The relationship between the phenomena of modernity and religion has exercised scholars in many fields over recent decades. For example, one of the original exponents of the secularization paradigm in the late 1950s and 1960s, sociologist Peter Berger, had, by the end of the millennium, recanted his earlier position saying: ‘The big mistake, which I shared with everyone who worked in this area Ñ was to believe that modernity necessarily leads to a decline in religion.’ Steve Bruce, sociologist and firm adherent of the secularization thesis, quotes this statement in an article in which he attempts to rescue Berg- er from the folly of his recantation. While Bruce’s view may now be regarded as ‘unfashionable’ in sociology of religion circles, echoes of the ‘modernity–religion’ dichotomy are very much present in studies related to modernity, contemporary Islam, and fundamentalism.

Modernist or fundamentalist?
Elsewhere I have argued that a ‘modern’ conception of the state need not imply discontinuity with the past (as implied by the secularization thesis) when conceived within parameters of a religious tradi- tion. The 1925 case of the Egyptian šâlim Ali Abd al-Raziq illustrates the point. Abd al-Raziq argued in Islam and the Roots of Authority that nei- ther the Qur’an nor the Prophetic tradition supported the view that the Prophet’s role was both political and religious; it was, indeed, merely spiritual. Since there was no essentially Islamic form of government and the modern state was conceived of as secular, the spheres of the political and the religious needed to be kept separate in the modern, colonial-dominated states in which Muslims lived. Abd al-Raziq examined and rejected the views of the fourteenth-century philoso- pher-historian Ibn Khaldun who ar- gued, according to his modern inter- preter Muḥsin Mahdi, that religion must be politicized – a notion clearly not alien to the Islamic tradition. In other words, Abd al-Raziq examined his own tradition seriously, debated with it, and found it wanting for modern times with regard to the nature of the political. Although his views were vigorously denounced at the time and led to his dismissal from al-Azhar, his argument was the product of a historically evolving, differentiated Islamic tradition. His contemporary oppo- nents, drawing upon the same data of the tradition, claimed that Is- lamic societies all shared essential elements, which marked their histo- ry and moulded the paradigm of their social and political development in the modern world.

It is curious that this latter position is labelled by Western scholars as ‘fundamentalist’, while that of Abd al-Raziq is called ‘modernist’; or that the ‘fundamentalist’ position is held to be ideological, while Abd al-Raziq’s is not when both views are about the disposition and institutional framework of political power. The main point here is that tradi- tion can be employed in various ways, irrespective of differing visions of the past and demands for the present, none of which logically im- plies a radical break with that past. Expressed in terms of one of the many debates on modernity and tradition (religion), ‘detraditionaliza- tion’, the example of Abd al-Raziq and his rivals would be best de- scribed, not in a manner that makes the characteristics of past and pre- sent mutually exclusive (and hence discontinuous), but rather as coex- isting inasmuch as ‘detraditionalizing processes do not occur in isola- tion from other processes, namely those to do with tradition mainte- nance and the construction – or reconstruction – of traditional forms of life.’ The arguments of Abd al-Raziq and his rivals might then be de- scribed as examples of ‘modernity-as-tradition’ and ‘tradition-in- modernity’ respectively.

Legal and theological uses
A second, illuminating case is that of the concept of jihad. The dis- tinction between the legal and theological uses of the term is well known. Writing in a theological context, al-Ghazali (d. 1111) called ‘true jihad’ the struggle against one’s inner desires. Ibn Rushd (d. 1198) laid out the jurists’ approach to jihad, ex- pounding impartially the contested positions over various points related to the theme of the ‘lesser jihad’, or fight- ing ‘in the way of God’. For example, one controversy arose over the imam’s choices in dealing with captives of war: he could pardon, enslave, kill, or re- lease them either by way of ransom or as a ‘protected person’ (dhimmī) in which case a head tax was imposed; some scholars taught that captives may never be slain, based upon the consensus of the Prophet’s companions. Ibn Rushd noted that technical differences of opinion emerged among scholars owing to the apparent contra- diction between certain Qur’ānic vers- es, the inconsistent practice of the Prophet, the contradiction between the manifest interpretation of the Qur’an and the Prophet’s deeds, or to a general and particular rule in the texts being at variance.

‘What is seldom acknowledged is that the strident authoritarian voices of contemporary religious fundamentalists have confronted for decades the powerful forces of secular fundamentalism, which have striven to eliminate them.’

The later jurist Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) concurs both with the view that captives taken in fighting unbelievers may not be killed, and with the discretion allowed the imam as to their appropriate disposition; he adds, however, that some jurists were of the opinion that the op- tions of releasing captives or ransoming them had been abrogated. In his discussion on jihad, Ibn Taymiyya, in contrast to that of Ibn Rushd,
Although he discusses in passing both offensive and defensive forms of jihad, his chief preoccupation is with the need to confront recalcitrant Muslim groups (Kharajites and the like) who seem to abandon tradition altogether, although he clearly intended to support it elsewhere. Overall his thought may be described as ‘tradition-in-modernity’. What is seldom acknowledged is that the strident authoritarian voices of contemporary religious fundamentalists have confronted for decades the powerful forces of secular fundamentalism, which have striven to eliminate them. One consequence of this has been the muting through co-optation by secular fundamentalists of the religiously authoritative voices of modernists. We have yet to see whether in the future a just balance can be achieved between ‘religion’ and ‘modernity’. The debate continues.

Modern authoritarian voices

With the advent of modern times, understood broadly as the past 150 to 200 years where Muslim societies are concerned, a ‘new sense of anxiety’9 becomes apparent in writings on jihad. This reflects the ubiquitous presence of Europe; its physical presence in the form of colonial control of Muslim lands; and its accompanying institutions and ideas and the challenges they posed. To cite one example among many, in the short work by Mahmud Shaltut published in the 1940s before he become Shakhyl al-Azhari (1958–1963), the author speaks of ‘our days of weakness and decay’. The purpose of his essay was to rectify the popular European idea that Islam had been spread by the sword. Indeed, he notes, the Qur’ān had provided instruments to secure peace and eliminate aggression long before the establishment of the modern League of Nations. Moreover, the sacred text provided general principles that could constitute a handbook for the ethical conduct of warfare ranking alongside similar modern works.20 It is true that, with the exception of the principle of abrogation, the individual Muslim should keep his own conscience pure and avoid obeying a ruler’s sinful command in a patient, non-violent way. In any course of action, there are costs and benefits, and where they need to be weighed in the balance, that which yields the greater benefit or averts the greater cost should be adopted.21 Although he discusses both offensive and defensive forms of jihad, his chief preoccupation is with the need to confront recalcitrant Muslim groups (Kharajites and the like) who refuse to abide by certain obligations of the shari‘a such as payment of zakat. Writing from different legal, regional perspectives and historical contexts, Ibn Rushd and Ibn Taymiyya were both engaged in and with a developing, authoritarian juristic culture; for each, the past and present formed a continuous reality that nonetheless accommodated differences and changes in emphasis and direction.

Notes

2. Ibid., p. 4, observed by Woodhead.
7. Ibid., p. 276.
8. Michael Cook, Commanding Right and Forbidding Wrong in Islamic Thought (Cambridge, 2000), p. 154; see also Abou el-Fadl, op. cit., p. 274.
11. Ibid., pp. 61, 94–9.
14. On use of the terms ‘authoritarian’ and ‘authoritative’, see Khaled Abou el-Fadl’s excellent study And God Knows the Soldiers (New York, 2001).