but more broadly because it introduces the notion of a deliberative, rationalistic stance into descriptions of relationships where that notion is not appropriate. For the same reason, the metaphor of "negotiation"—with its overtones of calculation—seems to me equally suspect. Although these familiar metaphors are central to market transactions everywhere and to politics in liberal societies, this fact does not make them suited to explicating every kind of practice in all societies.¹⁸

"Orthodoxy" is not easy to secure in conditions of radical change. This is not because orthodox discourse is necessarily against any change but because it aspires to be authoritative. In fact, the redefinition of *sharī'a* rules (religious laws) has been amply documented in the history of Islam, even prior to direct European intervention in the Middle East.¹⁹ What is involved in such changes is not a simple ad hoc acceptance of new arrangements but the attempt to redescribe norms and concepts with the aid of tradition-guided reasoning. The authority of that redescription, among those familiar with and committed to that tradition, has depended historically on how successful the underlying reasoning was judged to be. This is not to say that the *implementation* of those changes has depended entirely on that authority.

The aspiration to authority among those who would speak for Islamic orthodoxy cannot be a simple matter of anathematizing foreign behavior and objects of consumption. In fact, Islamic legal-moral

18. I refer below to a very different metaphor (the figure of the Muslim as God's slave) that is employed in Islamic discourse, which liberal readers may well find repugnant. But not to address such metaphors directly—as so many liberals do today—is, in my view, to mistranslate them. The anthropologist engaged in translation should retain figures that bring together conceptual elements in unfamiliar—even uncomfortable—ways. Whether this results in her readers simply confirming their inherited prejudices (as it did for many Europeans writing or reading about Islam) cannot, of course, be predicted. In any case, prejudice is certainly reinforced if we translate potentially disturbing concepts from other cultures into terms palatable to the liberal world-view.

19. Coulson (1964, chap. 10) recounts some of these changes in the area of civil transactions. More recently, Johansen (1988) has argued that a network of concepts in Hanafi law relating to property, rent, and taxation of cultivated land underwent thoroughgoing changes in the Ottoman Empire. The Western province of what is now Saudi Arabia, which contains the sacred mosques in Mecca and Medina, was part of the Ottoman Empire until World War I; the dominant legal school of that empire (the Hanafi) is still recognized there.

tradition contains a graded scheme for classifying behavior—*wājib* (mandatory), *mandūb* (recommended), *mubāh* (permitted), *makrūh* (disapproved), *harām* (forbidden). This classification forces specific questions onto people who belong to that tradition: Into which category does a given new behavior fall? Is it really new, or is it an analogue of something whose classification is not in dispute? The application of these categories to behavior engaged in by one's fellow Muslims often involves an elaborate work of reconceptualizing the context itself in ways that aim to be plausible to a Muslim audience. To take an extreme example: Should someone who continuously sins by committing what Islam forbids and omitting what it prescribes be considered a Muslim—albeit a sinful one (*'āsi*)—or an infidel (*kāfir*)? Is an entire society of such people (like Egypt, say) nevertheless a Muslim society, or is it (as Sayyid Qutb and his followers in Egypt have argued)²⁰ a modern society of heathens, a *jāhiliyya*? And if it is the latter, then how can a real Muslim maintain his “religion” (*dīn*) within it? By withdrawal from society or by the violent seizure of political power? Within Egypt, these are real questions today.²¹

In Saudi Arabia, however, the *'ulamā* who criticize their government reject these extreme options, although they too seek to be authoritative in the concepts of their tradition. They say that it is precisely because they regard their government as legitimate (*hukūma shar'iyya*) and their society as Islamic that they make the criticisms they do in the way they do. But there is an interesting double sense to the adjective *shar'iyya* here. For while it connotes the general modern sense of “legitimate,” it derives from the specific Islamic concept of “the divinely sanctioned law-and-morality” (*ash-sharī'a*), which does not simply legitimize the ruler but binds him. The Saudi government explicitly claims to be based on the *sharī'a*. Thus, what the critics offer is “advice” (*nasīha*), something called for by the *sharī'a* as a precondition of moral rectitude (*istiḡāma*), not “criticism” (*naqd*), with its adversarial overtones.²²

20. See Qutb 1991, especially chapter 3, “The Formation of Muslim Society and Its Characteristics.”

21. The struggle for and over the interpretation of authoritative texts has been intrinsic to the Islamic tradition since its beginning. I discuss this in Asad 1980.

22. I elaborate on the concept of *nasīha* below, but it may be worth noting here that in classical Arabic the verbal form *nasaha* always indicates a direct person-to-person relationship. The verbal form *naqada* (or *intaqada*), by contrast, often signifies a direct

An Islamic Tradition of Public Criticism

Even in a nonliberal (illiberal) state such as Saudi Arabia, then, there is a tradition of social criticism that is open and institutionalized. The most important form in which this tradition finds expression is the Friday sermon (*khutba*) delivered in the larger mosques, but it is also practiced in the form of theological lectures in the Islamic universities.

After the Haram incident in 1979 the Ministry of Endowments (*wazārat ul-awqāf*) took over direct control of all the mosques and even tried to specify the topics dealt with each Friday in the sermons. In the mid-eighties, the government's grip was relaxed, especially as the sermons consisted largely of pious exhortations. At about the same time, the practice of tape recording the more famous *khutabā* (sing., *khutīb*), or orators—even when they lectured at universities—and selling the cassettes to the general public became established. The adoption of this modern technology enabled an indefinite extension of the audience and the possibility of repeated listenings.

When the gulf crisis exploded in the summer of 1990, starting with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and culminating in the massive buildup of U.S. troops in the eastern province of Saudi Arabia, moral exhortation in the sermons was inevitably directed at the common peril facing all Saudis. As always, emphasis on the importance of strengthening one's faith in God was combined with a call for greater vigilance in ensuring proper Islamic practice throughout Saudi society. In the past, the latter formula had been understood as a criticism of the administration's laxity in preventing “un-Islamic” literature from entering the country. Now it was inevitably concerned with the greater danger of an un-Islamic army stationed in Arabia. Through an unusually wide distribution of cassettes, the substance of the sermons and lectures reached large audiences, including Western-educated Saudis, many of whom would not have normally been interested in them.

The bolder *khutabā* went one step further and addressed the theologically alarming situation in which a Muslim aggressor was being confronted with the aid of a force of unbelievers. Most of these men, incidentally, were in their thirties, graduates of the new Islamic universities in Saudi Arabia. One of the most eloquent and outspoken,

person-to-object relation—as in *intaqada ash-shi'ra 'ala qā'ilihī*, “he picked out the faults of the poetry and urged them against its author” (see Lane 1863–93).

