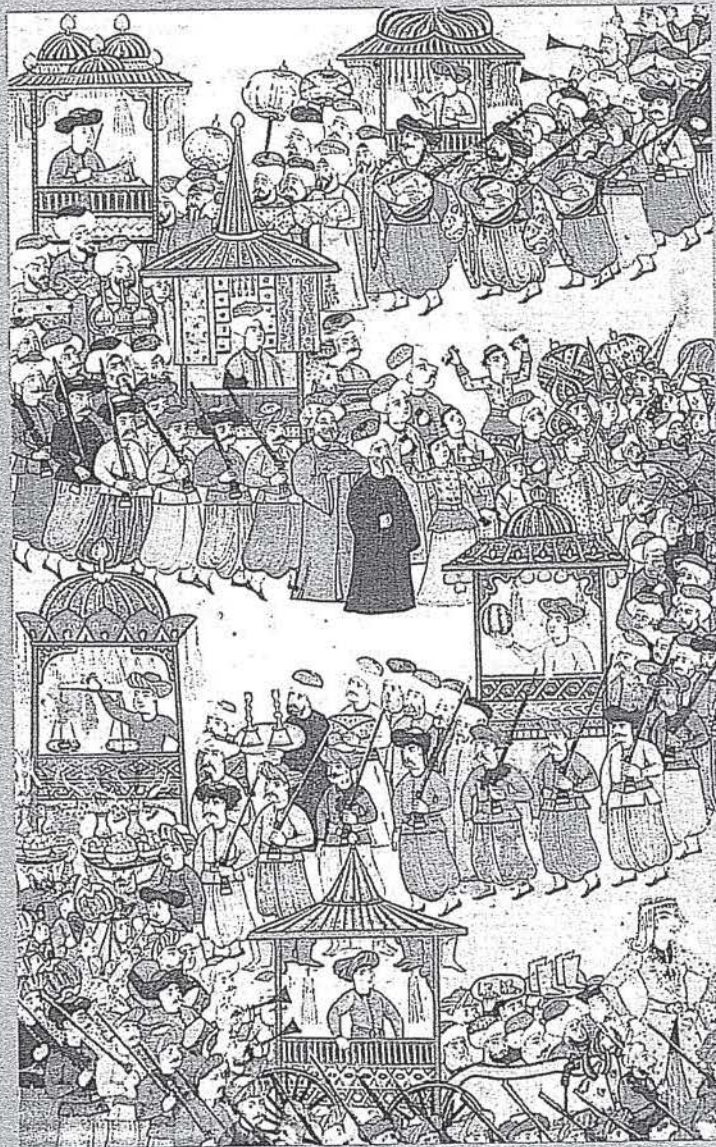


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CIVIL SOCIETY DEMOCRACY AND THE MUSLIM WORLD



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Civil Society and Islam

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As a first approximation, civil society can be defined as the intermediate domain between the state and the individual—a domain in which deliberation and association take place without constraint and coercion. In a stimulating book on civil society, the late Ernest Gellner claims that the survival of civil society hinges on avoiding three dangers to liberty: centralized authoritarianism, stifling communalism, and anemic atomism. Civil society consists of a plurality of institutions, but this is a pluralism of a certain kind. When plurality consists of segmentary communities, the tyranny of centralized power is avoided at the cost of another kind of tyranny: a stifling kind of communalism in which identities are not chosen but ascribed—whereas at the core of civil society lies the “unconstrained and secular individual, unhampered by social or theological bonds, freely choosing his aims...”¹ It follows that centralized authority cannot monopolize all power, fuse it with some understanding of transcendental (or immanent) truth and bind the individual and society to itself. Finally, civil society is possible when it avoids not only stifling communalism and centralized authoritarianism but also avoids the political enfeeblement of society and the individual through atomization by “forging of links which are effective even though they are flexible, specific, instrumental”.²

The formation of civil society in the West, Gellner claims, was the outcome of a “miracle” which brought into existence a zone of freedom free of stifling communalism, despotic authoritarianism and “emasculating” atomism. Gellner then suggests that we can best understand civil society by looking at its “rivals”: Islam, Marxism, and nationalism (of a certain kind). Since our main concern is civil society in the Middle East and the Islamic world, I shall exclude Marxism and nationalism from my discussion except when they are relevant to the discussion of civil society and Islam. And, since Ernest Gellner has not only written a book on “Civil Society and Its Rivals” but also a very provocative one on “Muslim Society”, I will address the question of whether civil society can accommodate Islam, or, whether Islam can accommodate civil society, in dialogue with Gellner and his thesis on the subject.

