

2001

Tribes and Cities: Towards an Islamic Sociology of Religion

James V. Spickard
University of Redlands

Follow this and additional works at: http://inspire.redlands.edu/oh_articles

 Part of the [Sociology of Religion Commons](#), and the [Theory, Knowledge and Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Spickard, James V., "Tribes and Cities: Towards an Islamic Sociology of Religion" (2001). *Our House Articles, Poems, and Short Stories*. 79.

http://inspire.redlands.edu/oh_articles/79

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Our House at InSPIRE @ Redlands. It has been accepted for inclusion in Our House Articles, Poems, and Short Stories by an authorized administrator of InSPIRE @ Redlands. For more information, please contact rebecca_clayton@redlands.edu, paige_mann@redlands.edu.

Name: James V. SPICKARD

Title: TRIBES AND CITIES: TOWARDS AN ISLAMIC SOCIOLOGY OF RELIGION

Published in:

Social Compass: An International Review of Sociology of Religion, 48/1: 103-116, 2001.

Abstract: Mainstream sociology of religion often presumes that its conceptual categories are universal and complete. They are, however, grounded in the Western intellectual tradition and arise from that tradition's reflection on Euro-American history.

This article outlines an alternate sociology of religion based on the writings of the 14th century Moslem historian Ibn Khaldûn – whose ideas arise from a very different world. His sociology is not grounded in individuals, nor does it focus only on religious beliefs and institutions. Instead it emphasizes the distinction between tribes and cities as forms of social organization, the importance of *Al 'Assabiyya* or "group-feeling" in social life, and the special role of Islam in transforming that feeling.

This locates religious individualism and institutionalism at distinct points in an historical cycle, throwing new light on debates about religious authority, popular religion, and secularization. It also highlights the connections between religion and ethnicity – helping us understand key late-20th century phenomena.

Abstract: La sociologie des religions présume souvent que ses idées sont universelles et complètes. Mais, ils sont basées dans la tradition intellectuelle de le Ouest, et émanent des aperçus de cette tradition sur l'histoire euro-américaine.

Cet article trace le contour d'une sociologie des religions alternative, à basé des écrits de le historien Musulman du 14^e siècle Ibn Khaldûn. Ses idées émanent d'un monde très différente de le nôtre. Sa sociologie n'est pas basée dans l'individuel,

ni fait il concentre seulement sur les croyances et les institutions religieuses. Au lieu, elle accentue la distinction entre les tribus et les villes comme espèces d'organisation sociale, l'importance d'*Al 'Assabiyya* ou "le sentiment du groupe" dans la vie sociale, et le rôle spécial d'Islam dans la transformation de ce sentiment.

Celui-ci localise l'individualisme et l'institutionnalisme religieuse chez points distinctes de le cycle historique, et éclaire les débats au sujets d'autorité religieuse, de la religion quotidienne, et de la secularisation. Cela met en valeur aussi les connexions entre la religion et l'ethnicité – aidon nous à comprendre des phénomènes majeurs de la fin du 20^e siècle.

Western sociology of religion presents itself as a system of analytic categories, useful for understanding religious phenomena worldwide. In this, it is not mistaken. Concepts such as the dynamics of religious authority, secularization, and individual rational choice throw light on people's religious behavior, regardless of time and place.

Yet, such categories are not as universal as their proponents claim. First, the ideas just mentioned all have their origins in Euro-American thought, especially in its reflection on its own religious history. To the degree that Euro-American history reflects particular, not universal themes, these ideas may fail to grasp key elements of events happening elsewhere. (Advocates of the "market theory" of religious growth and decline make this point in saying that even if secularization theory aptly describes European religious dynamics, it does not depict American ones; see Warner 1993.)

Second, various other traditions have their own sociological ideas about religion. These may better capture the dynamics of those traditions, and thus be better starting points for sociological analysis. Further, such "foreign" ideas may indeed better capture some aspects of Western religions – especially those not well explained by the reigning paradigms.

I have elsewhere exposed the cultural bias of several key Western concepts, including the problems of authority, secularization, and rational choice mentioned above (Spickard 1998a; 1998b). I have also argued for the viability of a Confucian sociology of religion, based on the different image of the person contained in that philosophical tradition (1998b). In the present article, I propose a similar "Islamic sociology of religion," based on the work of the 14th century Islamic historian Ibn Khaldûn.¹ In putting forth this alternate sociology, I am not arguing that Western sociological concepts are invalid. I claim only that we need a larger conceptual toolbox if we are to understand religious events worldwide. Khaldûn's ideas give us a new perspective from which to view several debates that have inflamed our subdiscipline. They also give us the intellectual tools with which to explore key aspects of religion that have heretofore received scant sociological treatment.

