Islam has often been described as a religion of the mosque and the book, and the early modern period saw the construction of many of the largest and most enduring mosques in history. In contrast to the major mosque-building projects of previous centuries, these new prayer buildings were not located in such old Muslim centres as Damascus and Cairo, but often in the further reaches of Asia and Africa that saw new Muslim-ruled polities appear in this period. The Bibi-Khanum mosque (1404) in Samarkand, the ‘Idgah mosque in Kashgar (1442), the Sidi Yahya mosque in Timbuktu (1440) and the Shaitgumbaj mosque (1459) in Bagerhat are some of the most important. After the conquests of Chinggis Khan (d. 1227) and Timur (d. 1405), new religious and intellectual centres developed beyond the formerly core regions of Islamic religious productivity. Given that the locations of many of the great fifteenth-century mosques had themselves only been recently claimed for the dar al-islam (‘house of Islam’), they in part served to publicly claim new spaces for Islam. As the post-Timurid sultanates gave way to the larger imperial states of the Ottomans, Safavids and Mughals, there began what was arguably history’s greatest period of mosque construction. This age of an imperial Islam saw the completion of the Ottoman Selimiye mosque (1575) in Edirne, the Ketchaoua mosque (1612) in Algiers and the Sultan Ahmet mosque (1616) in Istanbul, the Safavid Shah’s mosque (1629) in Isfahan, the Mughal Jahan-Numa mosque (1656) in Delhi and the Badshahi mosque (1673) in Lahore, and the Mecca mosque (1694) in Hyderabad that was begun by the Qutb Shahs but completed by the Mughals. Funded from the coffers of empire, these were arresting concrete symbols of imperial and Islamic might (Figure 15.1).

Yet as feats of patronage, these official projects tell us more about the religion of the state than of its peoples. For with their artful precocity and precious materials, these mosques distract our attention from the more widespread proliferation of an Islam of the shrine as much as an Islam of the mosque. While the wealth of rival empires was being channelled into
these prestige projects, in villages and towns right across the *dar al-islam* shrines appeared to the Muslim saints and their families, which served as the bridgeheads of an expanding and adapting world religion. For in comparative terms, the relative absence of durable village mosques to parallel the rural churches of Europe is not to be explained by an absence of piety or funds,
but rather by the focus of Muslim devotion on graves as much as prayer niches. Unlike mosques, such tomb shrines accommodated both women’s and men’s religiosity, the needs of both sedentary and pastoral peoples, as well as the hybridized Islams of the many rural communities acculturating to Islam from West Africa to Java. The point here is not to draw dichotomies between a mosque and a shrine Islam, between Islam as a religion of the book and the body, between a transcendent God and immanent saints. Rather it is to recognize from the outset the spectrum of religiosity behind the imposing imperial mosques built to capture the eye of posterity.

If mosques, great or small, must be recognized as the partners (if for many early modern Muslims, the less visited partners) of the shrines to the holy families of Shi‘i imams and Sunni awliya (saints), then the place of the Quran, and of written Islam in general, needs to be similarly contextualized. Since it is often casually claimed that Islam is a religion of the book, then in an historical appraisal this truism needs to be evaluated in relation to the parameters of textual receptivity. The Quran served as a symbolic touchstone for all Muslim communities in the early modern period, but for many it was more a venerated idea than a textual object. Although excerpts might be recited in formal worship, inscribed in public buildings or cited in non-Arabic books, the majority of early modern Muslims never owned a Quran. The reach of such a scriptural Islam faced multiple barriers as the demographic shift was made into Islam being practised by a majority of non-Arabic speakers. Except for occasional interlinear glosses, the Quran remained untranslated till the last decades of this period. Moreover, with the exception of the brief printing career of Ibrahim Müteferrika (1674–1745) in Istanbul, who was in any case expressly banned from printing the Quran, the early modern centuries remained for Muslims an age without printing. We must therefore be cautious in automatically looking to the Quran as a sourcebook on religious practice. The socio-religious dynamics of the period preclude the spread of anything comparable to a Lutheran sola scriptura model of religious practice, even if we will see proponents of the Prophet’s sunna (‘way, example’) becoming increasingly vocal in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Written languages form points of connection and disconnection. In towns throughout the dar al-islam, Arabic remained the learned language of the religious sciences. In many regions, Arabic was a sociolect or caste language that served as the cultural capital of self-replicating clerical families, though in certain regions the teaching of Arabic through madrasa schools offered the possibility of social mobility through Arabic. In either case, it served as
a minority language of prestige and power. Supported by the early modern empires, the prestige of Persian and Turkish opened alternative literary avenues for writers of religious works (including women) who had not learned Arabic. But with the rise of baroque styles at court, these too became learned and coded languages, leaving the true vernaculars (whether Malay, Hindi or the so-called African ‘Ajami languages) in the hands of vernacularizing literati and peasant troubadours. While there is no reliable data on literacy rates in this period, in all regions a minority of the population was literate, with men being far more likely to be literate than women and town-dwellers than agrarian or pastoral peoples. Literacy did probably expand through the demands of increasingly bureaucratic empires and in some cities, such as Cairo, we know that artisans and craftsmen possessed sufficient literacy to read basic texts. Nonetheless, however much we can surmise a trickle-down effect of scriptural awareness, for the majority of Muslims literacy remained a restricted and minority cultural asset, with literacy in Arabic being rarer still. Whole Muslim communities (pastoralists not least) found their only links to literate Islam through the Sufi patrons who served as cultural mediators on the many social, ethnic and linguistic borderlands of the dar al-islam.