Safar al-Hawāli, condemned the Baathist regime in Iraq not only for its aggression but for its atheism and its Arab nationalist ideology. He also strongly criticized the Saudi government's reliance on the military help of unbelievers to defend Muslims. This criticism was politically unspecific: while it condemned the resort to military help from non-Muslims and urged greater reliance on God, it did not offer any political alternatives. But that feature made the criticism more difficult to counter, since the argument of the sermons could be represented as moral exhortation and therefore not "political" in the modern sense. The government was not explicitly attacked for its policy (*siyāsa*). The Saudi people as a whole were simply being advised about the danger that they now faced as Muslims. On this theme, many of the sermons cited medieval histories and legal texts warning against trusting non-Muslims as military allies.²³

The criticism directed at both the government and the people for their laxity was offered by way of *nasīha*, a concept of central importance in Islamic moral theology. *Nasīha* signifies advice that is given for someone's good, honestly and faithfully. It also has the meaning of sincerity, integrity, and doing justice to a situation. *Nasīha*, then, is much more than an expression of good intention on the part of the advice giver (*nāsīh*): since in this context it carries the sense of offering moral advice to an erring fellow Muslim (*mansūh*), it is at once an obligation to be fulfilled and a virtue to be cultivated by all Muslims. Thus, in the context of the sermons and religious lectures under discussion here, *nasīha* refers specifically to morally corrective criticism.

A Theological Text: *Nasīha* as Moral-Political Criticism

The preconditions and modalities of this kind of practical criticism are expounded in an oration by a well-known *khatīb* and lecturer, ʿAlī Zaʿayr, which takes as its central text the famous *hadīth* entitled, "Religion is integrity (*ad-dīnu an-nasīhatu*)."²⁴ The entire *hadīth* may be rendered thus: "Religion is integrity. We said: To whom? [The

23. Especially al-Hawāli's lecture entitled *ahkām ahl idh-dhimma* ("Regulations pertaining to the Non-Muslim Subjects of a Muslim Prince"). Safar al-Hawāli often speaks at a large mosque in Jiddah, and he teaches at the Islamic University in Mecca.

24. This is available on a two-sided tape recording under the same title: *Ad-dīnu an-nasīhatu*. The recording is widely distributed and easily accessible in Saudi Arabia as well as among Saudi students in Western Europe and North America.

Prophet] said: To God, and to His Book, and to His Prophet, and to the leaders of the Muslims and to their common folk."²⁵

What is notable about Zaʿayr's lecture is that although it is delivered as a formal exposition of a theological concept, it is at the same time an exhortation urging upon Muslims the *duty* of criticizing political authority. This stands in sharp contrast to the Enlightenment view of criticism as a *right*, whose exercise is therefore optional.²⁶

Zaʿayr explains the linkage between *dīn* (religion) and *nasīha* (moral advice) in the form of three axioms:

First: The rightness of everything that people do, in all their affairs, is attainable only through subjection to God's authority—and that is what religion (*dīn*) is. Second: God's authority extends over each and every aspect of life. Third: Non-subjection to God's authority in any aspect of life must result in its being faulty and deranged. These three truths derive from the principle that the soundness of a people's affairs is bound up, all of it, with religion. If people's religion is soundly based, their affairs will be soundly based; if their religion is faulty, their entire life will be faulty too. Thus we say that religion is the proper condition of the people, and that *nasīha* is the foundation of religion.

Nasīha is therefore a benefit to the recipient—or, as Zaʿayr puts it, "*nasīha* is a comprehensive word signifying the acquisition of that which is good for the person advised (*mansūh*)."

A major theme of the oration is the duty of *every* Muslim, ruler and subject alike, to undertake *nasīha*. Thus, Zaʿayr cites the famous thirteenth-century jurist ibn Taymiyya to the effect that it is the ruler's

25. The perfect verb *nasaha*, and its derived forms, occur in several places in the Qurʾān (see Kassir 1983, 857).

26. Kant bases his argument for this right at least partly on utilitarian grounds: "The citizen must, *with the approval of the ruler*, be entitled to make public his opinion on whatever of the ruler's measures seem to him to constitute an injustice against the commonwealth. For to assume that the head of state can neither make mistakes nor be ignorant of anything would be to imply that he receives divine inspiration and is more than a human being. . . . To try to deny the citizen this freedom does not only mean, as Hobbes maintains, that the subject can claim no rights against the supreme ruler. It also means withholding from the ruler all knowledge of those matters which, if he knew about them, he would himself rectify, so that he is thereby put into a self-stultifying position" ("On the Common Saying: 'This May Be True in Theory, But It Does Not Apply in Practice,'" in Kant 1991, 84–85; emphasis added).

duty to establish institutions in accordance with God's authority, to ensure that his subjects do not flout that authority, and to defend them against oppression and injustice. To that extent, the ruler has special responsibilities, including the establishment of a supervisory organization whose members devote their energies "to commanding what is good and forbidding what is evil (*al-amr bi-l-ma'rūf wa-nnahy 'an al-munkar*)."²⁷ In Saudi Arabia this organization is known as the *mutāwī'a*, which foreigners call "the purity police."

In this latter form, *nasīha* was often used in the past to bolster the authority of Muslim rulers.²⁷ But in the contemporary Saudi context, Za'ayr insists that *nasīha* cannot be left only to the ruler or his agents to carry out.

Each individual must be watchful first over himself in order to establish God's authority in his very being. No single group can supervise every individual to do this for him. Therefore each individual must be watchful first of all over himself, and then over other individuals in society, to help them establish God's authority. That is the only possible way the community of believers (*umma*) can prosper.

As a practice that is everyone's responsibility,²⁸ *nasīha* is thus independent of the ruler's authority. Furthermore, the critical role of ordinary Muslims does not create the duty to report transgressions to the political authorities; it merely requires a direct engagement with the transgressor. True, that engagement may eventually result in resorting to the coercive power of the authorities, but only when the full comple-

27. Thus, in a recent history of the Ottoman state in the early modern period, Abou-El-Haj (1992, 51-52) draws attention to an interesting set of decrees "issued to rectify widespread acts described only euphemistically, and whose redress was alluded to by the expression 'proper faith is good advice' (*ad-din ul-nasiha*). . . . From the official point of view, laxity in adherence to the tenets of the faith was tantamount to immoral acts (*mekruh*). But apparently, the decrees meant to condemn something much more specific, namely, indulgence in magical acts and superstitious or pagan practices. The underlying meaning of the decrees, however, is inferred from the historical context. The decrees were issued as rebellions were breaking out in the Balkan and Crimean provinces. . . . In the eyes of the state . . . resistance . . . was portrayed in the decrees as failure in proper indoctrination and acculturation. Therefore the admonition, *ad-din ul-nasiha*, which literally translates as 'proper faith is in being properly guided (by accepting advice),' is therefore meant to enjoin absolute obedience to those in authority."

28. This is categorized in the *shari'a* as *fard 'ayn*, as opposed to a duty that is fulfilled on behalf of the community by a minimum number of people (for example performing the collective Friday prayer) technically called *fard kifāya*.

tion of *nasīha* calls for it, not because the political authorities have a superior right to intervene. More important, neither the ruler nor his officials are exempt from criticism by the upright Muslim. For if the ruler's role includes the duty of defending his subjects against injustice, the Muslim subject has not simply the right but the obligation to criticize the unjust ruler.²⁹ This conclusion has far-reaching implications in the context of contemporary Saudi Arabia:

Nevertheless, Za'ayr does not push the idea of criticizing the ruler to the point where it incites disobedience. On the contrary, he explicitly repudiates such an inference.