Ibn Khaldûn

'Abd-ar-Rahmân Abû Zaid Walî-ad-Dîn Ibn Khaldûn was born in 1332 C.E. in Tunis. As a boy, he studied philosophy, science, and some mysticism, as well as the political traditions of the Arab ruling families – an appropriate training for the son and grandson of court officials and scholars. On his family's death in the

plague of 1348-49, Khaldûn followed his teachers to Morocco. There, in Spain, and later in present-day Algeria, he pursued a life of court service and political intrigue, aiding the rulers of that region's fractious kingdoms. After being imprisoned and exiled for his efforts, he set down his learning in the Kitâb al-'Ibar, or "World History," generally better known by the title of its introduction: Muqadimmah (1377-99).²

Underlying Ibn Khaldûn's political adventures were two intersecting visions: one Islamic and the other classically Greek. Like most Moslems, he saw the early years of Islam as a golden era, a time when the faithful had been unified and pure. Seven centuries later, all agreed that the Moslem states were corrupt and divided. As an idealistic young politician, Khaldûn tried to serve rulers whom he thought could restore Arab unity – to Spain and the Maghreb (present-day Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya) if not to the Islamic world as a whole. Following Plato and Aristotle, he believed that wise rulership comes from wise philosophy. As a scholar-courtier, he tried to educate his masters so that they would govern well.

Time and again, though, his hopes were dashed. Rulers proved fickle; they became petty tyrants; or they were virtuous, but overthrown. Gradually, Khaldûn came to see that other factors were at work, factors strong enough to frustrate his designs. His failure as a politician led directly to his greatness as a social analyst: it led him to look to the social forces that govern the lives of peoples.

Three Key Ideas

Ibn Khaldûn built his work upon three key ideas: a distinction between nomadic and sedentary peoples; the importance of *Al 'Assabiyya* or "group-feeling" in each of these people's fortunes; and the role of Islam in transforming or augmenting group-feeling. In his history, he used them to explain the rise and decline of various Moslem kingdoms.

Tribes and Cities

Ibn Khaldûn saw history as a cyclic struggle between barbarism and civilization – "tribes" and "cities," to use a popular shorthand (Lechner 1994). "*Badâwah*" – "bedouinity" or "desert attitude" – typifies nomads, who live a rude and savage life and are forced by their harsh desert surroundings to endure with little and work hard for what they get. Individuals cannot survive here, and are thus of no consequence. The tribe works as a unit, especially in response to outside threats. Compelled to courage and fortitude, its members support each other against all comers (Ibn Khaldûn 1377-99, I: 249-58).

"*Hatharah*" – "sedentarisation" – on the other hand, typifies settled peoples, who are stable and rich. Agriculture, trading, and such livelihoods let them accumulate wealth. The resulting softer living forms softer characters, so they lack nomadic bravery. They think more of themselves and less of their neighbors, turning to magistrates and rulers to defend them both against their fellow citizens and against hostile outsiders. They depend on laws, not persons. In short, their living makes them weaker, so that they depend on social institutions for support (I: 249-50, 257-60).

Ibn Khaldûn argued that these two social types live in tension with each other. Harsh life makes tribes strong and fierce, which enables them to conquer their softer neighbors. On doing so, they become rulers, who settle down and take on the civilized habits of their subjects. (Who, after all, would willingly stay in the desert?) After a couple of generations of sedentary life, they have lost their unity, and so fall to the next wave of barbarians. Khaldûn saw the history of his native Maghreb, of Islam, and indeed of the Mediterranean world since Roman times as a cyclical history of conquest. Tribes overwhelmed cities, became civilized, and were overwhelmed by other tribes in their turn.