Islam as the Rival of Civil Society

Gellner’s major reason for viewing Islam as a rival form of social order to civil society is his contention that whereas civil society requires the privatization of religious belief, Islam is “secularization-resistant”. Islam is unique among world civilizations for its resistance to secularization and for its undiminishing vigor. According to Gellner, Islam derives its contemporary vigor from the fact that its elective affinity with the defining features of modernization and modernity, namely, industrialization and the industrial order, allows it to be a truly local response to the challenge of global, industrial modernity. This local response, however, while it is

¹ Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and Its Rivals*, London, 1994, p. 9

² *Ibid.*, p. 100.

industrialization-friendly, on the one hand, is no friend of civil society and liberty, on the other. It is, in other words, a model for modernization and modernity but of an authoritarian kind.

According to Gellner, industrialization-friendly Islam is one variant of Islam, for Islam is a soul with two bodies. Lived Islam has always been two: it is the scripturalist "High" variant that is industrialization-friendly, whereas this is not so for the folksy "Low" one. The rising "fundamentalism" in the Islamic world, forged in the image of the High variant, can best be understood not just as opposition "to alien unbelief, or to bowdlerizing reinterpretation" but as a "deep" concern with "countering folk distortions of Islam, illegitimate superstition, and ritual accretions".³ Clearly, for Gellner, it is what he calls the "High Culture" of Islam that lends itself not only to industrialization but to fundamentalism as well. Fundamentalism is really the "enthusiastic" version of High Islam within which a zealous commitment to High Islam is also a passionate commitment to modernization and modernity. Hence, fundamentalists can "have their cake and eat it too"; they are not only a solution to the problem of modernization posed from both outside and inside Islam, but they are also a local, native solution. This is what makes Islam so very vigorous in our day.

While (High) Islam is friendly to industrialization in its formal structure, it is unfriendly to civil society and liberty in terms of its "normative Ideal" which does not differentiate between "transcendent Law" and society:

...divine truth is not only a matter of doctrine about the nature of the world, but also, and perhaps primarily, a matter of quite detailed law concerning the conduct of life and society...As for political authority, it is charged with enforcing divine law, rather than specifically or paradigmatically exemplifying it, let alone creating it.⁴

This is what Gellner calls the "Model" of "*umma*", a term which acquires the generic meaning of "ideocracy" with two variants: the religious Islamic version and the secular Marxist version.

There are two lived variants of Islam, and then there is the normative Ideal or Model. All are old as Islam itself. The High Islam (scripturalist, rule-governed, egalitarian and puritanical) constituted the culture of the urban centers whereas the Low one (ritualistic, magical, ecstatic and saint-mediated) was more suitable to everyday rustic existence of the rural, tribal periphery and the urban poor. Although the two cultural systems interpenetrated each other much of the time,

There remained a latent tension which would come to the surface from time to time in the form of a puritan revivalist movement, aiming at transforming the Lower in the image of the Higher, at implementing seriously an ideal which had never been renounced, yet was not properly practiced either.⁵

This was the world of Ibn Khaldun where the tribal rustics mobilized by a discontented saint would attack the lax and corrupt city and take over the government in the name of purification forged in the image of the normative Ideal of High Islam and fuelled by the energy of tribal *asabiyya*. "These movements triumphed from time to time, though they never succeeded permanently, prior to modern times..." The neo-puritans once in power would in time succumb to the temptations of urban luxury and laxity while the rustics (and the urban poor) given the "exigencies of rural life and psychic needs of urban poverty would in due course" revert to the "persistent use of magic, ritual and personal mediation", and the cycle would start over again. This was the "Permanent or Recurrent but ever-reversed Reformation" of traditional Islam: "in each cycle, the Revivalist puritan impulse would in the end yield to the contrary social requirement."⁶

³ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁶ *Ibid.*

"But under modern conditions the rules of the game have changed." This recurrent cycle was broken under the impact of the colonial and post-colonial state when the "society was politically centralized and effectively governed by the centre", when tribes were subdued and their autonomy destroyed, and when "population explosion, urbanization, urban domination" and mobility led to the "general atomization of the society". In these circumstances, puritanism and fundamentalism symbolize not only "promotion from the status of rustic backwardness and ignorance to urban sophistication and propriety"⁷ but also societal progress: Fundamentalism "aiming at transforming the Lower in the image of the Higher, at implementing seriously an ideal which had never been renounced, yet was not properly practiced either", represents catching up with modernity and acquiring international dignity in local terms.

Islam and Christianity as Mirror Images

In Europe too, the home of civil society, Christianity had industrialization-friendly and unfriendly variants: what is "miraculous", however, about Western Europe is that the industrialization-friendly version has ended up as the friend of liberty as well. What accounts for the difference between the two industrialization-friendly variants of Islam and Christianity; why did the Reformation in the West befriend both industrialization and liberty while protestant-like Islam of the East befriended but one of them?

The secret lies in the mirror-image like positioning of industrialization-friendly versions of Islam and Christianity. In Islam, the friendly, urban, High variant of Islam "prevailed at the center, not always endowed with power, it was nevertheless ascribed normative authority".⁸ The unfriendly, communal, and superstitious Low variant was fragmented, peripheral and popular. Gellner does not spell it out clearly, but there were actually two variants of urban, High Islam: the lax ("not properly practiced") one, and the enthusiastic, zealous kind. The lax, relaxed Islam grew in the commercial and civilized soil of urban centers and was incapable of governing itself. The enthusiastic one was engendered by the combination of tribal *asabiyya* and the normative ideals of High Islam and provided governance to the lax, atomized urban residents enfeebled by commerce and affluence.

In Christianity, the superstitious, modernization-unfriendly variant "prevailed in the central single organization, claiming a monopolistic link to the Founder of the faith and source of unique revelation". The friendly-scripturalist, puritan, mediation-repudiating, enthusiast-variant was at the margin and disunited. "It was this mix", Gellner claims, "which engendered by some strange internal chemistry the modern world" friendly both to industrialization and liberty. He adds,

This mix, plus the fact that the great confrontation between superstitious centre and enthusiastic periphery ended in a draw and in some places in deadlock, eventually meant that the modern world was produced.⁹

So it is the "strange" chemistry plus the "balance of power" between the superstitious and the enthusiasts that accounts for the conversion of Christian enthusiasts into friends of liberty. The enthusiasts not only fail to prevail but also

their efforts to impose righteousness on earth if necessary by military and political force, turn instead to pacifism and tolerance, but they are not so crushed as to be prevented from practicing righteousness within their own moral ghetto, and demanding with success toleration for their excessive but private zeal.¹⁰

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

This is when the “miracle” occurred: the failure of enthusiasts to impose their righteousness militarily and politically turns them not only into friends of tolerance and liberty, but the privatization of their zeal channelled into economic activity engenders perpetual economic growth and plenty.

History and Normative Ideals

Clearly, the industrialization-friendly variant of Christianity became a friend of liberty not out of respect for its normative Model but because it had to be so. Had the balance of power been tipped in its favor, a theocratic ideocracy might have won the day. Michael Walzer has argued in his book on “The Revolution of the Saints” that the puritan saints were indeed capable of such radical vigor as the precursors of the Jacobins and the Bolsheviks.

We know, of course, that the Christian enthusiasts were just as “fundamentalist” as their Muslim counterparts: both claim to subscribe to the original, Normative (Ideal) Model and seek to cleanse it of its later distortions. In the case of Islam, according to Gellner, the normative Model makes no distinction between the religious and secular law and hence sacralizes the social world of mundane interaction. For Christianity, implicitly in his book on Civil Society and explicitly in his Muslim Society, Gellner mentions the God-Caesar distinction:

Judaism and Christianity are also blueprints of a social order, but rather less so than Islam... The most prolonged effort in the direction of theocracy was perhaps Byzantine Caesaro-Papism...¹¹

According to Gellner, although the normative Model of Christianity separates society from religion, apparently this Model can be overridden as in the case of not only the Byzantines, but also the enthusiastic Puritans who were intent on establishing the Commonwealth of Virtue “politically and militarily”. What stopped the zealous Puritans was not the normative Model but the balance of power.

