



ARTICLE

Marshall Hodgson's ideas on cores and modernity in Islam: a critique

Richard Maxwell Eaton

Department of History, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, United States of America
Email: reaton@arizona.edu

Abstract

Marshall Hodgson has been rightly admired for his vast contributions in the fields of both Islam and world history. Despite the many decades since the publication of his works on these topics, his ideas have largely survived the test of time and continue to be influential. There are two respects, however, in which Hodgson's ideas appear to have been fundamentally flawed—namely, his notion of cultural cores versus peripheries in the Islamic world, and his understanding of modernity. This article explores both of these themes.

Keywords: Marshall Hodgson; Islam; modernity; cores/peripheries

Two years before the death of the eminent historian of Islam, Marshall Hodgson (d. 1968), Tony Johns published an important article on the Islamisation of Java. In it, he discusses a sixteenth-century Javanese text that tells of the mystic Sunan Bonang sending his pupil, Sunan Kalijaga, to Mecca. But Mecca, as the reader learns, is only the *apparent* goal. While sailing across the Indian Ocean to Arabia, the would-be pilgrim encounters Hazrat Khizr, a Muslim folk prophet associated with water, immortality, and esoteric knowledge. Khizr advises Sunan Kalijaga to turn back, since the *true* Mecca is to be found within his own heart. 'Return,' he says,

for what you seek is not to be found in Mecca. The Mecca that lies to the west is, so to say, a false Mecca. Its holiness resides in a stone, thanks to the blessing of Abraham. If you leave Java, you will become, once more, an infidel. Therefore return.¹

It would be hard to find a starker reversal of the conventional notion of core and periphery in the Islamic tradition. Whether or not Hodgson had read Johns, he certainly made problematising core and periphery central to his intellectual project. His magisterial study and life's work, *The Venture of Islam*,² vastly expanded the geographical reach of the academic study of Islam, integrating Africa, Central Asia, East Asia, and southern Asia into a field long dominated by Arab-centrism. More than that, he persuaded succeeding generations of scholars to do the same.

¹ A. H. Johns, 'From Buddhism to Islam: an interpretation of the Javanese literature of the transition', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 9.1 (October 1966), pp. 40–50.

² M. G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, 3 vols (Chicago, 1974).

But there always seemed to me a deep paradox, if not contradiction, in Hodgson's scholarship. On the one hand, he is known for puncturing the Orientalist notion that regions lying beyond the 'Nile-to-Oxus' region, as he called it, were to some degree peripheral to Islam, or at least, to its 'orthodox' mainstream.³ By decentring Islam from the Arab world, and particularly Arabia, he seemed to be making the same point found in that Javanese text discussed by Johns. On the other hand, his engagement with the terms 'civilisation' and 'modernity' took him, almost despite himself, back to the familiar terrain of bounded cores—one of them spatial, the other one temporal.

The first two volumes of *The Venture of Islam*, subtitled respectively 'The Classical Age of Islam' and 'The Expansion of Islam in the Middle Periods', convincingly show that Islam was moulded from the same stuff as 'the West'. As noted by one of his many admirers, Terry Burke, this included the heritage of West Asian prophetic monotheism, Hellenistic thought, and agrarian-bureaucratic empires.⁴ It is in Volume 3, subtitled 'The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times', that the unitary vision of the *Venture's* first two volumes falls apart, for here Hodgson felt the need both to theorise and to historicise 'modernity'. In the 1950s and 1960s, he and one of his colleagues at the University of Chicago, William McNeill, were separately formulating their ideas on this subject. While both historians saw vital connections between modernity and Europe's ascendancy to global prominence, their explanations of these phenomena differed profoundly. McNeill focused on factors internal to Europe, such as Europeans' immunities from infectious diseases or their naval technologies. He also wrote of the 'factor of individual genius' in Europe, of Europeans' 'warlikeness' and 'deep-rooted pugnacity', and of 'the passion and violence, the extremism and recklessness of the European adventure'.⁵ Hodgson, by contrast, rejected such essentialist and reductionist reasoning, insisting instead on the need to situate the advent of European modernity in a global context, highlighting Europe's interaction with other world regions. As he famously wrote in one of his best-known essays, 'The whole of the Afro-Eurasian zone is the only context large enough to provide a framework for answering the more general and more basic historical questions that can arise.'⁶