This brings us to the important point that the ‘ulama, the ‘men of learning’ who were the representatives of learned and literate Islam, were not categorically distinct from the Sufis, whose authority rested on the combined claims of mystical experience and the genealogical inheritance of Prophetic charisma. Both ‘ulama and Sufis relied on textual learning for their legitimacy and activity, using writing to exchange letters and treatises across wide distances; to prove their learning through ijaza certificates; to disseminate their teachings through vernacular literatures in Arabic script. Their sources of legitimacy having converged in previous centuries, Sufis and ‘ulama were frequently the same persons; as such, in the following pages they are referred to as Sufi-‘ulama. Albeit constituting a small section of any given community, these men of learning extended an Arabic and, to a lesser extent, a Persian ecumene across Eurasia and Africa, at the same time that they developed Islamic vernaculars and translated Perso-Arabic works into existing literary languages such as Chinese. But such literate religion was not free-flowing and in each of its locales, it had to pass through the master-disciple networks that were the institutional fabric of Islamic learning. These networks were substantially provided by the Sufi tariqas (‘brotherhoods’) that served as social channels for the further distribution of ideas and activities. In writing Islam into world history, the networks created by such brotherhoods are
essential for understanding the expanding reach of Islam in this period. For these lineage-based networks bridged not only geographical but also social distance, connecting the learned heirs of the Prophet to tribespeople, women and non-literate townsmen.

The following pages explore the latitude and limits of these attempts to bring an Islam of the mosque and book to so wide a portion of the planet between around 1400 and 1800. The first section turns to the connection of different regions through the Sufi lineages that offered both the conceptual-genealogical ties and organizational-institutional networks that forged a cohesive if by no means unitary dar al-islam. The second section moves from geographical to social frontiers by examining the widespread conversions to Islam of this period as a process of collective acculturation and private strategy. The third section traces the impact of the early modern empires on religious conformity and confessionalization as states furthered this conversion process by playing an increasing role in the organization and systematization of their subjects’ religious and thereby public lives. Finally, the chapter follows the spread of renewal movements in the late eighteenth century before turning to the first signs of the impact of colonization on Islam. In attempting to conceive Islam as a set of processes in world history, the focus lies particularly on processes that emerged through interconnection between different regions or peoples and patterns that can be observed comparatively (if not always connectively) in different regions around the same time. Since the repositioning of Islamic history within world history cannot be accomplished by generating models from a notional Middle Eastern ‘centre’ or ‘norm’, equal attention is given to developments in all Muslim regions.

Connection: genealogies and networks

As mechanisms for the controlled transfer of charisma, authority and doctrine to selected followers and successors, the tariqa brotherhoods had already emerged in the medieval period. These vehicles of Sufi and wider Muslim tradition were originally more conceptual entities than concrete social organizations. But between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries they developed initiation rituals, dress codes, curricula and, most crucially, the pilgrimage, residential and teaching institutions that allowed for the accumulation of capital. While the tariqas can broadly be understood as Muslim counterparts to the Christian monastic orders, their leaders bore the crucial difference that they could marry (and marry multiply) to produce heirs and
successors. Through their links to the many upstart dynasties of the fifteenth century, the Sufis won patronage that saw them acquire properties that were inheritable through Muslim endowment law (waqf). One channel of royal patronage created grand mosques in the major cities, but this more diffuse and enduring pattern of investing in Sufi families saw ruling elites build channels of benefaction to their villages and provinces. Whether markets or farmlands, when granted in perpetuity to the Sufis and Sufi-‘ulama who maintained them, such endowments allowed these holy families to become independently wealthy economic as well as religious players. An example can be seen under the Timurid rulers of eastern Persia and Central Asia, particularly Sultan Husayn Bayqara (r. 1469–1506), who used waqf endowments to grant under-used arable land to saintly families. While the polity benefited in the short term by an increase in agricultural productivity, in the longer term, when the Timurid state itself collapsed, it was the Sufi families who emerged strongest by holding onto the rich agrarian resources granted them in perpetuity. Rightly described as ‘little cities of God’, the shrines that were constructed through this wealth generated further revenue in turn from the pilgrims who visited the deceased Sufis buried in the grand mausoleums at the centre of these complexes of mosques, schools and hospices. Through rituals of pilgrimage no less than popular legend and formal theology, these Sufi-‘ulama were rendered saints whose families inherited their symbolic and material capital through conflating the genealogical mechanisms of the brotherhood with the legal principles of the endowment. Brotherhood (tariqa) and endowment (waqf) were crucial tools in the construction and reproduction of religious power.

What this all meant was that by the fifteenth century, such Sufi families were emerging as local religious establishments in regions as far removed as Morocco, Anatolia, India and Southeast Asia. In many cases, the brotherhoods and their shrines provided services that states were either unable or not expected to provide. Through the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, for example, the Naqshbandi brotherhood in Central Asia provided the peasants and townsmen who pledged their allegiance to its leaders with services ranging from protection from raiding nomads to immunity from taxation. By the seventeenth century, the expansion of Sufi brotherhoods through China saw the descendants of their local founders establish menhuan (from menhu, ‘great family’), corporate lineages that blended claims of prophetic descent with Chinese family structures and mercantile dexterity. The very fact that Sufis were able to embed themselves into so many societies, economies and polities is testament to their effective apparatus of tradition.
For what was essential to their success was the transportability and transferability of their claims to authority: the genealogies, doctrines and rituals that supported their claims to be the heirs of the Prophet were all intrinsically mobile symbolic assets. And so there developed a general pattern in which the son or disciple of a notable Sufi from one region would travel to a new town, settle there, and gain followers through the prestige of a lineage that in leading directly to the Prophet served as a channel for Muhammad’s miraculous and salvific blessing power or baraka. There was undoubtedly a touch of the frontiersman about these migrants as they sought followers – and opportunities – on the expanding horizons of the dar al-islam, and their hundreds of hagiographies preserved popular tales of their travels and adventures.