Now it is said of some preachers that they are revolutionaries (*thuw-wār*), that they are rebels (*khawārij*),³⁰ and that they are against the state. Why is this said? It is claimed that in their lectures these preachers call for change in the status quo which they consider to be sinful (*harām*), and if the state doesn't respond favourably to their demands they will seek to change things by violence. Who says this? What are these suppositions? What are these delusions? . . . This is not the first time that you will have heard this kind of talk hostile to the preachers, this kind of accusation. There are people who have a vested interest in it. . . . They have an interest in likening our preachers to certain Islamic groups in other countries, knowing that there is no similarity between the two. Our preachers do not regard our government as unbelieving as the latter do, but as legitimate because our government rules according to the *shari'a*, cooperates with the *'ulamā*, and so forth. Yet just because our preachers call for the correction of some mistakes, they are called "revolutionaries!"

Za'ayr's manner of disclaiming rebellious intent is double-edged. For by rooting the government's right to rule in its avowed commitment to the *shari'a*, its actual performance can be criticized for failing to meet *shari'a* standards.

29. Such an obligation is qualified by a recognition of political circumstance, as in the well-known *hadīth*: "Whosoever of you sees an evil action, let him change it with his hand; and if he is unable to do so, then with his tongue; and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart—and that is the weakest part of faith (*ad'afu-l-īmān*)."

30. Although the text typically contains "contemporary-secular" terms (e.g., *thuw-wār*) and "classical-theological" ones (e.g., *khawārij*) in the same sentence, this should not be seen as a simple mixture of the traditional and the modern. It is not the diverse origins of the vocabulary but its differential resonances that are relevant to understanding the tradition of Islamic political discourse.

Za'ayr enumerates a number of conditions and requirements for achieving *nasīha* that together define a measure of personal responsibility for its success. Here again, the duty of *nasīha* differs from the right to criticize publicly in Kant's enlightened polity.

There are two general requirements, Za'ayr reminds his listeners, for successfully undertaking *nasīha*: (1) knowledge of the rules and models of virtuous living, and of the most effective way of conveying these to others; (2) kindness and gentleness in performing the act of *nasīha*.³¹ Knowledge for action and an appropriate mode of engagement are both essential, not least when undertaking *nasīha*. With regard to the former, although such knowledge may have to be obtained from those more qualified (e.g., the *'ulamā*), the responsibility for initiating *nasīha* and trying to ensure its completion rests with the actor. As for the manner of engagement, it is violence (*'urf*) and not emotion that is disapproved.³²

It should be noted here that legally confirmed transgressions ultimately carry the threat of legal punishment but that Za'ayr makes no mention of this fact anywhere.³³ One explanation of this omission is that Za'ayr's main objective is to justify criticism directed at those in authority, and here force is not normally an available option. Another is that since the use of force is contingent, it is not the essence of *nasīha*, whereas persuasion is part of its essence and consequently is emphasized in Za'ayr's exposition.

From the two general principles for undertaking *nasīha*—relevant knowledge and appropriate method—Za'ayr develops several maxims:

How should one act when confronted with something that goes against God's command? . . . (1) Determine carefully whether it is really against God's command. Be sceptical of your own judgement. If necessary, consult those who know better than you. (2) If it is a transgression, consider carefully whether it affects the individual or a small

31. Here Za'ayr cites the well-known *hadīth*: "If something is done with kindness and gentleness it is thereby beautified, and if it is done with force and violence it is thereby rendered ugly."

32. The contemporary Arabic for "emotion"—*'aṭifa*—comes from the classical word that carries the sense of "cause of inclining toward" someone. Taken in this sense and in this context, emotion and sound judgment are not necessarily mutually exclusive as they are in much Enlightenment thought.

33. The legitimate use of force as a last resort in the performance of *nasīha* is discussed in the medieval classics: for example, by Imām Ghazālī in *Ihyā' 'ulūm-id-dīn*, and by ibn Taymiyya in *Siyāsa shar' iyya*.

group, or the *umma* as a whole. In the latter case, be very careful. Consult with others, with the *'ulamā*, etc., even if this takes time. (3) Think carefully of the best way to deliver your *nasīha* and to rectify the error. If it relates to the *umma* as a whole, intensify your consultations with *'ulamā*, and don't hurry. Turn to God for help and enlightenment, pray to Him, especially at night. (4) After proper consultation, after you have chosen the best way, put your trust in God and proceed. Be fully conscious of your responsibility, for you are worshipping God. You are not free to do as you like, you are God's worshipper, bound to follow the Prophet. So persevere with your *nasīha*, and reiterate it, and use your wisdom in doing so. (5) Avoid all provocation, violence, rashness, and haste. (6) Don't measure the success of your effort and your call by the immediate result. A positive result [i.e., rectification of conduct] may be delayed for reasons beyond your control, or that of the person advised. Do not say: I have tried giving people *nasīha*, but it's never any use. So long as you carry out your responsibility with integrity, to its utmost, you have done what you can. (7) If the recipient of your *nasīha* does respond positively, don't cease your connections with him. Urge him to take on the responsibility of *ad-da'wa* [the call] towards others, because that is your message and his, and that of all believers.

Za'ayr concludes by reminding his audience that *da'wa*, as the extension of *nasīha*, goes beyond the criticism of transgressions to call for the cultivation of three central virtues: *itqān us-salāt* (the bodily mastery and spiritual perfection of prayer), *as-sabr* (self-command, fortitude, and perseverance), and *al-yaqīn* (certainty, true knowledge, right judgment). As virtues, *salāt*, *sabr*, and *yaqīn* articulate a range of disciplined passions, each of which presupposes continuous exercise based on discursive models. The virtuous Muslim is thus seen not as an autonomous individual who assents to a set of universalizable maxims but as an individual inhabiting the moral space shared by all who are together bound to God (the *umma*). Thus, *dīn* (invariably translated as religion) relates more to how one lives than to what one believes. For Muslims such as Za'ayr, it is virtues—mastery of the body, the ability to be patient, and the capacity to judge soundly—that matter, not states of mind.

Evidently, then, *nasīha* and *da'wa* together stand in a conceptual world quite unlike that of the Enlightenment. For unlike the former,

the latter world is inhabited by individuals aspiring to self-determination and dispassionate judgment, whose moral foundation is universal reason, not disciplined virtues.³⁴ In each world, the individual articulates a different motivational structure in which reasoning has a distinctive place. Thus, in the world assumed by Za'ayr, particular personal virtues must already be in place before practical reasoning can be properly carried out; in the Enlightenment world, practical reasoning yields an ethical maxim only when it is universalizable as a general law.