Accordingly, for Hodgson, the historical processes that made possible the advent of modernity in Europe 'presupposed numerous inventions and discoveries in all the several cited peoples of the Eastern Hemisphere'.⁷ Here he considered not only Europe's incorporation of gunpowder, the compass, printing technology, and the civil service examination system from Song China, but also a wide spectrum of science and philosophy from the Islamic world. He further argued that the framework for a world market capable of absorbing European commerce had already been built under Muslim auspices.⁸ This seems to anticipate by several decades Andre Gunder Frank's argument that Europeans, instead of conquering and remaking Asian societies, as an older historiography had maintained, simply used American treasure to buy their way into an Indian Ocean commercial system that had already become well established by the sixteenth century.⁹ Concerned again to frame Europe in a global context, Hodgson noted that the North European plain was not only extensive and undeveloped, it was also the only well-watered region adjacent to the Middle East's old urban centres, with no natural barriers like the

³ Inasmuch as most Muslims today live east of Karachi, such a correction would seem self-evident.

⁴ M. G. S. Hodgson, *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History*, (ed.) E. Burke III (New York, 1993), p. xv.

⁵ W. McNeill, *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community* (Chicago, 1963), pp. 569–570, 599.

⁶ M. G. S. Hodgson, 'The interrelations of societies in history', in Hodgson, *Rethinking World History*, p. 17.

⁷ Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. iii, p. 197. Emphasis mine.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 197–198.

⁹ A. G. Frank, *ReOrient: Global Economy in the Asian Age* (Berkeley, 1998), pp. 139–160.

Himalayas lying between them. Moreover, Europe had not been overrun by Mongol armies, which is what he argued had contributed to halting China's apparent path to modernity.¹⁰

Hodgson's view of the timing of the advent of modernity also differed from that of McNeill, who entitled one of his chapters in *The Rise of the West*, 'The Transmutation of Europe, 1500–1650'. In a private letter written in 1966, Hodgson suggested that McNeill's choice of the year 1500 as the date demarcating modern from premodern was 'disastrous'. Doing so, he argued, had caused his colleague to treat Portuguese expeditions not as one more venture within an essentially agrarianate-level historical complex populated by other peoples in the Indian Ocean, but rather as part of a technological process that did not actually begin until at least a century later.¹¹

That observation takes us to the heart of what Hodgson seems to have meant by 'modernity'. Significantly, he avoided psychological ideas that might have focused on humans as autonomous, self-willing, self-defining individuals. Had he tried to historicise human subjectivity, the *Venture of Islam* would certainly have been a very different book. Though deeply indebted to the work of Max Weber, whom he called 'the great master', Hodgson avoided Weber's strategy of identifying modernity with 'rationalism', or of seeing rationalism as a uniquely European trait.¹² Nor did he regard 'tradition' as modernity's natural opposite, notwithstanding that he was working in the 1950s and 1960s, the heyday of modernisation theory, which tended to see the world—and time itself—as neatly divided between 'tradition' and 'modernity'.¹³

Instead, Hodgson synchronised 'modernity' with what he called the 'Technical Age', which for him began with a series of transformations that stretched from about 1600—not 1500—to the late eighteenth century, culminating with the Industrial and French revolutions. But what, precisely, was the Technical Age? Here Hodgson invoked one of his notorious neologisms: 'technicalism', which he characterised in Volume 1 of *Venture* as a society-wide condition in which 'calculatively rationalized and specialized technical procedures form an interdependent and preponderant pattern'.¹⁴ In Volume 3, he defined the verbal noun 'technicalisation' as 'the condition of calculative (and hence innovative) technical specialization, in which the several specialties are interdependent on a large enough scale to determine patterns of expectation in the key sectors of a society'.¹⁵ To say that all aspects of social organisation were being technicalised, he adds, 'means that they were organized primarily in terms of specialized procedures calculated to yield maximum efficiency for the limited ends immediately in objective view'.¹⁶

Hodgson preferred the term 'technicalisation' to 'industrialisation' since the former is much broader in scope, and in fact, includes industrialisation, together with a wide range

¹⁰ Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. iii, p. 199.

¹¹ M. G. S. Hodgson, 'On doing world history', extracts from a letter to John Voll, 19 December 1966, in Hodgson, *Rethinking World History*, p. 93.

¹² Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. i, p. 35.