Settling in new regions, these migrants created local holy families, offshoots of the sacred lineages they imported from their homelands. Whether in India, Africa or Central Asia, such holy families usually exercised local monopolies over specialist services (legal arbitration, medicine, magic, education) and, through the patronage of ruling elites, consolidated their cultural power with land-grants or tax-exemptions. There was also often an ethnic dimension to this process. For these migrants were not only men of learning and lineage: in many (and in some regions a majority of) cases, they also claimed to be sayyids, that is, blood-descendants of the Prophet’s family. In this way, claims to biological descent allowed notionally Arab sayyids to position themselves prominently in the local religious establishments that emerged among the ethnically pluralistic societies of the early modern world.

In the southern Philippine islands of Mindanao and Sulu, claims of Arab descent were bolstered by the adoption of the Arabic script for local languages, creating the powerfully hybrid genre of the tarsila (from the Arabic silsila, ‘lineage’) that demonstrated the prophetic genealogy of both royal and religious elites. Even as such notionally sayyid families acquired varied physical appearances through local intermarriage, in regions where such bloodlines were most rare (such as Africa and South Asia) genealogical paradigms served to maintain ethnic hierarchies and privileges. Islam, then, was no democracy of souls. Rather, what we see is a context in which the genealogical paradigms of Sufi tradition and even older veneration for the sayyids proved to be highly effective resources for the reproduction of social hierarchy. While both education and initiation formed entry mechanisms into the intersecting religious establishments of Sufis and ‘ulama, such opportunities for social mobility were always constrained by the effective boundary maintenance of these holy families, whether through their
deployment of genealogy, learning or wealth. The friction between establish-
ment and upstart claimants to religious authority served as one of the central
dynamics behind religious change in many early modern Muslim contexts.

But for much of the early modern period, until the religious upheavals that
began with the political and economic catastrophes of the early eighteenth
century, these regional religious establishments remained stable, especially
outside the Safavid and Ottoman domains that saw the state most effectively
contest the autonomy of these holy families and brotherhoods (Figure 15.2).

Yet amid this picture of hierarchies and establishments, there remained
much room for solace. Pilgrims travelled to the shrines constructed as one
generation of these ancestral lineages passed to the next. And from these
pilgrimage sites sprang the miraculous cures and benevolent intercessions
that rendered these saintly families beloved, necessary and thereby lasting
members of their communities. As stories spread of such miracles, and
techniques developed to better solicit them, the graves of the holy dead
became fonts of religious creativity by way of poems and praise songs in local
languages that were often set to music as the media of vernacular theologies.

In gratitude to the miraculous powers of the holy dead, whether Sufi saints
or Shi‘i imams, their birth (mawlid) or death (‘urs) anniversaries became the
holy days of a shrine-based religious culture that was connected through the
mobile rituals, loanwords and doctrines that the brotherhoods spread across
the whole dar al-islam. Throughout the early modern period, major shrines in
Ajmer in India, Shah-i Zinda in Central Asia and al-Qarafa in Egypt hosted
grand festivals enlivened by banquets, musicians, fairgrounds and lighting.
Here was a culture of the carnivalesque that echoed the merry Catholic
world celebrated by the French author François Rabelais during this period.

Yet the influence of the Sufi tariqas and their local leaders came precisely
from the fact that they did not merely form the focus for a carnivalesque
Islam of the masses. They were also the representatives of learned and
legalistic Islam. They were, then, points of connection between different
classes, ethnicities and communities. Although there were Sufis who were
not learned and ‘ulama who were not Sufis, the family and initiatic lineages
that most successfully reproduced the tariqas typically were lineages of
learning. After all, literacy is the most effective tool for the transmission
and reproduction of culture (and cultural capital) through time. Through the
format of the regulated study ‘circle’ (halqa) around Sufi-‘ulama, book learn-
ing was transferred not only between generations but also between places.
Whether convened in shrines or mosques, in homes or gardens, such
teaching circles formed the social mechanisms of a textual tradition that
Figure 15.2: Tomb Tower Shrine of Safi al-Din, a leader of a Safavid Sufi order, Ardabil, Iran, c.1500
was not separated from the popular practices that also clustered round the Sufis. And what was *traditio* – ‘handed down’ – was often books, in many cases medieval classics such as the Arabic prayer manual of al-Jazuli (d. 1465) or the Persian poetry of Rumi (d. 1273), works that travelled far into Africa, India and China. Once again, the Sufi *tariqas* that linked one study circle to another served as the mechanisms for these transmissions of texts. Through the discipline of the inner self and the regulation of the outer self, the study of mystical and legal works was combined to pursue a self-restraint of which the Prophet and his Companion Abu Bakr were epiphanies. Education was inseparable, then, from the maintenance of social order, an order theoretically embodied in the austere *adab* (etiquette) of the Sufi-‘*ulama* themselves.