Group-Feeling

At its core, this is a sociological theory of change. The differing requirements of desert versus settled life make tribes and city-dwellers unlike one another – and these differences become the motor of history. Yet it is not individual character that distinguishes tribal and city people, in Ibn Khaldûn's view. More important is their differing *Al 'Assabiyya*.³ Usually translated as "group-feeling," "esprit de corps," or "spirit of kinship," *Al 'Assabiyya* denotes the emotion that leads group members to support one another. Derived from the Arabic root 'assab, "to bind,"

Ibn Khaldûn uses it to mean blood relationship in general, partisanship for the blood relatives, mutual partisanship and the vital force of a tribe or people which is expressed in common will. (Dhaouadi 1990, 325)

This group-feeling is, at first, external or defensive – the functional equivalent for nomads of the fortresses and armies of city folk. Lacking economic resources and even a secure livelihood, nomads must depend on their group or die. Some scholars thus see in *Al 'Assabiyya* a substitute for the strength and security that richer societies provide (Al-Jabri 1983).

Yet, Ibn Khaldûn did not see complex societies as having something that nomads lack – an attitude held by many Westerners. On the contrary, he saw just the opposite. City dwellers not only lack the personal fortitude found among nomads, they also lack their strong group-feeling and common will. This makes it harder for them to respond to emergencies, which leads to their eventual defeat. Law and armies compensate somewhat for weak *Al 'Assabiyya*, but they cannot replace it. Nomads' superior group-feeling and lack of regard for outsiders allows them a single-minded brutality that ultimately prevails.

It does not prevail for long. The nomads' victory brings booty, wealth, and rich living. This weakens their *Al 'Assabiyya*, for which they substitute laws, mercenary armies, and so on. Ultimately, they become weak enough to fall to others.

It is worth taking a moment to contrast this theory to Durkheim's (1893). Both scholars concern themselves with social solidarity, and both posit two polar types of society based on people's means of livelihood. But *Al 'Assabiyya* is not mechanical solidarity – far from it. Where Durkheim saw simpler societies tied together by external laws and compulsion (Giddens 1978), Khaldûn saw tribes as knit from within. Where Durkheim saw complex societies as strengthened by their internal interdependence, Khaldûn saw them as weakened by their lack of common will. Most notably, where Durkheim found social solidarity problematic for simpler peoples, tracing what they have in common ideas, Khaldûn saw tribes as stable and tied together by feelings. Solidarity's emotional side appears in Durkheim's later work (1915), where it supports the sacred ideas that he says prop up the social order. For Khaldûn, the emotional bond comes first; ideas may support it, but also undercut it – and are secondary in any case.

Ibn Khaldûn's approach also differs from Tönnies'. Tribes, like *Gemeinschaften*, are tied together by feelings, but for Khaldûn these feelings arise from the rigors of a harsh life. The distinction between *badâwah* and *hatharah* is thus not typological – as is Tönnies' – but the result of practical living. He shares Marx's emphasis on the primary role of economics in society, along with some technical economic concepts (see Soofi 1995, 390ff). For him, however, the mode and means of production work on a society's group-feeling, not just on its class structure. His overriding concern for the forms of social solidarity led him to ask Durkheimian rather than Marxist questions.

Islam

Yet Ibn Khaldûn was no Durkheimian, and nowhere is this contrast stronger than in the role each thinker saw for religion. Durkheim thought that religion creates the social solidarity that is crucial for simpler societies, which might not otherwise cohere. Khaldûn found tribal solidarity unproblematic, but saw a role for religion in the transition from nomadic to settled life. Islam, he said, could counteract a group's particularism, lending it the strength and unity that it needs to triumph (I: 305-6, 319-27).

This view is worth developing in some detail. Khaldûn called the early Arabs the most barbarous of peoples, because their life as camel herders kept them in the most nomadic condition. They thus had strong group-feeling, courage, and fortitude, but were the most remote from civilization. Their group-feeling was limited to blood relations, and their warfare produced pillage and ruin, not empire (I: 251-2, 302ff).

Islam, with its emphasis on good conduct and discipline, helped overcome this savagery. It expanded Arab group-feeling to encompass more than kin, allowing the growth of royal authority (which Khaldûn saw as the natural result of group-feeling). This would normally have lowered their *Al 'Assabiyya*, yet Islam kept it high. The group-feelings of various tribes and clans did not vanish, but were submerged into a wider unity that made the Arab empire possible (I: 284-5, 305-6, 313-27). Prophetic religion proved a good proxy for kinship – and a stronger force than city-dwellers' armies and laws.