It is possible, I suppose, to take Za'ayr's disquisition on *nasīha* as an appeal to habitual behavior as against reason, to tradition as against modernity. But if tradition is thought of as the rejection of any idea of reasoned change, then such an understanding would be mistaken. For in fact various changes are welcomed by Za'ayr so long as they are in accord with the foundations of *dīn*. Thus, he reasons that while one may welcome the benefits of new social institutions such as schools, hospitals, banks, and television networks, one must not be blind to their "mistakes and errors," things done contrary to God's commands. It is only the latter that Za'ayr regards as the proper targets of criticism. Nevertheless, it is true that there is no place in his disquisition for the post-Enlightenment idea of moral and political progress, and if that is essential to a conception of modernity, then Za'ayr is clearly opposed to it. Indeed, he is openly contemptuous of the kind of development discourse that speaks of "catching up" with the West. That way of talking, he declares, assumes that other civilizations be taken as the Muslim model. But: "If one doesn't secure one's own independent thinking the *umma* is made into an appendage of others. And if that happens, the *umma*'s essence (*huwiyya*) and its independence disappear together."

Za'ayr's language on this matter is similar to that of nationalist

34. In Kant's words: "Moral culture must be based upon maxims, not upon discipline. Discipline prevents defects; moral culture shapes the manner of thinking. One must see to it that the child accustom himself to act according to maxims and not according to certain impulses. Discipline leaves habits only, which fade away with years. The child should learn to act according to maxims whose justice he himself perceives. . . . Morality is something so holy and sublime that it must not be degraded thus and placed in the same rank with discipline. The first endeavour in moral education is to establish a character. Character consists in the readiness to act according to maxims. At first these are the maxims of the school and later they are those of humanity. In the beginning the child obeys laws. Maxims also are laws, but subjective; they spring out of the human reason itself" (1904, 185-87).

ideologues who call for cultural authenticity, and it is evident from his defensive remarks in response to his Westernized opponents that he is not unfamiliar with nationalist discourse. However, his argument is differently grounded. His overriding preoccupation is with the idea of obedience to God's command and the exemplary practice (*sunna*) of the Prophet. The position he takes up has nothing to do with advocating an "authentic culture" or with proposing an "independent road to modernity." He wishes to affirm the absolute authority of God—or, as he puts it, "The first foundation of independence for the *umma* is to know that it is indissolubly bound (*muta'abbid*) to God, and to reject dependence on any alternative idea." (Note, incidentally, that Za'ayr does not regard particular commands as having authority because they issue from God; he recognizes the commands as divine because a bond of absolute authority is already taken for granted.)

The concept of the Muslim as indissolubly bound to God is expressed repeatedly in this lecture through the classical words *'abd* and *muta'abbid*. The latter derives from the former (whose sense includes both "slave" and "worshipper") and means something like "forcibly secured for devotion to God." Although nearly all English translations of the Qur'an render the word *'abd* as "servant" (Pickthall being an exception), I would translate it as "slave." For liberals, a slave is primarily someone who occupies the most despised status of all, and therefore the institution of slavery is utterly immoral (conversely, to be considered fully human, creatures must own themselves). Yet by employing the metaphor of slavery to describe the human relation to God, the Islamic rhetorical tradition stands in powerful contrast both to the figure of kinship (God as Father) and the figure of contract (the Covenant with God), which are part of Judeo-Christian discourse.³⁵ As God's slaves, humans do not share any essence with their owner, who is also their creator,³⁶ nor can they ever invoke an original agree-

35. The idea of a covenant with God—*'ahd allah*—is mentioned in the Qur'an several times, but arguably never when Muslims are addressed directly. In both the Judeo-Christian tradition and Islam there are, of course, several metaphors for describing the relationship of humans to God. Some of these are shared. But my purpose here is to stress the contrastive as well as the intrinsic qualities of the idea of the Muslim as God's slave, especially as articulated in Za'ayr's discourse. The mystical traditions of Islam employ very different figures to convey the notion of attainable states in which human beings can merge with God (see Baldick 1989). Such notions are anathema to the tradition to which Za'ayr belongs.

36. The absolute difference between human beings and God is enunciated in a fa-

ment with him. The relationship requires unconditional obedience. However, this is not an abstract bond between an individual believer and a transcendent power; it is embodied in an existing community with its founding texts and authorized practices (the *umma*). The community always needs correcting, under threat of divine punishment “in this world and the next (*fi-ddunyā wa-l-ākhirā*).” Za’ayr warns his listeners that if Muslims fail to obey God, He will destroy their community (*umma*) as surely as he has destroyed those early communities (*umam*) whose fate is related in the Qur’ān. The members of the *umma* can be continually criticized and reformed, but they cannot become self-owning individuals, each with the right to choose his or her own ends.³⁷

Finally: One should not think that what Za’ayr refers to when he speaks of the *umma* is a sociologically defined community—traditionally unified, but now subject to modern disintegration. It is not. Nowhere in his lecture does he bewail the collapse of a sense of communal sociality,³⁸ he simply takes it for granted that the *umma* exists, and he

mous sūra (*al-ikhlās*) of the Qur’ān: “Say: ‘He is the One God: God the Eternal, the Uncaused Cause of All Being. He begets not, and neither is He begotten; and there is nothing that could be compared with Him’” (Muhammad Asad’s translation). *‘Ibāda* (a word having the same root as *‘abd* and usually translated into English as “worship”) defines the relationship one properly has with God, and with God only. Hence, those who want to condemn ritual supplication at saints’ tombs—which would certainly include the Wahhabi Za’ayr—will describe it as *‘ibāda*. To defend such a practice—as Wahhabis themselves do in the context of prayers offered at the Prophet’s tomb—one must reject that appellation and insist instead that it is *ziyāra* (“visitation”). This is more than a matter of words, of course: it marks an argument over the structure of virtues, including both inward attitude and outward behavior.

37. This stands in sharp contrast to the sentiments of liberalism as articulated by Isaiah Berlin in his celebrated essay on the essence of individual freedom: “The ‘positive’ sense of the word ‘liberty’ derives from the wish on the part of the individual to be his own master. I wish my life and my decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not other men’s, acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from outside (1958, 16). Of course, this is not a simple statement of egoism but of a *universal right*. According to C. B. Macpherson, that idea has seventeenth-century foundations, whose assumptions include the following: “(i) What makes a man human is freedom from dependence on the wills of others. (ii) Freedom from dependence on others means freedom from any relations with others except those relations which the individual enters voluntarily with a view to his own interest. (iii) The individual is essentially the proprietor of his own person and capacities, for which he owes nothing to society” or to any other external force (1962, 263).

38. Which is not to deny that many people do often make just that complaint in Saudi Arabia as elsewhere in the third world.

develops his arguments about moral action on the basis of that assumption. The *umma* is the concept of a religious-political space—divinely sanctioned and eternally valid—within which rational discussion, debate, and criticism can be conducted. It is also a space of power and of punishment.