From Gujarat and Yemen, learned Sufis followed the monsoon winds to transmit both their lineages and learning into maritime Southeast Asia, whence they turned north towards Thailand, Sulu and Mindanao, only to be halted by the Spanish conquest of the Philippines and the expansion of the Buddhist kingdom of Ayutthaya. Far from Arabia, the Arabic language was not only studied in its own right, but also used to create a script and technical vocabulary for such languages as Malay, Javanese and Maguindanao. What little evidence survives of the early transmission of Islam across the Atlantic even suggests that it was enslaved members of Sufi brotherhoods who acted as the first Muslim community leaders in Brazil and the Caribbean. Muhammad Kaba was a descendant of an old Sufi family, who had been educated by Shaykh Babu al-Fakiru in what is now Côte d’Ivoire; in 1777 he was shipped as a slave to Jamaica. There he wrote his *Kitab al-Salat*, a treatise on prayer in simple Arabic, to spread Islam’s basic principles among the island’s slaves. Muhammad Kaba thus ensured that, even in their enslavement, Africans in Jamaica received the knowledge he remembered from writings passed down by the Qadiri brotherhood in West Africa.

The Sufi brotherhood, the study circle and the written text were therefore the combined components of intercontinental transfers of knowledge. Tracing the transmission of North African learning in another direction, we can turn to the Nilotic Sudan, where in introducing the Shadhili brotherhood to the region, the migrant Hamad Abu Dunana (fl. 1450) brought with him books that taught the legalistic Sufism being promoted by al-Jazuli in the cities of Morocco. Through the networks created as mobile Sufi-‘*ulama* moved from attending study circles to create their own elsewhere, ideas could travel quickly. In evolving societies with few alternative mechanisms for dispute resolution, legal expertise helped cement the prominence of – and demand for – Sufi-‘*ulama*, who also found positions as judges and arbitrators.
In early modern contexts where the state was distant and arbitration sorely needed, Sufi-‘ulama helped in the small-asset disputes that tormented populations living on the brink of subsistence. Across much of Saharan Africa, such legal functions loomed so large in people’s minds that the Sufis were popularly termed faqīhs (‘jurists’). When disputes arose on a larger scale, as sayyids inheriting the Prophet’s blood and blessing power, the special status of some Sufis saw them serve as mediators between different ethnic or political groups, as in the negotiations between the Mughal and Afghan confederacies as they struggled for control of India in the sixteenth century.

Whether as solvers of disputes or transmitters of learning, as purveyors of miracles or causers of carnivals, in each of their innumerable locales the representatives of the Sufi brotherhoods were entwined in complex webs of interdependency with their surrounding societies. They supported, and were in turn supported by, ruling elites and common pilgrims, not to mention the large extended families and servants who depended on the shrines for hearth and home. This issue of income and interdependence also points us to the role of the tariqas in enabling commerce, as seen in the dominant role that the Nasiriyya brotherhood came to play over trade in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Morocco or the ascent of Kunta merchants affiliated with the Qadiri brotherhood in Saharan Africa. The brotherhoods not only supplied the social capital of trust that was so crucial to early modern trade. They also often provided the more practical commercial wherewithal of loans, labour, access to political elites and accommodation in hospices whose sanctity few thieves dared violate.

Sufis have often been theorized as agents of religious localization, carrying teachings and practices from homelands in such venerated regions as the Hadhramawt and Khurasan that, when replanted in the distant soil of Sumatra or Sudan, grew into the variegated foliage of ‘local Islams’. In a sense this is exactly what happened. But it is only half of the process. For in as much as the tariqa brotherhoods were agents of the localization of Islam, they were also agents of inter-connection between Muslims. We have already noted that the tariqas were conceptual as well as concrete entities: for early modern Muslims they were conceived as the branches of genealogical trees that all had their trunks in Persia, Iraq and ultimately Mecca, but whose branches reached out across the whole dar al-islam. As such, the tariqas were conceptual tools that allowed Muslims from distant regions to conceive of themselves as parts of a larger connected unit, as with the Jawi Sufis from Southeast Asia incorporated into hagiographies written by Arabs in Yemen. In this way, through the remembered genealogies of generations
of masters and disciples, the *tariqas* formed the conceptual cords that bound the *dar al-islam* into an overlapping web of inter-relations. If the many Muslim societies of the period were separated by states and geography, languages and ethnicity, then the far-reaching genealogical branches of the brotherhoods allow us to make sense of the notion of Islam as a world religion in a way that early modern Muslims may themselves have recognized.

All in all, perhaps the most important collective process undertaken by the manifold personnel, doctrines, rituals and places associated with the brotherhoods was rendering Islam recognizable as it adapted to its many host societies that by the early modern period stretched from the Niger delta to Siberia. If we have said that the *tariqas* were agents of both the localization and inter-connection of Islam, then what this implies is that local religious practices could develop while still being recognizably Islamic to visitors from other regions. As a processual outcome rather than an inevitable given, this ‘recognizability’ occurred through the transmission of specific cultural markers, whether the shape of shrines based on cuboid domes, the adoption of the same Arabic lexicon to label rituals and persons in many local languages or the recurrence of familiar key texts across vast spatial distances. The transmission of the Persian poetry of Rumi and Jami between circles of learning from Persia to Anatolia, India, Central Asia and even China is only one example. Without the level of coherence and intelligibility offered by these transmitted cultural markers, it would make no sense to think of early modern Muslim societies as being part of a larger shared system within which people, practices and ideas could circulate without facing insurmountable cultural barriers. Yet such coherence and intelligibility did exist, enabling a figure such as Nur al-Din Raniri (d. 1658) to enjoy a career that linked India, Egypt, Arabia and Southeast Asia. And as Raniri’s example makes clear, in order to function, such recognizability had to be mutual: the Indian-born Raniri had to be recognizable as a Muslim to his teachers in Arabia just as he would in turn need to recognize his Malay students as Muslims when he settled in Sumatra.