Soon, though, the natural decline of group-feeling set in. Having conquered, the Arabs took on civilized habits and lost their *Al 'Assabiyya*. City life lowered their common will below the point that Islam made any difference. Their empire split into kingdoms, whose dynasties rose and fell with the rise and fall of various tribal solidarities. Seljuqs, Almoravids, Turks, Berbers, and others came to power and then were absorbed or swept away in the pattern of invasion and conquest that Khaldûn traced back 1000 years. Religious group-feeling came to be but one among scores of group-feelings that typified the ethnically and territorially diverse Moslem world. Regimes rose or fell, peoples conquered or faced away in a complex dance of these many *'Assabiyyat* (I: 327-56, 372-85, II: 114-35).

Ibn Khaldûn's work is thus not just a history of nomadic conquest; it is the first sociology of a multi-ethnic society, one in which religion played a key but varied role. Khaldûn saw religion as a parallel means of solidarity, alongside kinship, ethnicity, and so on. All were active in both tribes and cities, but in

different strengths and combinations. As we shall see below, treating such factors under the same rubric encourages a nuanced analysis of their interrelationships.

A Khaldûnian Sociology of Religion

What kind of sociology of religion can be erected on this base? Two main aspects stand out.

Non-Individual

First, a Khaldûnian sociology of religion is not grounded in individuals. Individuals do not appear in the Kitâb, except as exemplars of social processes. They are mere counters in the social game, pawns in the hands of larger forces. An individual's religiosity; her or his beliefs; her or his personal choices (rational or otherwise): it is not through such things that religion influences events. Instead, Khaldûn points to the role of group-feelings, which often submerge individuals in the mass of their co-religionists.

As Islam was for the Arabs a unifying force, able to overcome (for a time) the natural decline in city-dwellers' group-feeling, so other religions have their own *Assabiyyat*. A Khaldûnian would find ways to gauge religious group-feelings as social phenomenon, would explore their waxes and wanes, and would study their interactions with their familial, ethnic, and regional counterparts. Is the decline in American mainline religion an outgrowth of their liberalism and their lost strictness (Finke and Stark 1992)? Or is it a result of a soft city-dwelling life that reduces group-feeling in general, plus a religious predictability that does not reverse such natural trends? A Khaldûnian would explore the latter possibility, seeing such things as the American Methodists' loss of "market share" as less the result of individual and institutional choices than as the product of changing life patterns that lessen *Assabiyyat* in general.

Not only does Ibn Khaldûn not ground his sociology in individuals; he allows us to predict where individuals (as a social phenomenon) will occur. He argues that they will only appear where group-feeling is weak. In tribes,

the individual can hardly acquire personal interests within the boundaries of *Al*

'Assabiyya. In tribal society a person can only assert his or her individuality through *Al*

'Assabiyya. In the words of Al-Jabri, the 'I' of *Al 'Assabiyya* is equal to the 'I' of each of its

members. (Dhaouadi 1990, 326)

In cities, however, the situation is much different: there, lowered group-feeling allows individuality. People become distinct from one another, religiously as well as socially. Their individual religious leanings, their

diverse belief-systems, and their insistence on choosing their religious paths are a result, for Khaldûn, of a settled life that lessens group identity. A Khaldûnian sociology of religion would see the growth and decline of such individualism as the product of underlying social ties (cf. Douglas and Ney, 1998), whose strength or weakness is in turn the effect of specific ways of living. In short, religious individualism is a social product, to be explained rather than assumed.

Non-Institutional

Second, a Khaldûnian sociology of religion would not focus on religious institutions. Individuality and complex organizations are both typical of city life, where a lessened group-feeling calls forth laws to adjudicate people's quarrels (I: 258-61). There, institutions come to dominate and regularize society, in both religious and secular spheres. But rather than strengthening social life, as they do for Durkheim, Khaldûn saw these institutions as a sign of social weakness.

Remember that tribes precede cities in his scheme (I: 250-52). In the former, group-feeling is all; the latter uses institutions to make up for its decline. For Khaldûn, religion builds group-feeling not through churches, sects, and other such bodies, but directly; religious enthusiasm is primary, while specific religious organizations are feeble attempts to stave off its demise. If the first thing a Christian reformer does is to found a 'pure' church, the first task of a Moslem prophet is to bring the whole people back to God. While the former is a matter of founding a perfect institution, the latter is a matter of reviving the group-feeling that makes institutions superfluous.