If one religion can override its normative Model, cannot another do the same; as the normative Ideal was overridden in Christianity, so could it not be in Islam, given favorable balance of forces? Moreover, is the normative Model in Islam as unambiguous as Gellner assumes? From Gellner’s own account of Christianity, it appears that normative Models are a matter of interpretative emphases subject to contextual balance of forces –the Protestant enthusiasts’ attempt to override the Society-Church distinction was stopped short by the balance of forces, while Byzantine Caesaro-Papism prevailed for some time. Gellner himself is not totally free of doubt about the interpretation of the normative Ideal of High Islam by Muslims.

High Islam may not really be, as its adherents like to think, the perpetuation of the pristine practice of the prophet and his Companions [‘the Model’], but it is something that has genuinely been a prestigious part and parcel of Muslim civilization for a long time.¹²

But if we are to approach the normative Model with some interpretative doubt and put the weight on Muslim civilization, then Islamic civilization has another “part” of long duration overlooked by Gellner: As Ira Lapidus suggests, there are in fact not just one but two historical “paradigms” in Islam: The “Caliphal” paradigm in Islam is conceived as a “total way of life” and the “imperial paradigm” in it which was not. Neither the Recurrent Cycle *à la* Ibn Khaldun, valid for the arid zone of North Africa, nor the sacralization of life in all its aspects was true for the imperial variant of Islamic society. This is how Ira Lapidus puts it:

The Middle Eastern Islamic heritage provides not one but two basic constellations of historical society, two golden ages, two paradigms, each of which has generated its own characteristic repertoire of political institutions and political theory. The first is the society integrated in all

¹¹ Ernest Gellner, *Muslim Society*, Cambridge, 1981, p. 2.

¹² Gellner, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

dimensions, political, social, and moral, under the aegis of Islam. The prototype is the unification of Arabia under the leadership of the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century...The second historical paradigm is the imperial Islamic society built not on Arabian or tribal templates but on the differentiated structures of previous Middle Eastern societies...By the eleventh century, Middle Eastern states and religious communities were highly differentiated...Thus, despite the common statement that Islam is a total way of life defining political as well as social and family matters, most Muslim societies ... were in fact built around separate institutions of state and religion.¹³

In the context of the Reformation, Gellner's emphasis is on the balance of forces between the "superstitious" Catholic Church and the "enthusiastic" Protestantism. Once the confrontation between the two ends up in a draw, according to Gellner, "community" is superseded by "society": "In Europe, the contrast between community and society is one between the past and the present." In the case of traditional Islam, "community" and "society" were ever present and synchronic: "community at the margins, society at the centre". This ceases to be true in the Islam of the modern world:

Come the modern world however—imposed by extraneous forces rather than produced indigenously—and the new balance of power, favoring the urban centre against rural communities, causes central faith to prevail, and we are left with a successful *Umma* at long last. This is the mystery of the secularization-resistant nature of Islam...¹⁴

Gellner uses the concept of "*umma*" to cover both the lax version of urban High Islam ("not properly practiced") and its enthusiastic variant in terms of what is supposedly the highest value for them both: the textual, normative Ideal. In traditional Islam, the relaxed urban variant cyclically succumbed to its enthusiastic, *asabiyya*-ridden counterpart because the "emasculated" urbanites did not have the coherence and moral stamina to govern themselves without the "virile" tribesmen; come the modern world, the balance of forces favor urban High Islam, and "society" at the expense of "community". But why in the new modern setting when society is favored and community undermined, the fundamentalist, enthusiastic version rather than the relaxed version of High Islam prevails (both of which are industrialization-friendly and local) is not clear. Wouldn't it be more accurate to analyze specifically the kinds of power balances that exist in the contemporary Muslim world between the relaxed and enthusiastic, and the "caliphal" and "imperial" variants of High Islam?