The conceptual and institutional roles of the *tariqas* in enabling the transmissions that underlay this recognizability were all the more important given that early modern Islam inherited no centralizing institution comparable to the Catholic Church and developed nothing comparable to the Inquisition that sought to standardize a recognizable Christianity across the vastly distant societies of Europe, Latin America and the Philippines. In providing local religious leaders and holy families, places of worship and pilgrimage, schools and teaching circles, legal arbitration and popular celebration, what
the *tariqas* of Sufi-ʻulama transmitted to their various places of settlement was Islam in its workable social terms. And through their genealogies, brotherhoods and networks, the *tariqas* were able to ensure that, in conceptual terms likewise, this was a legitimately recognizable Islam that had spread across the immense geographies that their networks connected.

**Conversion: acculturation and agency**

Another large-scale religious process that expanded during the early modern period was conversion. While conversion to Islam had been taking place since the seventh century, its means and motivations were by no means stable through different periods. Even between 1400 and 1800, different forms of conversion emerged that varied according to context. Since in principle to become a Muslim requires only the utterance of the profession of faith (*shahada*) in the company of adult witnesses, with circumcision adding the more enduring testament of the flesh for men, so brisk a procedure meant that many converts’ cultural attitudes could be transferred into their (and their descendants’) lives as Muslims. For this reason, historians have used the concept of ‘acculturation’ alongside ‘conversion’ to recognize that, whether for individuals or entire communities, relatively rapid moments of formal or nominal conversion are often followed by a slower period of acculturation by which the converts acquire the wider cultural trappings of Islam, from naming practices to patterns of diet, clothing and sociability. Since acculturation was typically a process of cultural negotiation, some of the former customs of any convert community would usually survive in parallel with the adoption of Islamic practices. Few if any early modern Muslim communities followed the *sharia* wholesale and a quavering balance between Islamic and customary law (ʻurf) typified many if not most communities. Indeed, the diversity of religious and cultural practices displayed by the many Muslim communities of this period was itself the outcome of these varied paths of acculturation.

Amid this variety, certain larger patterns can be discerned. We have already seen Sufi-ʻulama establish themselves so successfully that they were the most prominent human representatives of Islam. Unsurprisingly, this afforded them central roles in the conversion and acculturation process. There is certainly room here to reckon with the role of unlettered wandering Sufis as cultural mediators, preaching Islam in colourful local idioms and, as wonder workers, making miracles as startling as the circumsissing of kings as they slept. This is certainly how conversion was
remembered in the ethnohistories of the ‘nine saints’ (wali sanga) of Java, and similar conversion narratives abound from Siberia to West Africa. To make sense of the processes behind such stories, it is worth making a distinction at the conceptual level between the conversion of places and the conversion of peoples. Looking first at places, one of the most effective conversion methods was the establishing of institutional bridgeheads of Islam in new regions. When Sufi-ʿulama served as frontiersmen on the edges of the dar al-Islam, they were in many cases not operating as pioneering lone stars, but as representatives of larger systems by way of the polities that lent them patronage and the brotherhoods that lent them legitimacy. What this often amounted to was a prince or governor granting frontier land on the edge of his nominal dominions that was at once his most under-used and abundant asset. Since the Sufi recipients of such endowments were in many cases also ʿulama trained in Islamic law, these land grants were often exchanged for the promise of service. By using their legal skills for dispute resolution and the maintenance of social order, such pious frontiersmen became the representatives of Muslim-ruled states on the limits of their power. In other cases, Sufi-ʿulama were associated with soldiers, farmers or merchants whose power and wealth incentivized conversion.

The process of agrarian conversion has been most fully explored with regard to Bengal, the vast forested frontier of the Mughal Empire that saw perhaps the period’s most demographically significant conversion. The fact that Bengal was more thoroughly converted in these few hundred years than the rest of South Asia was in a millennium is certainly a pointer to significant developments. Plots in Bengal were granted to Sufi-ʿulama by Mughal governors with a generosity that was only matched by the land’s relative worthlessness as uncultivated forest. Whether by bringing in kinsmen or employing local jungle-clearers, the trees were felled to create deep forest outposts of Islamic civilization by way of built settlements with mosques, shrines, farms, markets and occasionally even schools. Over time, these bridgeheads were connected by road or river communications to the larger imperial society they represented. On one level, then, this was a conversion of the land (and its resources) into Muslim territory through a pattern of migrant settlement and annexation by a neighbouring polity. But in the Bengal case, the forests were already populated (albeit by followers of indigenous religions rather than Sanskritic or caste Hinduism), and the wealth, prestige and practical advantages offered by entry into this society of Muslims attracted these forest dwellers to convert and gradually acculturate to regional Muslim norms. This was, then, a conversion of people as well
as of place. In this multi-generational undertaking, it was often the institutional rather than the human representatives of Islam that were the more effective motors of acculturation as convert communities attached themselves to shrine complexes that offered legal mediation, agrarian marts and miraculous protection from the forest’s many menaces.