An Argument about “Proper” Islamic Public Criticism

Sermons and lectures like these helped to prepare the way for a critical event of great moment shortly after the Gulf War came to a formal end. In May 1991, an open letter, addressed to King Fahd and signed by several hundred Saudi *‘ulamā*, was published in the form of a leaflet and distributed throughout the kingdom, although it received no mention in the Saudi press (whether private or state-owned) or on Saudi radio or TV.³⁹

The tone of the letter is polite but firm.⁴⁰ Its formal opening addresses Fahd not as “the King” but simply as “The servant of the two noble Sanctuaries [of Mecca and Medina], may God prosper him,” a title which Fahd had assumed some years earlier.⁴¹ After reminding the reader that the Saudi state was officially based on the *sharī‘a*, it declares rather pointedly that “the *‘ulamā* and counsellors (*ahl un-nasīha*) continue to fulfill the obligation, imposed on them by God, of giving *nasīha* to their leaders.” It then puts forward several demands that bring together longstanding criticisms made of the regime by various groups within the country. The demands include “the establishment of a consultative assembly to adjudicate on domestic and foreign affairs . . . with complete independence (*inshā’ majlis ash-shūra lil-bat fi-sh-shu’ūn id-dākhiliyya wa-l-khārijīyya . . . ma’a al-istiqlāl at-tām*),” “a just distribution of public wealth (*iqāmat ul-adl fi tawzi’ il-māl il-‘ām*),” “guarantee of the rights of the individual and of society (*kafā-*

39. It was published in Arabic newspapers abroad, however. For example, the full text, together with a photostat of the signatures, appeared in the Egyptian paper *ash-Sha’b* of 21 May 1991.

40. A little later, another letter was addressed to the king by a number of well-known Western-educated Saudis, also asking for various reforms—political, educational, and social. In contrast to the letter by the *‘ulamā*, the tone of this letter is very deferential, and central stress is placed on modernization (*tahdīth*).

41. In contrast, the “liberal” letter is addressed to “The Servant of the two noble Sanctuaries, King Fahd bin ‘Abdul ‘Azīz, may God support him.” Unlike the other letter, it thus names the addressee as king and as the son of the Founder of the Kingdom.

lat huqūq al-fard wa-l-mujtami’),” and the removal of all infringements on the wishes and rights of people, including human dignity (*al-karāma al-insāniyya*), in accordance with legitimate (*shar’iyya*) and recognized moral rules (*dawābit*)—as well as a complete and thorough review of all political, administrative, and economic organizations in the kingdom to ensure that they are run in accordance with the Islamic *sharī’a*.

The King did not respond directly to this letter, but apparently asked the Council of Senior ‘Ulamā to do so. The council published a reply through the main media, deploring the manner in which the self-proclaimed *nasīha* was publicized.⁴² While it was right to assert that Muslims were under an obligation to give corrective advice to their fellows (“their leaders and their common folk”), there were—the council insisted—proper forms and conditions that governed *nasīha*. It required not only sincerity but also good intention toward the recipient, “desiring for him what one desires for oneself.” For this reason it should be given personally and in private, so as not to hurt or embarrass him.

It is said that some of the King’s supporters who commented on the original letter by word of mouth claimed that the manner in which it was delivered rendered this so-called *nasīha* (morally corrective discourse) into something close to *ghība*—that is, speaking of someone’s faults in his or her absence (and by extension also calumniating or slandering someone). *Ghība* is strongly condemned in Islamic moral theology,⁴³ so it is not surprising that the letter writers dismissed this analogy as absurd. But the point of likening moral criticism addressed publicly to the king to the sin of backbiting in private was, of course, to suggest malicious intent, a feature that irretrievably damages the integrity of *nasīha*.

It is thus precisely the description of this act of criticism as *nasīha* that is disputed by those siding with the recipient of advice (*mansūh*). For the authority of the younger ‘ulamā to criticize the king (and also his inordinately rich and often blatantly corrupt relatives) derives from their claim that what they are doing is giving *nasīha*. They appear to have thought through all the proper conditions for carrying out *nasīha* mentioned in the Za‘ayr sermon and to have anticipated the objections

42. See the Saudi daily *ash-Sharq al-Awsat* of 4 June 1991.

43. A commonly used textbook on this topic in Saudi Arabia is ‘Uwaysha n.d.

of the king’s supporters. At any rate, I heard two arguments produced in defense of the publication of the *nasīha*, one moral and one tactical.

Thus, it was maintained that since the *nasīha* dealt with matters affecting the proper regulation of the *umma*, not with the personal behavior of the prince, it had to be announced publicly. The common folk needed to be reminded—no less than the prince did (albeit for different reasons)—of how the affairs of the *umma* should be conducted. There were many precedents for this in the history of Islam, examples of ‘ulamā reproving the prince in public for not doing what he ought, even if this led to their imprisonment. Perhaps the most notable of these, and the one frequently cited by Saudi ‘ulamā, was the medieval jurist ibn Taymiyya. The first justification therefore appears to have invoked publicity not as a transcendental principle but as a moral option that is appropriate in *this* situation rather than some other.

The second (and tactical) argument was that the king had often in the past been urged privately to undertake the necessary reforms but had chosen to ignore that discreet advice. The wide distribution of the printed letter was thus a second step, intended to exert greater pressure on a morally passive prince to respond—either by openly challenging the *nasīha* or by initiating authentic Islamic reform. The publicity given to the *nasīha* created a public space in which the prince was required to confront others—and himself—as a moral person. It was assumed that as a moral person he would be ashamed to be told publicly that he had failed to act as a Muslim prince ought, in his capacity as ruler, to act.

If the Saudi royal clan and its supporters are to subvert the authority of these critical younger ‘ulamā (as opposed to silencing them by force), it seems that they will have to enter the dangerous terrain of open theological argument.⁴⁴ The greatest danger in this lies not in the possibility that the king may lose the argument but precisely in his conceding a domain of public argument *in which he becomes accountable*.

This kind of publicized argument is relatively new in the sense that it is articulated by graduates of the new Islamic universities, and that the things dealt with in their discourse are often new to traditional Islamic discourse (although not external to that tradition). But

44. Another step in the argument was a book-length polemic directed formally at one of the best-known establishment ‘ulamā, Shaikh ‘Abdul-‘Azīz bin Bāz by Hawālī (n.d.).

if the scope of social criticism now appears more comprehensive, this is not because untraditional Islamic spokesmen have begun to extend their criticism into areas previously ignored. It is, rather, because modern institutions (administrative, economic, ideological) and modern classes (especially those who have received a Western education) have come into existence, creating a new social space that is the object of critical discourse and practice. The religious discourses and practices presuppose the new social space—the latter partly constitutes and is constituted by the former. In this important sense, they are a *part* of modernity and not a *reaction* to it, as is often said: unless, of course, it be insisted that modernity is articulated by a fixed teleology.

Those who speak for the modernizing state have begun to treat Saudi society (*al-mujtami' as-sa'ūdi*) not only as a totality but also as a totality that is undergoing a critical transformation. There now exists a theoretically all-encompassing administrative framework, a defined territory (with some ill-defined boundaries generating international disputes), national passports, budgets, development plans, foreign workers, foreign policies, a graded educational system (schools, technical institutes, universities, overseas scholarships), a centralized network of information collection (statistics, archives) and of information distribution (radio, TV). In these different elements, practice is not always congruent with official representation, nor are the elements fully integrated with one another. But that is precisely one of the things that renders all of them together a totality-in-crisis.