¹³ *Ibid.*, vol. iii, p. 188.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, vol. i, p. 52.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. iii, p. 186.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 188. This reasoning seems very close to that of the French philosopher Jacques Ellul, whose *Technological Society*, published in the early 1960s, may well have influenced Hodgson's thinking about modernity. Ellul understood the technological imperative as the drive to find the single most efficient means for accomplishing any given end, whether the nature of that end be mechanical, administrative, medical, scientific, industrial, and so on. Applying such reasoning to the twenty-first century, early social media platforms like SixDegrees, Friendster, or MySpace largely disappeared, while Facebook, with its more than two-and-a-quarter billion active users, prevailed (at least for a while), because the latter proved to be the single most efficient means of achieving the end of maximising one's social networking. See J. Ellul, *The Technological Society*, translated from the French by J. Wilkinson, with an introduction by R. K. Merton (New York, 1964).

of other phenomena within what the French call the ‘human sciences’. Nor did he confuse technicalisation with innovation, which has recurred throughout human history. In the late Song period, for example, the Chinese made a remarkable series of technological innovations, some of which migrated across Asia to stimulate Europe’s own drive towards modernity. But added together, these inventions never became sufficiently self-sustaining to transform Chinese society as a whole or to withstand the devastating Mongol invasion and occupation, which effectively put a stop to the process. By contrast, for Hodgson ‘technicalism’ as a historical phenomenon did not appear before the seventeenth century. But once it did appear, it proved to be self-sustaining. This was because its characteristic feature was the capacity to generate such a critical mass of innovations that changes compounded themselves in an ever-spiralling dynamic. Such a process not only survived major political disruptions—such as the Thirty Years War, the English Civil War, or the Inquisition—but, once rooted, became irreversible.¹⁷

Hodgson further identified this ‘technicalism’ with what he called the ‘Great Western Transmutation’, an unintended process that occurred uniquely in western Europe between 1600 and 1800, and in three interconnected spheres of Europe’s historical experience. In economic life, it involved a huge increase in productivity; in intellectual life, it embraced a new sort of experimental science; and in social life, it saw the breakdown of landed privileges and their replacement by bourgeois financial power. These three spheres were mutually interdependent, with changes in one sphere leading to changes in the others. Notably, what made these innovations irreversible was that, from the seventeenth century on, they had become embedded in new institutions that established stable footings across generations and fostered continuous cycles of yet more innovations. In the realm of ideas, for example, the Royal Society institutionalised intellectual advances, just as in political economy, the Dutch and English joint-stock companies institutionalised a worldwide reinvestment of financial capital.¹⁸

Institutionalising new techniques—whether ideational, economic, or social in nature—also had the effect of creating and institutionalising the *expectation* of ever more innovations to come.¹⁹ Newness in all its guises, then, was no longer random or ad hoc. Institutions like the Royal Society existed precisely to publicise new discoveries that were expected to be made somewhere in the public domain, just as the Dutch East India Company existed to channel profits that were expected to derive from its financial investments. Despite his tortured arguments over the use of Weberian terms like ‘tradition’ and ‘rational’ for explaining the transition to modernity, Hodgson largely accepted these categories in his analysis of this process. Although his prose could be maddeningly dense,²⁰ in his more lucid moments he spoke of a shift from authoritative custom towards institutions that nurtured independent calculation. As he succinctly put it, ‘The family trade secret was replaced with the public patent office.’²¹

However—and this takes us back to the core versus periphery issue—despite Hodgson’s penetrating analysis of modernity and the timing of its advent in world history, his problems in theorising the phenomenon marred his otherwise ground-breaking *Venture of Islam*. This was because, instead of understanding modernity as a process detached from time or place, and therefore available in principle to any society in history, he

¹⁷ As he wrote, ‘Once this process was well-established, new discoveries and inventions, along with the human and financial investment needed to realize them, grew at a geometric rate of progression. Each new round of inventions, once exploited, cleared the way for yet another.’ Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. iii, p. 185.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

²⁰ Richard Bulliet once described his style as grey and dreary and his neologisms as uniformly ugly. R. W. Bulliet, ‘Review of *The Venture of Islam*’, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 98.2 (1978), p. 157.

²¹ Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. iii, p. 189.

yoked it to a uniquely European experience. He equated modernity with the Technical Age, which he rooted in a mentality he named 'technicalism'. That drove what he called the 'Great Western Transmutation', which in turn occurred only in Western Europe between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Notably, it was not the 'Great Transmutation' that he sought to theorise, but the 'Great Western Transmutation'. He even characterised 'modern man' as 'a European of the Technical Age'.²² Non-Europeans were by definition excluded from modernity.