Another example of converting the land comes from the newly conquered provinces of the Ottoman Empire in the Levant and southeastern Europe. Here trusted Sufis with ties to the state were used to re-settle formerly or partially Christian regions, which were either strategically vulnerable or under-populated through previous wars. The same process occurred in the expanding African Muslim states of the period, such as the Funj sultanate, which attracted Arab Sufi-‘ulama southward through the Sahara with the promise of patronage. Arriving on this new African frontier of Islam, these holy men were given lands on which they established the qasr villages that formed the focus of what were at once confessional, agricultural and legal outposts. As in the Ottoman and Mughal contexts, in return for the Funj rulers’ patronage, they acted as pillars of social order for an emergent state with minimal direct influence over its population. By creating the infrastructural networks to support travelling merchants, these ‘market and hostel’ shrines not only stimulated regional economies but also privileged the role in them of merchants who were Muslims. This process led in turn to demographic changes, not only through the arrival of such traders and their marriage to local women, but also through their greater access to local resources that created further economic incentives for non-Muslims to convert. The role of multi-purpose shrine complexes rather than mosques can be seen in regions as far apart as the Balkans, Central Asia, Sudan, India and Palestine, where both peasant and pastoral communities found such complexes the most effective (and in many cases the only) sedentary or state-affiliated service institutions to which they had access.

Shrines were not only effective in the conversion of places, but also the conversion of peoples, particularly the pastoral-nomadic peoples who occupied the vast plains between the Volga and far Siberia. In contrast to the ‘conversion by the plough’ model, where acculturation appears as a gradual bottom-up procedure of forest peoples being incrementally attracted to the benefits of a larger Muslim society, in the many cases of tribal conversion on the steppes we see a more immediate top-down process initiated by the conversion of a tribal headsman which his kinsmen were bound to follow. In the abundant ethnohistories of these tribal peoples, such sudden conversions are presented as the work of charismatic wandering Sufis who, amid the
competitive struggles for pasture and tribute that typified the nomadic life, pledged to act as the protectors of particular clans or tribes. Thus it was with the Mongol-descended Golden Horde, who considered a certain Baba Tükles as their collective convertor or even ancestor. Further east into Central Asia, the conversion of the Turkic peoples known today as Uyghurs was locally remembered as collectively occurring through the conversion of the Qarakhanid sultan, Satuq Bughra Khan (d. 955), whose shrine at Artush near Kashgar became a key memory space for the region’s Muslims.

In other regions of Central Asia, as well as China and even Tibet, it was Sufis rather than sultans who took on the role of anchoring collective identities to local geographies through the building of shrines to convertors or ancestors of entire communities. While the Chinese Hui, who cherish self-histories of descent from Middle Eastern migrants, call these shrines gongbei (from the Arabic qubba, ‘dome’), they more often resemble Confucian than Muslim buildings. This commemoration of ancestors or convertors in turn points to the role of Sufis as not merely the patrons of existing communities but as the primogenitors of new ones. In some cases, this phenomenon was a genuine occurrence; in other cases, it was part of invented aetiologies that lent Muslim respectability to pastoral groups beneath the sway of urban mores. The ethnohistories of many tribal groups thus recount the marriage and offspring of a Sufi with the daughter of the tribal headman. One example comes from the Timuri branch of the Chahar ‘Aymaq people of Afghanistan, who considered themselves descendants of the union of the Naqshbandi Sayyid Amir Kulal and a daughter of the great conqueror Timur (d. 1405). If in the aetiological narratives that recorded these conversions, agency was given to the individual holy man, in seeing conversion as only one moment in a longer process of acculturation, we must again recognize the role of shrines as the enduring institutional agents of this slower procedure. For each of these tribal groups venerated the shrines of their convertors by making pilgrimages to holy burial places that, in some cases, allowed pastoralists to articulate ancestral claims to the surrounding land. Islam, then, also served the practical function of sanctifying claims to pasture and water. Such functionality helps us recognize the way in which conversion and acculturation were reciprocal processes in which the convert’s agreement to be drawn into a larger moral community based on the acceptance of Islamic norms was exchanged for a series of fringe benefits. These might include sanctifying customary rights, arbitrating disputes, curing animals, providing talismans, writing documents needed for mercantile or state interactions, or any of the other services that the shrines and their religious professionals could provide.
Such exchanges bring us to the conjunction between conversion to Islam and interaction with the state, and in turn to the role of shrine complexes and their personnel in mediating these interactions, particularly with regard to the tribal (pastoral–nomadic) groups which early modern states increasingly sought to control. Once again, religion formed a useful instrument of social action. We have already seen how, as acculturation, conversion to Islam was a multi-tiered process in which there existed many points of negotiation along a spectrum between former custom and wholesale sharia. In some cases, what this meant in practice was that states tried to intervene in the acculturation process by pushing tribal groups in directions that better suited state policy. Typically, this meant binding tribal peoples more closely to urban legal personnel or rural Sufi-‘ulama outposts and thence to the common rules of sharia rather than fissiparous custom as a strategy of rendering tribes more governable. In being promoted by force of state, such religious projects can accurately be considered ventures in the creation of ‘orthodoxy’, that is, a historically generated religious norm produced by the exercise of power. An example is seen in the Ottoman patronage of outposts for the Bektashi brotherhood as a means of exerting control over areas of Anatolia with unstable tribal populations. In other cases, the Ottomans encouraged immigrant legalistic Naqshbandi Sufis to found stations among rural Turkomans in order to direct their acculturation towards a more legally codified and thence predictable set of Islamic norms. Such policies did not only involve the Sufi brotherhoods and, in developing the legal-administrative system known as the ‘ilmiyye, the Ottomans were assiduous in employing law to better control their bewildering variety of Muslim subjects. For once a community was classified as Muslim, whether they understood their own Islam in legalistic terms or not, such classification allowed the state to use the regulated and relatively predictable mechanisms of sharia to shape their behaviour. For even though recent scholarship has shown the practical implementation of sharia to have varied by general context and jurisprudential decision, the Ottoman bureaucratization of law sought to delimit the executive fiat of ‘ulama as much as the nonconformity of tribesmen.