This general situation invites members of the Western-educated middle classes to produce critical discourses directed at mobilizing publics and to intervene thereby in the uneven movement of that totality toward its appointed goal.⁴⁵ For the Islamic graduates, on the other hand, the situation demands judgment and criticism based on knowledge of the principles by which religion regulates life—that is, *fiqh*, usually translated as jurisprudence. It should therefore not be surprising that in the new Islamic critical discourse, normative classi-

45. The more subdued criticism offered by members of the growing, Western-educated middle class is formulated in moral-political vocabularies drawn from post-Enlightenment Europe. For the most part, this takes place in private discussion groups and makes its opinions felt through personal contact with some of the princes. Many of these liberal critics have begun to exchange ideas, on matters of substance as well as tactics, with the more outspoken Islamic critics. But they do not characterize their criticisms in terms of the Islamic concept of *nasiba*.

cal concepts such as the *umma* (the moral space in which all Muslims are placed) come to be applied to a contemporary moral-political order relevant to Saudi Arabia. Or that—together with Western-educated Saudi liberals but with a very different intent—they should speak of their country as a society in crisis (*azmat ul-mujtami'*). For the new, teleological sense of “crisis” carried by this concept is reflected in its distance from the older meaning of the word *azma*: Whereas *azma* classically signified a time of drought and dearth, in modern parlance it is employed to denote not simply a term of hardship but a sickness of the body politic that has reached a dangerous point and that consequently awaits a radical diagnosis and resolution before things can move toward a better future.⁴⁶

Shifts in the Idea of “Critical Reason” from the Eighteenth Century to the Twentieth

The *'ulamā* I have discussed in this chapter could not conceivably assert, as Kant did two centuries ago:

Our age is, in especial degree, the age of criticism, and to criticism everything must submit. Religion . . . and legislation . . . may seek to exempt themselves from it. But they then awaken just suspicion, and cannot claim the sincere respect which reason accords only to that which has been able to sustain the test of free and open examination.⁴⁷

For Kant (in contrast to the *'ulamā*), criticism is intended as an alternative to religious authority, not as a means of reinforcing it. But this difference is attributable, at least in part, to the fact that in Enlightenment Europe, religious authority was already in retreat. Political authority, of course, was not.

However, Kant insisted that the freedom to criticize everything should not interfere with the duty to obey political authority. Although some subsequent commentators have described this separation as amounting to support for political authoritarianism, others have seen in it a principled statement of the *Rechtsstaat* (see Reiss

46. In the introduction to his very interesting book on the human rights debate in the Middle East, Dwyer (1991) notes the general sense of crisis among Arab intellectuals today. However, the discourse of crisis in the region is not merely contemporary; it goes back at least a quarter century—and in some cases much longer.

47. *Critique of Pure Reason* (cited in Arendt 1982, 32).

1991, 11). At the very least, these contradictory responses indicate how ambiguous Kant's doctrine is.

Foucault has suggested—in the article I cited at the beginning of the chapter—that because Kant was living in an absolutist state, it is not surprising that he should have sought to reassure the king about his authority: “Kant . . . proposes to Frederick II, in scarcely veiled terms, a sort of contract—what might be called the contract of rational despotism with free reason: the public and free use of autonomous reason will be the best guarantee of obedience, on condition, however, that the political principle that must be obeyed itself be in conformity with universal reason” (Foucault 1984, 37).

This is certainly a neat liberal solution to the paradoxes generated by Kant's separation of critical reason from political obedience.⁴⁸ But what, we may ask, are the implications for non-European histories when Enlightenment “free reason” contracts with imperial “rational despotism”? One answer, as it relates to the Muslim world, has recently been provided by the well-known Middle East scholar Leonard Binder:

From the time of the Napoleonic invasion, from the time of the massacre of the Janissaries, from the time of the Sepoy mutiny, at least, the West has been trying to tell Islam what must be the price of progress in the coin of the tradition which is to be surrendered. And from those times, despite the increasing numbers of responsive Muslims, there remains a substantial number that steadfastly argue that it is possible to progress without paying such a heavy cultural price. (1988, 293)

Binder may be right here (indeed, I believe he is right). But it is surely no incidental detail that each of the “tellings” cited by him—when traditional authority was successfully attacked in the name of rationality and progress—was at the same time an act of violence.⁴⁹ In each of

48. Foucault's suggestion that Kant makes the subjects' duty of obedience conditional on the ruler's respect for universal reason would not, I think, have been acceptable to Kant himself. For Kant (1991, 126) rejects “rebellion [as] a rightful means for a people to use in order to overthrow the oppressive power of a so-called tyrant.” In this respect, Kant's position is close to what today is called *constitutionalism*.

49. Some anthropologists of the Middle East regard Napoleon's invasion of Egypt as having initiated “scientific fieldwork” in the region—a nice example of the fusion of rational knowledge and military power (see Eickelman 1989).

them, Western political, economic, and ideological power increased its hold over non-European peoples.⁵⁰ That power, unleashed in Enlightenment Europe, continues to restructure the lives of non-European peoples, often through the agency of non-Europeans themselves. And if “Islamic fundamentalism” is a response to that power, then certainly so, even more thoroughly, are the intellectual currents called “modernist Islam” (which is concerned to adapt theology to the models of Christian modernism)⁵¹ and “Muslim secularism” (which is preoccupied less with theology than with separating religion from politics in national life). And so, too, are the progressivist movements in literature and the arts, in politics and law, that have arisen in Muslim societies.

The translation of modern Western categories into the administrative and legal discourses of the non-Western world is a familiar story. It was through such discursive powers that people undergoing Westernization were compelled to abandon old practices and turn to new ones. The massive redefinition and regularization of property rights is probably the best known example of this process. But there are others.

The historiography of modernization in the Middle East recounts the measures taken in various countries to re-form the *shari'a* in conformity with the presuppositions of Western social practice. At first, in the areas of commercial, penal, and procedural law, and later, more

50. Of course, the use of force to impose one's political will on another people was not, and is not, peculiar to the modern West. The point is that it raises distinctive moral problems for modern liberal thought, because liberalism celebrates freedom from external coercion as an absolute end, and it is also committed to extending its social arrangements across the world by coercive means. In the nineteenth century, J. S. Mill attempted, famously, to reconcile this contradiction by reference to the creative role of rational (i.e., European) despotism in relation to “unprogressive,” non-European peoples. (See Mill 1975, chap. 18.)