Hodgson's displacement of modernity onto European territory also reflected his understanding of historical space more generally. Indeed, such a move was methodologically consistent with the rest of the *Venture*, which in a similar manner displaced Islamic religion and culture onto territory, creating a stark division between Europe and what he calls an 'Islamicate' world. A decade after Hodgson's death, Edward Said, following the lead of Michel Foucault, would regard the entire East–West dichotomy as an artificial, discursive construct that had evolved out of Europe's colonial ties to the Middle East. Yet Hodgson, notwithstanding his pioneering work as an ecumenically minded world historian, ultimately embraced the notion of an opposition between Islam and Europe, a dichotomy that seems to have had its roots in his Eurocentric notion of modernity. It was perhaps on account of that dichotomy that Said declined to review *The Venture of Islam* and summarily dismissed Hodgson as just another Orientalist.²³

But there are ironies here. Said himself, like his arch-nemesis Bernard Lewis, had made a huge intellectual investment in the notion of a binary opposition between Europe and some version of the 'Orient'—though the two men reached their positions from very different positions: Lewis as an Orientalist, and Said as a severe anti-Orientalist.²⁴ Yet both men identified the Muslim world almost exclusively with the Middle East. For Hodgson, of course, that world included much more, which was one of his most important scholarly contributions. But methodologically—and this was his Achilles heel—Hodgson was deeply invested in the notion that high, literate 'civilisations' constituted the defining units of historical study and the basic building-blocks of world history. This understanding had several unfortunate implications. First, Hodgson's study of literary high culture in the Islamic world meant neglecting socio-economic history. This disregard might explain why so many subsequent historians neglected Hodgson's scholarly work. In a recent essay critiquing his oeuvre, Richard Bulliet notes that since Hodgson's day the history of technology, the environment, and economic structures steadily replaced high cultural achievement as the foundation for writing world history.²⁵

²² *Ibid.*, p. 181n. Emphases mine.

²³ In a 1978 conversation with Terry Burke, Said expressed his disinclination to review Hodgson's *Venture* for the *New York Times Sunday Book Review*, exclaiming, in French, 'C'est un Islamologue!', that is, an Orientalist. 'Had Said read Hodgson,' wrote Burke in 2010, 'he would have been impressed by Hodgson's methodological rigor, especially by his idea of "pre-commitments"... He might also have come to appreciate the way Hodgson linked a kind of Weberian history of ideas to a deeply materialist approach.' Edmund Burke III, "'There is no Orient': Hodgson and Said', *Review of Middle East Studies* 44.1 (Summer 2010), pp. 13, 14, 18.

²⁴ Although Lewis and Said came from very different intellectual traditions—the former a social historian and political scientist, and the latter a humanist trained in literature and literary studies—the crux of their mutual hostility lay in their opposing political commitments. Lewis was an ardent Zionist, and Said an equally ardent Palestinian nationalist.

²⁵ R. W. Bulliet, *The End of Middle East History and Other Conjectures* (Boston, 2019), p. 20. Christopher Bayly adds that Hodgson's appeal to a morally aware history—he was a devout and deeply committed Quaker—stood at odds with the academic hyper-professionalism of the day, when academics disguised or hid any sort of religious commitment. 'After 1970,' he writes, 'everybody studied capitalism, economic change, or demography—not idealism.' C. A. Bayly, 'History, Islam, and world history in the modern age', in *Islam and World History: The Ventures of Marshall Hodgson*, (eds) E. Burke III and R. J. Mankin (Chicago, 2018), p. 45.

Second, since religion and elite literary traditions were central to Hodgson's understanding of 'civilisation', he had to invent a term that would serve as a logical and necessary analogue to what Orientalists called 'Christendom'. Hence, 'Islamdom'. This, in my view, was an especially unfortunate move. Since the suffix '-dom' is cognate with 'domain', or home territory, the term 'Islamdom' logically displaced Islam onto territory in the same way that 'kingdom' (literally, the domain of a king) displaces royal sovereignty onto territory. In its most deplorable form, this kind of displacement of culture onto territory would appear near the end of the twentieth century in Samuel Huntington's malignant theory of a 'clash of civilisations'.²⁶ First introduced by Bernard Lewis, the theory was later refined and popularised by Huntington in a 1993 *Foreign Affairs* article and was further elaborated on three years later in a book bearing the same title.²⁷ Huntington identified 'civilisations' not only with selected religious traditions, but also with selected language traditions, nation-states, and even racial populations—effectively mixing apples not only with oranges, but also with peaches, pears, and mangoes. He then projected these 'civilisations' onto territory, their respective boundaries neatly defined by those of nation-states. In his mapping of the world, one and only one 'civilisation' occupied any given national territory, thereby excluding the possibility of cultural diversity anywhere. The result was an extraordinary jigsaw-like map of the world that identified each 'civilisation'—that is, nation-state—with a particular colour.²⁸