So far we have focused on more collective and in some cases state-sponsored forms of conversion. But conversion was also the outcome of private decision-making, and so we can detect larger-scale patterns emerging from the sum of individual acts. Two important and distinctive patterns of individual motivation can be seen with regard to the avoidance of slavery and the sometimes-related phenomenon of social mobility. With regard to the intersection between conversion and slavery, the best-known example is
again related to the agency of the state by way of the Ottoman devshirme system. Until its effective end in 1648, the devshirme (a term first cited in 1438) used a flesh-and-blood tax to enlist the sons of Balkan Christians, raise them as Muslims, and then employ these adoptive sons of the state as Ottoman bureaucrats and soldiers. The opportunities that this brought paradoxically encouraged some parents to bribe officials into taking their children. The extent to which conversion emerged from less formal mechanisms of military recruitment elsewhere is unclear if nonetheless likely.

We see a quite different pattern in Africa, where being kidnapped into the Atlantic slave trade offered no options for social advancement comparable to the relative meritocracy of the devshirme. On the basis of Islamic legal regulations forbidding the enslaving of Muslims, many individual Africans chose to convert to Islam in the (often vain) hope of avoiding enslavement. However, conversion was not only one-way, and whether in the plantations of Brazil or the Carolinas, African Muslims later found themselves being converted – and acculturated – to Christianity, even if their Islam did survive longer in the Americas than was once thought. Lest African religious lives appear solely as responding to external hegemonies, whether Muslim or Christian, it is also important to recognize the role of the slave trade in disseminating African religious practices. This can be seen most clearly through the dissemination of African Muslim practices of spirit possession, whether by the rise of the Gnawa (Berber: aguinaw, ‘black’) brotherhoods in North Africa, the spread of the Zar, Bori and Ahl-i Hava cults in the Middle East, or the diffusion of Sidi possession rites in India. In each case, this involved a form of acculturation-in-reverse through which non-African Muslims adopted religious techniques that had evolved from the pre-Islamic customs of converted African slaves.

Conversions also took place further north in the Mediterranean, where we find the early modern phenomenon of the renegado. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, many Christian sailors from northern Europe made the private decision to better their social and economic prospects by becoming Muslims. The collective outcome of these individual acts of conscience added up to a considerable number, with estimates varying from the lower thousands to the tens of thousands. As captured Christians enslaved in the ports of North Africa sought a confessional path to freedom, in some cases these private decisions may be compared with the conversions chosen by Africans. In other cases, we are dealing with strategic acts of religious careerism as impoverished Christian sailors chose Islam not merely as a path to freedom but as a road to social ascendance and riches. Once again, such individual
decisions added up to larger collective and comparable processes, not least since the conversions of European renegados were echoed by the decisions of many Ottoman Christians and Jews who similarly converted in pursuit of social mobility. Whether in Istanbul or London, the demographic impact of these conversions was visible enough to attract the attention of seventeenth-century storytellers and playwrights who chided their fellow Jews and Christians for having alternatively ‘turned Rumi’ or ‘turned Turk’.

The process was by no means one-way, though, and the gradual Spanish conquest of Iberia saw both enforced and voluntary conversions to Christianity as the Muslim ethnic and professional groups of al-Andalus negotiated new relations with the crowns of Castile and Aragon. In the case of professional cavalrymen, conversion to Christianity allowed them to replicate their high social standing under the new dispensation. But for Iberia’s many lower-class Muslims, unable to afford the luxury of pious emigration (hijra) to North Africa, their forced conversion led them to secretly preserve remnants of their old faith in Arabic-script Spanish (aljamiado).

Whether with the Ottoman Dönme, or the Iberian conversos, the confessional states of early modernity spun a concealed pattern of crypto-communities. Similarly enforced conversions and assimilations of many different Muslims took place after the Russian conquests of Kazan and Astrakhan in the sixteenth century and Siberia and the Crimea in the eighteenth century. From a Muslim viewpoint at least, here again was acculturation in reverse as these Iberian and Eurasian Muslims incrementally lost sight of their former faith and practice. If conversion could sometimes be the outcome of private choice, it was therefore also increasingly a question of state enforcement.

The state: confessionalization and conformity

The religious interventions of the state came not only through conquest, conversions, transactions with Sufi-‘ulama and the patronage of grand mosques. They also came through a more systematic change by which the larger early modern polities transformed themselves into confessional and thereby persecuting states. This offered a contrast with the later medieval period when legitimacy-weak and relatively short-lived tribal dynasties had cultivated the support of a Sufi establishment that their own insecurities helped create. This pattern had reached its apogee in the sixteenth century when the Safavi Sufi brotherhood transformed itself into the ‘Safavid’ empire by conquering Persia in 1501. From this point, to make a pilgrimage to the
shrine of Safi al-Din at Ardabil was at once to pay homage to the ancestor of a Sufi and an imperial dynasty. Similar state (or better, court) attempts to co-opt Sufi authority were seen elsewhere in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In India, the Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556–1605) synthesized elements of Muslim and Hindu religiosity in a new ‘divine religion’ (din-i ilahi) in which Sufi forms of authority were appropriated for the emperor himself, who was designated the ‘perfect man’ (insan al-kamil) who ruled as rightful master (murshid) over courtiers configured as his disciples (murids). A parallel practice emerged in the Malay courts of Southeast Asia, where in Aceh the sultan Iskandar Muda (r. 1607–36) was likewise presented as the insan al-kamil in whom all authority rested.