51. Unsuccessfully, according to the verdict of Western scholars like Binder. For earlier criticisms, see Gibb 1947; Kerr 1966; and Kedourie 1966. Kedourie ends his book with a striking image of Muslims as animals, wild and domesticated: “And a year later, more sweepingly and more trenchantly [Blunt wrote]: ‘The Muslims of today who believe are mere wild beasts like the men of Siwah, the rest have lost their faith.’ Since his day, of course, a large proportion of the wild beasts, thanks no doubt to the modernists, has been civilised and domesticated. The few survivors are firmly confined to their reservations” (65). Beneath the offensiveness of the metaphor (which, incidentally, Western scholarly reviewers did not comment on) lies the more interesting thought that Muslims are animals of two kinds: domesticated (trained or otherwise subjected to the designs of humans) and wild (free and therefore both dangerous and useless).

hesitantly, in that part of the *shari'a* which Western and Westernized historians call "family law" (marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc.), Western principles replaced or restricted Islamic rules and practices.⁵² Reviewing these changes in the Ottoman Empire and its successor states, a historian of modern Islamic law observes:

It might well be asked why it was that the Shari'a was thus progressively set on one side in favour of codes derived largely from the West. Initially, it seems clear, this was far less the result of any popular demand for reform . . . than imposed upon the people from above, partly in the interest of administrative efficiency and national progress, and partly in order to satisfy foreign opinion. But as time went on, the conservative opposition to these reforms was challenged by a variety of arguments put forward by the more progressive elements in the countries concerned. (Anderson 1959, 22-23)

Arguments may well have "challenged" conservatives, as progressivist historians claim, but the fact remains that the translation of Western legal categories depended less on persuasive argument than on constraints put into effect by persons acting in the name of the Westernizing state. What mattered was not that the Muslim population thought well of the legal reforms, but that once the reforms had been "imposed upon the people from above," the Westernizing state could create and maintain new conditions to which everyday practices had perforce to be related. In this context, it is not the probability that conservative opinion was persuaded that counts, but the frequency with which people responded appropriately whatever their motives.

Yes, of course, these reforms did not simply reproduce Western institutions ("local cultures make a difference"). And yes, of course, many people resisted them in a variety of ways ("people aren't puppets"). But henceforth the cultural differences were constructed under new conditions, and the acts of resistance took place in new spaces. On the one hand, there were new political languages, new social groupings, new modes of producing and consuming, new desires and fears, new disciplines of time and space; on the other, there was the critical

⁵². This process is not a simple shrinking of the scope of the *shari'a*, for in some geographical regions the *shari'a* has come to be applied to Muslim populations who had until recently followed varieties of custom. The crucial new feature everywhere has been the prominent role of the state in redefining the structure and application of the *shari'a* according to Western principles.

fact that contest and conflict were increasingly relatable to *legal* demands (even when governing powers sought to deny their legality) within the framework of a modernizing state. When these new conditions had taken root, the idea of "crisis" as a historical stage in the life of Muslim society made its appearance. The modern discourse of crisis, here as elsewhere in the third world, depends on a particular form of diagnosis (radical social criticism) and proposes a particular kind of cure (emancipation from the sickness-producing past).

There can be little doubt that in this increasingly modernized world the kind of religious criticism I have described for Saudi Arabia becomes less viable. My question, however, is this: is that nonviability to be attributed to the liberating powers of transcendental reason or simply to the secular powers that destroy and reconstruct?

Apparently even an intelligent modern liberal like Binder does not find it easy to decide. On the one hand, Western critical reason is definitely held to have its own redeeming power. "By engaging in rational discourse with those whose consciousness has been shaped by Islamic culture," Binder maintains, "it is possible to enhance the prospects for political liberalism in that region and others where it is not indigenous" (2). But, on the other hand, the power to extend liberalism seems to depend critically on something else:

So long as the West was convinced that its moral superiority rested upon the confluence of rational discourse and its own political practice, the practical example of the liberal West encouraged the liberal interpretation of Islam. But when the West began to doubt its own moral superiority, then the norm of Western liberal rationality no longer served as a plausible explanation of political experience in the world. As a consequence, it is no longer imperative that certain traditional Islamic practices be explained away, or even simply explained. (5)

In this account, it is the West's alleged loss of its sense of moral superiority over Muslim countries, and hence its inability to overawe them, that reveals, negatively, where the power of modern "Western liberal rationality" lies.

This latter account is different from the one that Kant gave of critical reason. For, according to Kant, rationality is universal because it is rooted in the abstract idea of the transcendental subject; modern liberals like Binder seem—at least some of the time—to consider ration-

ality to be universal because it is identified with the globalizing moral and political power of the modern West.

Nineteenth-century evolutionary theorists, including those we today call anthropologists, insisted on a single distinction between rationality (which they identified essentially with European civilization) and irrationality (which they ascribed to varieties of primitivism, psychological or social). These theorists were not always fully aware that their concept of a single substantive rationality was one of the faces of power. On the contrary, they tended to believe that power was a means for instituting rationality throughout the less civilized world for that world's benefit. In the twentieth century, this belief took a more explicit political form: translating the liberal conception and practice of "the good society" into every corner of the non-Western world.⁵³

Conclusion

The religious criticism described in this chapter is undeniably a vigorous expression of political opposition to the Saudi ruling elite. That criticism is not merely a one-sided assault, it invites argumentative exchange. Yet the invitation appears to increasing numbers of Westernized Saudis—who have their own complaints against their government—to be not only limited but limiting. And that is indeed what it really is. (But so, in its own way, was Kant's concept of political criticism.) It is limiting in that there are certain choices it will not allow; it is limited in that there are certain things it will not criticize. Nevertheless, I have aimed to provide an account that suggests the limitations are due not to a permanent incapacity to contemplate change, still less to an intrinsic contradiction between religion and reason.⁵⁴ The limitations are part of the way a particular discursive tradition, and its associated disciplines, are articulated at a particular point in time.

Since the objective of *nasiba* is the person who has transgressed

53. Thus, Lipset (1963, 439): "Democracy is not only or even primarily a means through which different groups can attain their ends or seek the good society; *it is the good society itself in operation*" (emphasis added). In other words, democracy is not simply the practice whereby a people freely chooses its government by an electoral majority; it is a style of life and a set of values.

54. This alleged contradiction is the burden of a famous critique of religion by a politically courageous (but intellectually old-fashioned) secularist, Al-'Azam (1969).

God's eternal commands, its normative reason can be regarded as a repressive technique for securing social conformity to divinely ordained norms, which many people today are unwilling to tolerate silently. But there is also another way of understanding *nasiba*. It reflects the principle that a well-regulated polity depends on its members being virtuous individuals who are partly responsible for one another's moral condition—and therefore in part on continuous moral criticism.

Modern liberalism rejects this principle. The well-regulated modern polity—so it argues—depends on the provision of optimum amounts of social welfare and individual liberty, not on moral criticism. The primary critical task, according to political liberalism, is not the moral disciplining of individuals but the rational administration and care of entire populations. Morality, together with religious belief, has become essentially a personal matter for the self-determining individual—or so the liberal likes to claim. Hence, some say, rational politics has replaced ideological politics (Bell 1960) in fully developed modern societies.