As many critics have noted, the 'clash of civilisations' idea flies in the face of how cultural systems anywhere became dispersed across the planet and how they actually interpenetrate one another. If one were to speak of 'the West' as embracing Arkansas, Finland, and Papua New Guinea, but not Mexico—as Huntington happily does in his map—we might merely blush and dismiss the notion as quaintly antiquated and its author as a misguided cretin. After all, what could such a formulation possibly mean? And yet we do *not* blush when Marshall Hodgson happily speaks of Morocco, Sicily, and Mindanao as part of 'Islamdom'. Could it be that Hodgson was just as blind to cultural variation in the Muslim world as Huntington was to such variation in what he called 'the West'?

This begs the question of what Hodgson actually meant by 'Islamdom'. 'In studying the history of Muslims,' he writes, 'obviously, we need distinct terms for the religious tradition on the one hand and for the most inclusive civilization on the other.'²⁹ This conceptual separation led him to formulate two distinct categories—Islam/Islamic and Islamdom/Islamicate—with the former referring to religion conceived of as essentially 'personal piety',³⁰ and the latter referring to 'the social and cultural complex historically

²⁶ Christopher Bayly, as Terry Burke noted, felt that Hodgson anticipated Samuel Huntington's discovery of civilisation as the essential cultural context in which change happens. 'Introduction', *Islam and World History*, (eds) Burke and Mankin, p. 7.

²⁷ See B. Lewis, 'The roots of Muslim rage', *Atlantic Monthly* 256.3 (September 1990), pp. 47–60; S. P. Huntington, 'The clash of civilizations?', *Foreign Affairs* 72.3 (1993), pp. 22–49; S. P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Making of World Order* (New York, 1996).

²⁸ Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations*, p. 46. In this way, he distinguished Eastern Orthodox (sky-blue), Latin American (purple), Islamic (green), Hindu (saffron), Buddhist (yellow), African (i.e. non-Islamic Africa) (brown), Sinic (i.e. China, Korea, Vietnam) (maroon), and Japanese (red) civilisations. All these were juxtaposed with 'Western' (dark blue), which he identified with 'Western Christendom' or, simply, 'the West'. A black-and-white version of this map is in *ibid.*, pp. 26–27. For the colour-coded version, see <https://medium.com/graduatesofdemocracy/the-clash-of-civilizations-in-the-21st-century-1cb86a1aa6a3> (accessed 8 June 2023).

²⁹ Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. i, p. 95.

³⁰ 'Personal piety is in some ways but a small part of religion. Yet it is the core of it. For it is in personal devotion (whether by way of the usual rituals, or otherwise) that the cosmic dimension is entered upon which makes religion religious; and hence that the whole structure of a religious community ultimately justifies itself. Accordingly, what we call personal piety or devotion plays a key role in civilization as a whole, at least wherever religious traditions are of major importance.' *Ibid.*, p. 360.

associated with Islam and the Muslims',³¹ even if most members of that complex were non-Muslims. But as Shahab Ahmed notes, such a distinction bears striking parallels with Muslim fundamentalist and Salafist discourses that distinguish between an 'authentic', 'true' Islam and a less 'pure' faith found in mixed cultures with their multiple historical accretions.³²

What is more, because Hodgson's idea of 'Islamdom' is inherently territorial in nature, his formulation implied a geographical division within the Muslim world that reserved 'Islam' and 'Islamic' for Arab lands, while identifying lands beyond the 'Nile-to-Oxus' region with 'Islamdom', that is, the domain of the 'Islamicate'. 'By the sixteenth century,' he wrote,

most of the East Christian, Hindu, and Theravada Buddhist peoples found themselves more or less enclaved in an Islamicate world where Muslim standards of taste commonly made their way even into independent kingdoms like Hindu Vijayanagar or Norman Sicily.³³