A Khaldûnian sociology of religion would thus not begin with organizations but with everyday religious feeling. This is not quite the same as the current notion of "popular religion," for the latter is but the little-studied residue that remains when official church religion is seen as primary (Parker 1998). A Khaldûnian approach would be more akin to Victor and Edith Turner's (1978) analysis of Christian pilgrimages, which, they say, removed folk from their churchly tethers, creating a community of believers in a ritual time-out-of-time. They called such events "anti-structures" and noted how they create a sense of *communitas* among their participants.

With its focus on group-feeling and on the role of religious emotions in creating (or destroying) bonds between believers, a Khaldûnian sociology of religion would treat such pilgrimages as more than mere transformations of individuals. It would explore the ways in which they and other popular-religious

events generate long-lasting group emotions. It would investigate the persistence (or diminution) of such emotions as their participants return to ordinary life. It would look into other circumstances in which religions create (or fail to create) feelings of unity among their members, and it would probe the styles of unity thus created. And it would explore the correlates and consequences of such *Assabiyyat* as a primary, rather than a secondary or tertiary, aspect of religious life.

This no longer treats non-institutional religion as the collected superstitions of a benighted populace, in need of official control. Nor does it divide religion in two, assigning group religion to institutions and popular practices to individuals. Instead, a Khaldûnian would treat official and unofficial religion in parallel ways, investigating their consequences for social life and the impact that social life has on them in turn. Religious organizations would no longer have conceptual priority, in this view.

A New Look at Old Questions

A Khaldûnian sociology of religion has the potential to throw new light on several other matters of long-standing interest to the subdiscipline. Three stand out: the question of secularization, the problem of religious authority, and the relationship between religion and ethnicity. Though I cannot develop any of these in depth here, it is worth outlining a likely Khaldûnian starting point for each – if only to demonstrate this theory's sociological promise.

Secularization

First, a Khaldûnian view of religion puts a different spin on "secularization." If religious institutions are symptoms of decadence, not of strength, then the presence of strong churches indicates a decline in society-wide *Al 'Assabiyya* in favor of group particularism. The rational-choice theorists' "competitive marketplace" of small but strong churches (Iannaccone 1994) means that religion has lost its ability to bind people together and has even set them at odds with one another. The lack of a competitive market, as found under European religious monopolies, on the other hand, does not necessarily mean that religion is strong. It could mean a lack of religious *Al 'Assabiyya* as profound as does competitive schism. The market analysts would thus be half-right, in a Khaldûnian view.

To a Khaldûnian, secularization would not be something that comes just after religious organizations have lost their strength or religions have lost their plausibility. It could just as well come before. The case would be measured by the power of religious *Al 'Assabiyya* compared to the other

'*Assabiyyat* present in the society in question. In some cases, the total group-feeling (religious and otherwise) would be weak; in others it would be strong. In still others, some one or several '*Assabiyyat* could dominate. The analysis of these levels of group-feeling would be at the core of this sociological theory.

In particular, a Khaldûnian might interpret late-modern fundamentalism in terms of group-feeling, and seek its social sources. This might be more productive than to see it as dependent on a need either for firm belief or for authority, though all these concepts might in the end prove useful.

More interesting to a Khaldûnian sociologist of religion would be the effects of particular religious '*Assabiyyat* in the various modern churches. To pose just one example, one might ask whether the group-feeling of the liberal American denominations leads them to feel a unity with the world's poor, thus justifying their social ministries. The group-feeling of conservative churches, on the other hand, might cause them to turn inward and play down their connections with others. Where some theories tend to see the former as "weaker" than the latter and their religions as more individualized, Khaldûn might have seen different qualities of *Al 'Assabiyya*, each with its own results for social life.

Authority

Second, Ibn Khaldûn provides a different view of the problem of religious authority. His *Kitâb* paid a good deal of attention to the dynamics of royal authority, the stability and instability of kingdoms, and other political matters – not surprising for a frustrated leader (I: 269-385, II: 3-240). Like Weber, Khaldûn saw authority as the central political problem. Strong authority kept a state vital, thwarting invasion or dynastic decline.

Yet, the key aspect of authority, for Khaldûn, lay not with the ruler but with the people. A ruler's character matters, he wrote, but authority arises out of *Al 'Assabiyya* and lasts only as long as that group-feeling is strong. Dynasties begin when their followers show great group-feeling and decay to senility in about four generations. Nothing seems to sustain them. Laws and institutional coercion only paper over the decline; a dynasty that relies on them rather than *Al 'Assabiyya* becomes corrupt and soon falls, because city life has diminished its inner strength (I: 336-47, II: 91-128, I: 258-61).