Conversely, the existence of ideological politics within a given society indicates that it is not yet fully modern. This thought is appealing to many anthropologists who write on "development." Thus, in a well-known essay on Muslim Indonesia, Geertz (1973) argued that ideology—which moralizes the domain of politics—is typical of societies that have begun to move from tradition to modernity,⁵⁵ and that its function is to cope creatively with crises of transition.⁵⁶ Ideologies are

55. "It is a loss of orientation that most directly gives rise to ideological activity, an inability, for lack of usable models, to comprehend the universe of civic rights and responsibilities in which one finds oneself located. The development of a differentiated polity (or of greater internal differentiation within such a polity) may and commonly does bring with it severe social dislocation and psychological tension. But it also brings with it conceptual confusion, as the established images of political order fade into irrelevance or are driven into disrepute" (Geertz 1973, 219).

56. "That Indonesia (or, I should imagine, any new nation) can find her way through this forest of problems without any ideological guidance at all seems impossible. The motivation to seek (and, even more important, to *use*) technical skill and knowledge, the emotional resilience to support the necessary patience and resolution, and the moral strength to sustain self-sacrifice and incorruptibility must come from somewhere, from some vision of public purpose anchored in a compelling image of social reality. That all these qualities may not be present; that the present drift to revivalistic irrationalism and unbridled fantasy may continue; that the next ideological phase may be even further from the ideals for which the revolution was ostensibly fought than is the present one; that Indonesia may continue to be, as Bagehot called France, the scene of political experiments from which others profit much but she herself very little, or that the ulti-

therefore to be seen in their double form as "maps of problematic social reality and matrices for the creation of collective conscience." Geertz's argument, which belongs to the end-of-ideology school, is that eventually, when "adolescent nations" have reached maturity, when serious social crises have been overcome, a realm of rational politics becomes possible.

However, the assumption is surely mistaken that modern liberal politics precludes any direct commitment to particular moral norms, or any space for ideologically based criticism. To the extent that modern politics employs the language of rights (individual or collective), ideological principles are central to it. Civil rights and human rights (including civil liberties and material entitlements) are not merely neutral legal facts, they are profoundly moralistic values constantly invoked to guide and criticize modern politics—in the domestic setting of the nation-state and beyond it in international relations. The individual citizen is not required by the political community to be virtuous, but is required to be the bearer of rights that define his or her moral capacity. Furthermore, this moral-political ideology of rights has a specific *religious* (Christian) history (see Friedrich 1964).

But even if they have a religious *origin*, human rights are no longer based on religious *reason*. That alone, so it may be said, gives them a more rational foundation. Yet when people make such claims, it is not always clear what concept of rationality or religion they are employing. Nor do they always seem to recognize that the provision of epistemological foundations is itself a problematic enterprise (and one that, ironically, connects "reason" to "origin"). Thus, Kantian philosophers have one concept of rationality, modern political liberals who stress pragmatic criteria have another, and psychiatrists yet a third.⁵⁷ Philosophers and anthropologists have long been fascinated by the question of explaining apparently irrational beliefs in nonmodern cultures and premodern epochs. There is a vast literature on the subject.⁵⁸

mate outcome may be viciously totalitarian and wildly zealous is all very true" (Geertz 1973, 229).

57. For a discussion of some historical shifts since the seventeenth century in the concept of reason in epistemology, see Blanché 1968. A longer history of the major Western traditions that have successively redefined rationality in the domain of ethics is MacIntyre's impressive *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1988).

58. A recent collection on rationality (Hollis and Lukes 1982) brought together anthropologists and philosophers to debate this question. All the anthropologists (Gellner, Horton, Sperber) took the view that what appear as irrational beliefs in non-Western

Three features characterize this literature. First, natural science is usually invoked as the model for what counts as rational. But even this apparent agreement is deceptive. In fact, the debaters urge mutually incompatible concepts of rationality upon each other, partly because what is critical to the long-term success of the different natural sciences is itself the subject of continuing philosophical and historical dispute.

Second, rationality is held to be the essence of an entire secular culture, and consequently the success of modern medicine and technology is considered the guarantee of a truth shared by the culture as a whole. (This foundational claim is not to be confused with the sociological observation that science and technology are variously bound up with a range of social, economic, and political institutions.) The idea of an integrated cultural totality founded on the Truth of Science makes it difficult to understand how people come to have serious disagreements over the possibility or the desirability of particular changes in a modern polity.

Third, great importance is attached to being able to assert that "modern culture" is superior to "nonmodern cultures," as though the consequence of not being able to do so forcefully enough would lead to large-scale defections from the former to the latter. Implicit in the well-advertised fear of "relativism"⁵⁹ is the extraordinary thought that the cultural life of human beings is the product of conscious criticism and objective choice. It is extraordinary because, although arguments are clearly important in different social situations, the reasons for a person's attachment to a given way of life, or conversion to another, cannot be reduced to an idealized model of scientific theory building.

Perhaps the feeling that secular arguments are rationally superior to religious ones is based on the belief that religious convictions are the

cultures are in fact failed attempts at theoretical explanations of the world. (Sperber complicates the argument by distinguishing between propositional and semi-propositional beliefs, maintaining that the latter are not, strictly speaking, "irrational beliefs" but "representations that enable us to store and process as much as we understand" [Sperber 1982, 170].)

59. Hollis and Lukes open their lucid introduction to *Rationality and Relativism* with the statement, "The temptations of relativism are perennial and pervasive. In many fields of thought they are openly embraced. Within social anthropology, they have been ever-present, though partially, if firmly, resisted." One might be reading here about some socially dangerous sexual perversion, and not—as it happens—about a philosophical position.

more rigid. But there is no decisive evidence for thinking this. Religious traditions have undergone the most radical transformations over time. Divine texts may be unalterable, but the ingenuities of human interpretation are endless—quite apart from the fact that some of the conditions of human doubt and certainty are notoriously inaccessible to conscious argument. Fanatics come in all shapes and sizes among skeptics and believers alike—as do individuals of a tolerant disposition. As for the claim that among the religious, coercion replaces persuasive argument, it should not be forgotten that we owe the most terrible examples of coercion in modern times to secular totalitarian regimes—Nazism and Stalinism. The point that matters in the end, surely, is not the justification that is used (whether it be supernatural or worldly) but the behavior that is justified. On this point, it must be said that the ruthlessness of secular practice yields nothing to the ferocity of religious.

Finally: it is necessary to stress that I am not concerned with the truth or otherwise of Saudi religious beliefs but with the kind of critical reasoning involved in *nasīha*. I have tried to show that the Islamic tradition is the ground on which that reasoning takes place.⁶⁰ And that is no more than may be said about political and moral reasoning within the modern liberal tradition—except that modern liberalism deploys powers that are immeasurably greater, including the flexible power to construct a “universal, progressive history,” which the other tradition does not possess. That today is the main condition that limits religious criticism in the contemporary Middle East.

60. There are, it is true, several Islamic traditions (which is why the clumsy anthropological claim that there are several “Islams” appears to some to be plausible—see Asad 1986a for a critique). But the several Islamic traditions are related to one another formally, through common founding texts, and temporally, through diverging authoritative interpreters.

Polemics