By citing Vijayanagara and Sicily in this passage, Hodgson signalled that he was referring to something very different from conventional understandings of the 'Muslim world'. After all, a Hindu ruling class governed the South Indian state of Vijayanagara, Christians governed Sicily, and neither place had many resident Muslims. But for Hodgson that did not matter. These lands were part of 'Islamdom' because, as he writes in the case of Vijayanagara, the city's rulers 'used Islamicate fashions in its court'.³⁴ He does not specify what these fashions were, but we may presume that he is referring to articles of clothing such as the *kulah*, a tall Persian headgear worn across the Persianate world. He is probably also referring to the vaulted domes and pointed arches found on secular monuments such as Vijayanagara's so-called 'Elephant Stables'. If this is the case, then what Hodgson was calling 'Islamicate' was, in reality, Persian cultural items that had become associated with transregionalism and prestige, and which the state's Hindu ruling class had appropriated precisely for that reason. Ironically, right down the street from those Elephant Stables stands a truly Islamic monument—a mosque—that Hodgson would not have labelled as Islamicate because it lacked domes or arches; instead, it exhibited the same trabeate architecture of the city's temples.³⁵ In effect, then, rather than Vijayanagara being enclaved in an 'Islamicate' world, as Hodgson had claimed, what we actually see are properly Islamic structures like this mosque being enclaved in an Indian world. Conversely, secular governmental structures in the city's so-called 'Royal Centre', with their lavish use of arches, cross-vaulting, and domes, had been absorbed in the transregional and prestigious world of Persianate norms and sensibilities.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

³² 'Quite so,' says the modern fundamentalist, 'back to pure and authentic faith we must go...and not—God forbid!—to the Islamicate!' S. Ahmed, *What is Islam? The Importance of Being Islamic* (Princeton, 2016), p. 171.

³³ M. G. S. Hodgson, 'The role of Islam in world history', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 1.2 (April 1970), p. 118.

³⁴ Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. ii, p. 532.

³⁵ Built in 1439, this is the Ahmad Khan mosque, which until 1980 was not even recognised as a mosque, but rather as a 'rest house'. Its dedicatory inscription, composed in Kannada, does not state that its patron built it for the glory of God, but for the merit of the king, Deva Raya II. Its inscription refers to the structure not by the Arabic *masjid* (mosque), but by the Sanskrit *dharma-sala* ('hall of religion'). And architecturally, the structure takes the form of a pillared hall (*mandapa*) typical of temple architecture of the day. See P. B. Wagoner, 'Fortuitous convergences and essential ambiguities: transcultural political elites in the medieval Deccan', *International Journal of Hindu Studies* 3.3 (December 1999), pp. 241–264.

Some admirers of *The Venture of Islam* have made explicit Hodgson's implicit association of Islam with the Middle East, and Islamicate with more distant regions. 'Most Muslims are Asian,' writes Bruce Lawrence, 'and Islamicate civilization, like Muslim demography, derives its central focus, and determinative profile, from Asia.'³⁶ Commenting on this passage, Shahab Ahmed notes that Lawrence's use of Hodgson's concepts

manoeuvres us into a position where Asia is, by definition, simply not central to the constitution of Islam—it is only *derivative*/Islamicate. One can readily imagine a good Salafi seizing on this conceptualization to argue that if Asian Muslims want to be less Islamicate and more Islamic, less cultural and more religious, they should be less Asian and more (seventh century) Arab.³⁷

Like Ahmed, I have no doubt that neither Hodgson nor Lawrence would subscribe to such a disagreeable position. And yet, such is the logical inference of the foundational categories that Hodgson had established in his *Venture of Islam*. Such an inference is especially ironic when one reflects on the passage to which I alluded at the beginning of this article, in which the folk prophet Hazrat Khizr ordered Sunan Kalijaga to abandon his pilgrimage to Mecca and return to Java. As he said, 'the Mecca that lies to the west is, so to say, a false Mecca... If you leave Java, you will become, once more, an infidel. Therefore return.' The point is not that Java is the core of the Muslim world and Arabia the periphery, but that any effort to separate culture from religion and then territorialise them both is bound to create problems.

Hodgson's tendency to territorialise Islam and Islamdom is mirrored in his drive to territorialise modernity. For, by embedding modernity within the matrix of European culture and history, Hodgson was ineluctably drawn to seeing Islam and modernity in mutually exclusive terms. Indeed, in Hodgson's analysis, the way Muslim societies typically entered modernity was by being colonised in the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries by one or another European power.³⁸ This is ironic, considering his astute observation that, historically, modern Europe owed so much to 'Islamic' science and philosophy.³⁹ It is nonetheless owing to his projection of Islamic culture onto territory (that is, 'Islamdom'), and that territory's failure to embrace modernity/technicalism, that Edward Said seems to have placed Hodgson in his rogue's gallery of Orientalists, together with the likes of Bernard Lewis.