To some degree, locating authority in *Al 'Assabiyya* is akin to Weber's situating it in charisma: both are non-rational sources of authority. But unlike the former, charisma rests with individuals, not

collectivities. Without joining the intellectual brawl over the concept, I suggest that Khaldûn would agree with Worsley's (1968) critique, for he saw *Al 'Assabiyya* as a quality of the people, one which rulers could influence, but not determine. Yet unlike charisma, *Al 'Assabiyya* is not totally mysterious. Khaldûn claimed that it grew of necessity from a harsh way of life. Rigor enhanced it and luxury eroded it: tribes and cities stood at its two poles. It is thus open to sociological investigation – a clear benefit if one wants one's theoretical concepts to explain social life, not just label it (see Stark 1999: 304-5).

Like Weber, Khaldûn thought that non-rational authority deteriorates. He did not, however, think that in becoming "traditional" it became stronger or more stable – just the opposite. Nor did he think laws and reason provided the stability Weber claimed. This may be a true insight, but it may also be an artifact of his culture. North Africa, in particular, and the Arab Empire, in general, were "invasion economies," to use Mahmoud Dhaouadi's (1990) term. For centuries, they have been subject to the cyclical processes that Khaldûn describes. Dhaouadi shows how this pattern operates in modern Arab oil economies, with some success; whether the Weberian or the Khaldûnian description of authority is more accurate in any given situation, however, is an empirical matter.

Religion and Ethnicity

It is in a third area, however, that Ibn Khaldûn's ideas may prove most useful. Though scholars study religion, and scholars study ethnicity,⁴ these are seldom the same scholars – and if they are, they seldom bring the same concepts to bear on both interests. True, scholars study ethnic churches (e.g.: Baer 1984) and ethnics in churches (e.g.: Díaz-Stevens 1993), and they have long recognized the ethnic origins of some denominations. But they do not conceive of both kinds of identity in the same way.

To be specific: religions are usually thought of in terms of beliefs and institutions – i.e., as ideas that people hold, or as organizations to which they belong, both of which are in a sense "voluntary." Despite some recent work on the social construction of ethnic identity (e.g.: (Spickard and Burroughs 1999), ethnicity is usually seen as an intrinsic property of the person – i.e., as something "involuntary." Thus survey research often asks for one's ethnicity, and may conceivably ask for one's "religious history" – i.e., a listing of the various religions to which one has at one or another time belonged. A parallel question about one's "ethnic history," however, would most likely elicit one's ancestors' ethnicities, not a record of the various ethnicities one has held during one's own lifetime. "I was raised White, then spent

ten years being Black before becoming Asian"? Such an answer seems absurd,⁵ a sign that we see ethnicity as an attribute, not a choice – and see religion the other way around.

This difference has been institutionalized in law. Ethnicity's "inevitability" has won ethnic groups legal protection and – in some circumstances – communal recognition. Britain, for example, protects ethnic groups against discrimination and in some cases grants them communal representation on local councils. It does not do this for religious groups, with the exception of Jews and Sikhs, who are protected because of their putative ethnicity. It specifically does not protect British Muslims *qua* Muslims, despite the fact that they suffer discrimination for their religion as much as for their origins.

This has spawned a Muslim identity movement, which, notes Tariq Modood, has "thrown British multiculturalism into theoretical and practical disarray" (1999). The very proponents of ethnic-minority identity politics have opposed Muslims who seek parity with other disadvantaged groups. Some opposition stems from the Rushdie affair; some results from Islam's supposed anti-feminism. Those who spoke for the public relevance of gender and ethnic identities – by criticizing liberalism's relegation of such identities to the private sphere – now deny the public relevance of religious identity. Modood shows their clear inconsistency (1998).

This controversy would not occur were religion and ethnicity seen with Khaldûnian eyes. Identities, to Khaldûn, are not an attribute of persons but of groups. That is, they are a function of group *Al 'Assabiyya*, whose weakness or strength is always an empirical matter. In some circumstances, people feel more attachment to ethnic groups and so identify with their ethnicity; in other circumstances, their religious adherence comes to the fore. Some identify themselves foremost as women and men; others find such identities trivial. No such identity is essential, for each depends on activated social support. Can one imagine a politicized women's identity without a Women's Movement? Or a Latino identity without activists emphasizing their Latino (as opposed to Chicano, Cubano, Dominicano, Puerto Riqueño, Tejano, or simple American) heritage? The nature of such identities varies across time and society. Their strength is a function of group activities, which also vary. And they all – ethnic, gender, religious, etc. – are of a type: they rise or fall on the basis of group-feeling.