If the modern world indeed favors the industrialization-friendly variant of Islam and the city, then the question should be: what is the balance of forces between the relaxed and enthusiastic version and the saint-mediated, magical Islam still favored by the urban poor? It is within the balance of forces between these variants that we must seek the secularization potential of Islam. What, in other words, are the countervailing forces against the enthusiastic, fundamentalist version of Islam, and what form is Islam taking within the field of forces that vary from one country to another? While the fundamentalists have their "caliphal" golden age, so do the moderates and secularists have their "imperial" paradigm, and the "de-tribalized and de-ruralized" population not only aspire to live up to urban High Islam but continue to favor magic and ecstasy. To lump all these groups as the devotees of the "*umma*" overlooks altogether the contemporary diversity and the balance of power among them.

Why indeed is "*umma*" the ever victorious hero of Gellner's story of Islam? There is, I believe, a subtext to Gellner's analysis. In traditional Islam à la Ibn Khaldun, the urbanites are haunted by the normative Ideal which they do not practice but never forget; the rustics do not practice it but aspire to it; when the rustics turn zealous, they forge their identity in its image. What was true in old times is true for modern times: the rich and the poor, the *ulema* and the ignorant, the town dwellers and the villagers, the masses and the elites—all are haunted by the normative Ideal of *umma* all the time

13 Ira Lapidus, "The Golden Age: The Political Concepts of Islam", *The Annals of the American Academy*, 524, (November 1992), pp. 14-15.

14 Gellner (1994), p. 14.

but practice it some of the time. In Gellner's account of Islam, the normative Ideal always beats history to the punch-line.

The hold of Islam over the populations of the lands in which it is the main religion has in no way diminished in the course of the last hundred years. In some ways, it has been markedly strengthened. Moreover, the hold is not restricted to certain layers of society; one cannot say that it is only among the lower classes and the rustics or the women that the faith has retained its vigor. Its hold is as strong among the ruling and urban classes and cultural elites as it is among the less favored segments of the population. It is as marked among traditionalist regimes as it is among those committed to social radicalism.¹⁵

What of historical Christianity and its normative Ideal? There were, to be sure, attempts to violate the Norm but none were really successful. Even the most prolonged effort of them all, Byzantine Caesaro-Papism, served as a model not for later Christianity but for Islam:

Christianity, which initially flourished among the politically disinherited, did not then presume to be Caesar. A kind of potential for political modesty has stayed with it ever since... Theocratic aspirations only appear intermittently; canon law significantly means religious ordinances as distinct from secular ones, unlike the Muslim *kanun*. The most prolonged effort in the direction of theocracy was perhaps the Byzantine Caesaro-Papism, which, significantly was one of the models available to Islam.¹⁶

What about the enthusiasts of the Reformation? They too got back in touch with the Norm which they had never renounced –to be sure, a bit of Weberian “routinization” and a lucky balance helped. In the case of the Muslims, “routinization and compromise were not open” to them because “they were politically too successful”.¹⁷

In Gellner's account, history is ultimately the handmaiden of the Original Norm not only in the case of Islam but of Christianity as well: History serves all without discrimination on the basis of faith; each to his own Norm.

The Diversity of Islam

Au contraire to Gellner, History did not serve the Norm well in the case of the Ottomans, for the Ottomans not only compromised the Norm but also struck a compromise between High and Low Islam. This double compromise lasted for a very, very long time, almost six hundred years: While the relaxed variant of High Islam prevailed at the center, folk Islam was practiced at the periphery, and much of the time they interpenetrated each other and existed in “amiable symbiosis” rather than in perpetual tension. The “rude” tribes were subdued (or stopped) at the periphery; and, at the center, a relaxed Islam governed in alliance with the “superstitious”. The ever recurrent Ibn Khaldunian cycle was broken.