Like other aspects of the *Venture of Islam*, however, Hodgson's theorising of modernity was full of contradictions and inconsistencies. After all, in much of his work, he attacked ethnocentrism, and especially Eurocentrism, wherever it reared its ugly head. He rightly ridiculed Mercator world maps for projecting what he called a distorted, 'Jim Crow' vision of the planet.⁴⁰ And he savaged conventional scholarship that divided the earth into three zones, namely,

the Primitives, who were supposed to have no history; the Orient, which produced great cultures at a certain point, but, for want of a sense of due proportion, stagnated thereafter and regressed; and lastly the West (composed, by arbitrary fiat, of Classical

³⁶ B. B. Lawrence, 'Islamicate civilization: the view from Asia', in *Teaching Islam*, (ed.) B. M. Wheeler (New York, 2003), p. 63.

³⁷ Ahmed, *What is Islam?*, p. 173. Emphasis Ahmed's.

³⁸ Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. iii, pp. 205–222.

³⁹ I place 'Islamic' in quotation marks here, since, of course, there is no such thing as Islamic science, just as there is no Christian science, Buddhist science, etc. There is simply science, although, of course, some scientists might be Muslim, Christian, or Buddhist, all of whom readily borrowed from each other.

⁴⁰ Hodgson, 'Interrelations', pp. 4–8.

Greece plus the Latin Occident), where due proportion was introduced by the Greek genius, which in turn produced Truth and Liberty and hence a Progress which, if at first less spectacular than the Orient, at last necessarily led to Modernity and to world dominion.⁴¹

Likewise, he parodied the teleological notion of the 'torch' of history being passed from Mesopotamia and Egypt successively to Greece, Rome, and eventually to Christian north-western Europe, which it then passed on to the rest of the world.⁴² As mentioned above, he also dismissed the conventional view that modernity began with Europe's maritime contacts with non-European peoples.⁴³ For him, the dividing line between modern and premodern was *not* the old triumphalist 'expansion of Europe' idea, which began with Columbus and da Gama in around 1500 and ended, luckily for Americans, in the American Dream. Rather, for Hodgson, modernity began with the advent of the age of 'technicalism', a mentality that fostered institutionalised innovation and did not fully emerge until the late eighteenth century.

Yet it just so happened that this technicalism emerged first in Western Europe, whence it diffused throughout the world. Why was this so? At one point in the *Venture*, Hodgson candidly admits that he does not know. 'When the time was ripe for it,' he writes,

the actual cultural transformations could take place only within a given culture and in terms of the background of that culture—as it happened, the Occident. It is not yet established what determined that the Transmutation should occur just there and then.⁴⁴

This would seem a stunning confession, and 'when the time was ripe for it' a feeble argument for explaining the appearance of this or of any historical phenomenon. It is even more astonishing that he fell back upon arguments that were aligned with conventional tropes that he otherwise attacks.

That is to say, while Hodgson stands out among historians of the 1950s and 1960s for his laudable attempt to critique Eurocentrism, in the end, his work ironically reinscribes many Eurocentric tropes. As noted above, he invoked the conventional argument that Europeans had incorporated techniques borrowed from China. He also cited the expansion of world markets, which had been launched under Muslim auspices but were not completed until Europeans had acquired access to large areas of relatively dense, urban-dominated populations. This last process, as he put it, 'followed the Iberian oceanic ventures of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries'.⁴⁵ In this way, Hodgson seems to affirm that the 'discoveries' of America and India around 1500 had indeed led to the 'Western Transmutation' (despite his insistence elsewhere that that process would not begin until a century later).

It is also in Volume 3 that the terms 'East' and 'West'—absent in the rest of the *Venture*—suddenly appear, while at the same time, his neologism 'Islamdom', so vital in Volumes 1 and 2, becomes noticeably muted. Hodgson insists that the terms 'Eastern' and 'Western' are legitimate, if at all, only with reference to the Technical Age.⁴⁶ But since the Technical Age was itself tied to Western Europe and the Great Western

⁴¹ Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. iii, p. 204.

⁴² Hodgson, 'Interrelations', p. 6.

⁴³ Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. iii, p. 205.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 198.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 203.