Ibn Khaldûn saw no difference between ethnic and religious *Al 'Assabiyya* in his native Maghreb; both kinds of group-feeling were present in various strengths at various times and places. Furthermore,

they were not mutually exclusive: such feelings cut across one another as often as they coincide. Thus rulers had to deal with the mobilization (or potential mobilization) of people based on ethnicity, kinship, religion, locality, and a whole host of other factors, which often set people against those who had previously been their allies. Arabs might face Berber rebellion, which they could undercut either by dividing Berbers along kin lines or by emphasizing the Islam that all held in common. Such strategies might or might not work, depending on the *'Assabiyyat* involved. Khaldûn described these processes, but saw their outcome as always an empirical matter. In his refusal to privilege any one *Al 'Assabiyya*, he was as anti-essentialist as any post-modern thinker.

Such ideas shed light on recent Balkan conflicts, over whose causes scholars have argued at length. While all agree that Balkan politicians have "played the communal card" (Brown and Karim 1995), there is considerable controversy over whether the key distinctions are "ethnic" or "religious" (Ignatieff 1993). After all, the differences between Serbs, Croats, and Bosnian "Muslims" amount to small bits of vocabulary and the religious services which each doesn't attend. Are the recent Bosnian and Kosovar wars best understood as ethnic (somehow "inevitable") or as religious ("voluntary") fighting?

Khaldûn would see this as a false dichotomy. What matters is not the source of *Al 'Assabiyya*, but its strength and results. Clearly, "Croats," "Serbs," and "Muslims" lived together in relative peace for hundreds of years; clearly they have not lived peacefully for major parts of the last century. At least some of their recent discord stems from an international political system that imagines national states as pure ethnic communities (Anderson 1983; Llobera 1994). Khaldûn wrote in an age in which such purity was scarcely to be conceived: a multi-ethnic, multi-religious society in which politics depended on variable group-feeling. He encourages us to seek the source of religious and ethnic conflict alike in such group-feelings – and to recognize those feelings' social origins.

Talking Back to the West

It is increasingly clear that we cannot build a universal sociology of religion using the intellectual tools of just one civilization, as we in the West have heretofore believed. Our own civilizational blinders lead us to see individuals and institutions as central, to the neglect of other aspects of religious life. Not only does this prevent us from understanding religion in other times and places: the standard sociological focus does not help us with much of Islam, for example, especially in the pre-modern period (Hodgson 1977). It

also prevents us from understanding some aspects of religion in our own era, including those noted above.

A Khaldûnian sociology of religion puts such less remarked aspects of religious life in a new perspective, and also throws new light on what we thought we knew before. This enriches our understanding of all religions, both our civilization's and others. Just as Weberian, Durkheimian, Marxist, constructivist, and other perspectives each capture a part of a complex religious whole, so too do these other traditions show us things we have missed. This is not just a matter of specific concepts, for it is the integration of concepts into an overall approach that makes such theories useful. Ibn Khaldûn's combination of new concepts with a new framework can help Western sociologists see with a new eye.

NOTES

¹ Several scholars have recently proposed reviving Ibn Khaldûn's work – e.g.: Dhaouadi (1990); Weiss (1995); Soofi (1995). As far as I know, the present article is the first systematic attempt to apply his ideas to the sociology of religion.

² Ibn Khaldûn is generally seen as an historian, but his work is unlike any previous Moslem history, and is also unlike the narrative histories that dominate the West. Where Al-Tabari's History of the Prophet and Kings (915) was chronological and relied entirely on lists of authorities, the Kitâb al-'Ibar was thematic and used empirical arguments to prove authorities wrong. Like Max Weber, who was originally an economic historian, Ibn Khaldûn used history mainly as grist for social analysis.

³ I use Dhaouadi's (1990) transliteration rather than Rosenthal's (1958), largely to avoid the latter's more complex diacritics.

⁴ In the following, I do not distinguish between 'ethnicity' and 'race'.

⁵ It may, however, accurately depict someone of Pakistani extraction raised in the United States (where Pakistanis are "White"), who moves to Britain (where they are considered "Black" but are struggling to be seen as "Asian"); see Modood (1994). This supports the social-constructivists' claims.