Gellner is puzzled by the Ottoman Empire: The word “*kanun*” which Gellner spells in its Turkish version meant in the Ottoman context not sacred and secular law fused into one, but secular law only. But more significantly, as the successor to the Byzantine Empire, the model which inspired the Ottomans was not the “caliphal” version of Caesaro-Papism but the “imperial” paradigm which, as Ira Lapidus suggests, was based upon the separation of state and religion. In fact, it was the imperial paradigm that was the rule in pre-modern Islam and not the caliphal one, if we judge it by the scope and longevity of the hold it exercised over the Muslim world from the eighth century onwards. In the imperial paradigm,

embedded in the Ottoman Empire, ... the realm of Islamic authenticity lies within the soul of the individual and in the relations of individuals with each other within small communities. This is the Islam that sees holiness and religion as incompatible with state power.¹⁸

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

¹⁶ Gellner (1981), p. 2.

¹⁷ Gellner (1994), p. 49.

¹⁸ Lapidus, *op. cit.*, pp. 16-17.

This is a considerably different image of Islam from the one Gellner draws. According to Lapidus, most Muslim societies did and do not conform to the monolithic "umma" model. On the contrary,

they were and are built around separate state and religious institutions. This differentiation first took place in the eighth and ninth centuries when the Caliphate differentiated into a secular political regime and parallel Muslim communal and religious associations, separated by organization, elites and values... Such associations included schools of law, *Sufi tariqat* (brotherhoods), *Sufi* lineages, *Sufi* shrine communities, *Shi'a* sects... Thus, in the pre-modern era there were two alternative concepts of Islamic society. One was the 'Caliphate' which integrated the state and the community, the realms of politics and religion, into an inseparable whole. The second was the "Sultanate" or secular states which ruled over the quasi-independent religious associations that were the true bearers of Muslim religious life.¹⁹

This is a very different image from that provided by Gellner. Here, there is no state and society forged in the image of a monolithic "umma" of atomized individuals governed, in practice, by "cynical clientelism" that fills in the vacuum left by the Law-governed "umma". "What strikes the observer" in this non-caliphal image of Muslim society, is not "the curious combination of religious moralism and cynical clientelism"²⁰ but a secular state co-existing with a society made up of "quasi-independent" religious associations and communities.

Within the "sultanic/imperial" tradition, then, Islam is not unfriendly to the separation of state and religion. Neither is it unfriendly to pluralism; on the contrary, the Ottoman *millet* system was pluralism *par excellence*. To put it in Gellner's terms, the problem of "imperial" Islam vis-a-vis civil society does not lie in its fusion of faith, power and society but in the kind of countervailing pluralism that underwrites society, the kind of "stifling communalism" in which identities are not freely chosen, social ties are not flexible and instrumental but constrained and hampered by religious-moral bonds. This is the problem-area of the imperial variant of High Islam, not the ideocratic fusion of state, religion and society.

We have then two models, not one, within Islamic civilization; both, however, are problematic from the viewpoint of civil society, though in different ways. In the "caliphal" model, the circle between faith, power and society is kept intact, whereas in the "imperial" model, the link between faith and power is broken, but that between faith and society is kept.

In the contemporary Muslim world, some movements and regimes subscribe to the "caliphal" model, (such as the radical fundamentalist movements, Iran and Saudi Arabia) others to the "imperial" model (with some modification, such as Morocco, Jordan, and Pakistan) and yet others reject both and break the circle between faith, power and society (such as Turkey). In the case of Turkey, for instance, there are competing conceptions of state and society: There is a very large and strong constituency for secular state and civil society; and, while the religious Welfare Party appears to espouse the "imperial" model of secular state and a plural but religious-moral society, there is also a wide array of religious networks and groups which concentrate their energies predominantly on private economic activity. The balance of power among these various constituencies and movements is what requires analysis if we are to understand the potential for the secularization of state and society not only in Turkey but elsewhere in Islamic countries.²¹

¹⁹ Ira Lapidus, "Islam and Modernity", in S.N. Eisenstadt, ed., *Patterns of Modernity*, New York, 1987, pp. 90, 93.

²⁰ Gellner (1994), p. 27.

²¹ See İlkay Sunar and Binnaz Toprak, "Islam and Politics: The Case of Turkey", *Government and Opposition*, 18/3, (Autumn 1983).