Transmutation, Hodgson effectively reinscribed the very East–West dichotomy that he had otherwise decried. Hodgson did this while offering the *Venture of Islam* as an alternative to the Eurocentric view of world historians like William McNeill, whose work he sharply criticises for its exaggerated estimate of the seminal traits of the West, as well as for its condescending evaluation of Islam, which, for McNeill, merely stagnated after the Abbasid period (750–1258).⁴⁷

As Michael Geyer notes, it was seeing the world through the light of Quakerism that heightened Hodgson's consciousness of the unity of humankind and inspired him to write world history.⁴⁸ This he sought to accomplish not only by rewriting the history of Islam but by rethinking modernity. Put in his own historical context, he was certainly thinking well ahead of his day. After all, he was writing in the age of Cold Warriors like John Foster Dulles, Joe McCarthy, or Walt Rostow, and at the University of Chicago, then a citadel of modernisation theory. He seems to have been especially eager to find an alternative to the triumphalist vision of world history articulated by his colleague William McNeill, whose teleological and Eurocentric presuppositions are captured in the very title of the latter's seminal book, *The Rise of the West*. But Hodgson's identification of the modern with an ahistorical and essentialised mentality—technicalism—prevented him either from theorising modernity beyond the confines of European history, or from historicising it within those confines. What is more, he argued that preceding the Technical Age—or the period of the Great Western Transformation—lay the 'Agrarian Age', an enormous span of more than 6,000 years extending from the time of ancient Sumer to the Technical Age, that is, the seventeenth century.⁴⁹ By conflating modernity with the Technical Age, and by juxtaposing that era with its protracted antecedent, he effectively created a temporal dichotomy that mirrored the tradition/modernity dichotomy of modernisation theory. This temporal division proved just as problematic as his spatial division between the Occident and Islamdom. In the end, what Hodgson gave us was elegantly repackaged versions of both the tradition/modernity and East/West tropes.

Since Hodgson's untimely death in 1968, historians have continued to pursue his goal of radically rethinking historical space and time, with results that have taken us in new and exciting directions. For example, as fundamental spatial units of historical analysis, both the nation-state and 'civilisation'—the analytical units to which Hodgson himself was committed—have been seriously challenged, if not simply dismissed.⁵⁰ As the break-neck pace of globalisation has continued to accelerate in the half-century since Hodgson's day, many historians have proposed, with varying degrees of success, alternative frameworks for writing world history, such as environmental history, comparative history, big history, world system history, network theory, literary cosmopolises, and more. Scholars have also attempted to rethink historical time, such as by theorising an 'early modern era'.⁵¹ Because such theorisation occurred at about the same time that Eurocentric notions of historical space were being questioned, some world historians have endowed the 'early modern era' with global significance, exploring such transregional themes as the expansion of notions of time and space, the rationalisation of bureaucracies, the appearance of individual self-fashioning through new genres of autobiography and letter-writing, and the vastly accelerated global flows of merchant capital, silver, cash crops,

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 205n.

⁴⁸ M. Geyer, 'The invention of world history from the spirit of nonviolent resistance', in *Islam and World History*, (eds) Burke and Mankin, pp. 57–58.

⁴⁹ Hodgson, *Venture*, vol. i, p. 110.

⁵⁰ See, for example, P. Duara, *Rescuing History from the Nation: Questioning Narratives of Modern China* (Chicago, 1995).

⁵¹ See, for example, S. Subrahmanyam, 'Connected histories: notes towards a reconfiguration of early modern Eurasia', *Modern Asian Studies* 31.3 (1997), pp. 735–762.

slaves, gunpowder weaponry, paper-making technology, and so on. It is almost as though we have a clearer idea of the 'early modern' than we do of the 'modern'.

That said, it remains the case that Hodgson, unlike his contemporaries, was groping towards an understanding of modernity that would transcend Walt Rostow's notion of industrial take-off, Max Weber's theory of rationalism, or Immanuel Kant's thinking about the metaphysical self. Had he lived to write the world history he intended to write, or even to put the finishing touches on *The Venture of Islam*, he might well have refined his ideas of modernity and of civilisation as territorialised categories. Or perhaps—as I suspect—he might have been among the first to discard these terms altogether. Of course, we shall never know the answer to that question. The important thing, though, is that his efforts prompted subsequent generations to pick up where he left off. And that, in and of itself, is a lasting legacy for which we should all be grateful.

Acknowledgements. Adapted from 'Marshall Hodgson's ideas on cores and modernity in Islam: a critique', in Richard M. Eaton, *The Lotus and the Lion: Essays On India's Sanskritic And Persianate Worlds* (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2022), pp. 165–180. The author is indebted to an anonymous reviewer for suggestions respecting revisions and additions to the original version of this article.

Conflicts of interest. The author reports none.