REFERENCES

- Al-Jabri, Mohammed. 1983. Al-Assabiyya and the State: Ibn Khaldûn's Theoretical Perspectives in Arab-Islamic History. Dar Attalia.
- Anderson, Benedict. 1983. Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism. Verso.
- Baer, Hans A. 1984. The Black Spiritual Movement: A Religious Response to Racism. Tennessee.
- Brown, Cynthia and Farhad Karim, eds. 1995. Playing the 'Communal Card': Communal Violence and Human Rights. Human Rights Watch.
- Dhaouadi, Mahmoud. 1990. "Ibn Khaldûn: The Founding Father of Eastern Sociology." International Sociology 5(3):319-35.
- Díaz-Stevens, Ana María. 1993. Oxcart Catholicism on Fifth Avenue: The Impact of the Puerto Rican Migration Upon the Archdiocese of New York. Notre Dame.
- Douglas, Mary and Steven Ney. 1998. Missing Persons: A Critique of the Social Sciences. California.
- Durkheim, Émile. 1893. The Division of Labor in Society. 1964. Free Press.
- _____. 1915. The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life. 1965. Free Press.
- Finke, Roger and Rodney Stark. 1992. The Churching of America, 1776-1990: Winners and Losers in Our Religious Economy. Rutgers.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1978. Emile Durkheim. Penguin.
- Hodgson, Marshall G.S. 1977. The Venture of Islam. Chicago.
- Iannaccone, Laurence R. 1994. "Why Strict Churches Are Strong.." American Journal of Sociology 99(5):1180-211.
- Ibn Khaldûn. 1377-99. The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History (in 3 Volumes). 2d ed. Bollingen/Princeton.
- Ignatieff, Michael. 1993. Blood and Belonging: Journeys Into the New Nationalism. Farrar, Strauss, & Giroux.
- Lechner, Frank J. 1994. "Tribes and Cities: Particularism and Universalism as Global Processes." XIIIth World Congress of Sociology. Bielefeld, July.

Llobera, Josep R. 1994. The God of Modernity: The Development of Nationalism in Western Europe.

Berg.

Modood, Tariq. 1994. "Political Blackness and British Asians." Sociology 28(4):859ff.

_____. 1998. "Anti-Essentialism, Multiculturalism and the 'Recognition' of Religious Groups." Journal of Political Philosophy 6(4):178-99.

_____. 1999. "The Place of Muslims in British Secular Multiculturalism." International Society for the Sociology of Religion (SISR). Leuven, July.

Parker, Cristian. 1998. "Modern Popular Religion." International Sociology 13(2): 195-212.

Rosenthal, Franz. 1958. "Translator's Introduction." Pp. xxvii-cxv in Muqaddimah, by Ibn Khaldūn.

Princeton.

Soofi, Abdol. 1995. "Economics of Ibn Khaldun Revisited." History of Political Economy 27(2):386-404.

Spickard, James V. 1998a. "Rethinking Religious Social Action: What is 'Rational' About Rational-Choice Theory?" Sociology of Religion 59(2):99-115.

_____. 1998b. "Ethnocentrism, Social Theory and Non-Western Sociologies of Religion: Toward a Confucian Alternative." International Sociology 13(2):173-94.

Spickard, Paul R. and W. Jeffrey Burroughs, eds. 1999. We Are a People: Narrative and Multiplicity in Constructing Ethnic Identity. Temple.

Stark, Rodney. 1999. "A Theory of Revelations." Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion 38(2):287-307.

Turner, Victor W. and Edith Turner. 1978. Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives. Columbia.

Warner, R. Stephen. 1993. "Work in Progress Toward a New Paradigm for the Sociological Study of Religion in the United States." American Journal of Sociology 98:1044-93.

Weiss, Dieter. 1995. "Ibn Khaldun on Economic Transformation." International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 27:29-37.

Worsley, Peter. 1968. The Trumpet Shall Sound: A Study of "Cargo" Cults in Melanesia. 2d ed.

Schocken.

Biographical Note

James V. Spickard is Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Redlands, and Research Consulting Professor at the Fielding Institute. He is the author of many articles on social theory and the sociology of religion. His current research explores multiculturalism and the ethical implications of a globalized world.

address: Department of Sociology and Anthropology
University of Redlands
Redlands, California
USA 92373

phone: 830/980-4390 fax: 830/438-4390

e-mail: spickard@uor.edu