As personalized forms of religiosity based on the coalescence of imperial and religious charisma in the person of the emperor, these ventures were mainly aimed at controlling the court and ensuring its members’ loyalty. Such attempts to instrumentalize religion at court were clearly different from attempts to use religion to regulate a far more numerous and diffuse society of imperial subjects. This brings us to the question of confessionalization, which has been identified as a state-led (if not entirely state-controlled) demarking of religious boundaries for the purposes of state expansion and governance. What this involved was not only the increasing role of the state as a sponsor of conversion, but also a more general attempt to enforce uniform standards of ‘orthodoxy’. While the case has been made most fully with regard to the Ottoman Empire, the process of confessionalization has been theorized as inherently interactive: an outcome of inter-state relations by which the Ottoman, Safavid and Habsburg empires shaped their religious identities in distinction to one other. In the Ottoman and Safavid cases, this process manifested itself not only in increasing attempts to police religiosity but also to actively transform it, whether by the large-scale promotion or similarly large-scale suppression of particular forms of Islam. The most vivid example of such state-initiated transformation was the conversion of Safavid Persia from Sunni to Shi’i Islam, a process which, though initiated in 1501, only took full effect a century later. In practical terms, this involved the deployment of state resources towards the importing of Shi’i ‘ulama from Lebanon and the establishment of the madrasa colleges to produce a home-grown cadre of legal expertise in Persia. Since such a top-down policy would hardly reach the grass roots of popular religiosity, the Safavid state also patronized a new Shi’i sacred geography of pilgrimage sites. Based on the tombs of descendants from the twelve Shi’i imams, these imamzada sites articulated Shi’i blood lineages to counter the tariqa lineages.
of Persia’s great Sufi families. Here we see the role of the state in not only promoting religion through importing new legal specialists and establishing new pilgrimage centres, but also in persecuting those it regarded as rivals for religious authority. For the most part, this meant the Sufis, who were massacred, exiled or at best rusticated.

The turning of the Muslim millennium in 1591 sent chiliastic tremors through the surrounding decades. State authorities looked gravely on the revolutionary potential of such millennial expectations. In India, Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624) – the self-proclaimed ‘renewer of the second millennium’ (mujaddid al-alf al-sani) – was imprisoned by the emperor Jahangir and his writings subsequently banned by the emperor Aurangzeb. As in the Ottoman and Safavid polities, other forms of charismatic Islam (such as the Rawshani movement among the Afghans) were also increasingly regulated under Mughal rule. The execution of the fifth Sikh guru Arjan in 1606 and the ninth guru Tegh Bahadur in 1675 can also perhaps be fitted into this policy that saw both Muslim and non-Muslim charismatic movements as a danger to political stability, echoing in India the Ottoman suppression of the messianic Jewish movement led by Sabbatai Sevi (d. 1676). What we see, then, is the state policing not only of Islam, but of religion more generally.

By the seventeenth century, the increasing confidence of the by now well-established imperial states led them to act as religious authorities in their own right, particularly through the use of sharia and its clerical executors. A point of transition between the gathering of Sufi charisma around the emperor and the absorption of religious law by the state can be seen with the Ottoman emperor Suleiman (r. 1520–66), who tapped into the expectations surrounding the turn of the Islamic millennium to present himself as the supreme ‘lawgiver’ (kanuni) whose personal justice permeated, and legitimated, the entire imperial structure. What emerged more slowly was a shifting in the relations of the state and the other ‘ulama lawmakers operating in its lands as the Ottoman Empire sought both to centralize the patronage (indeed, the salarization) of legal experts and to organize the implementation of their knowledge. Whether messianic or Sufi, the problem with charisma as a basis for state authority had been that it was inherently unstable and uncontrollable, a dilemma confronted most starkly by the Safavids. For every charismatic emperor there were rebellious charismatic subjects. In principle at least, Islamic law provided a more stable and predictable means not only of articulating a ruler’s and state’s legitimacy, but also of shaping the behaviour of its people. But the problem remained with sharia that it consisted of non-standard and at times conflicting sets
of legal opinions and practices that emerged from diffuse bodies of legal practice and quasi-independent groups of legal practitioners who operated in different cities. While it was not achievable overnight, the solution was to bring legal scholarship and implementation into the ambit of the state and its own preferred norms. This might be achieved by the construction of state-sponsored madrasa colleges in the imperial centre (as with the six colleges established in Istanbul by the emperor Suleiman between 1550 and 1559) or by the implementation of a hierarchical religio-legal bureaucracy (as emerged with the Ottoman ‘ilmīyye system). In the period’s most remarkable fusion of imperial state norms with Islamic law, culturally Chinese Hui Muslims such as Wang Daiyu (d. c.1660) began to write Muslim works in Chinese (later known as the Han Kitab) that blended sharia with the terminology and principles of state Confucianism.

Clearly, such policies involved long-term transformations, and as such were subject to any number of contingencies, whether from adjustments in policy at the imperial apex or opposition at the bottom of the system as among Arab ‘ulama in the imperial province of Egypt. If throughout the early modern centuries there would always remain a variety of ‘antagonistic sharias’, it is nonetheless accurate to see an increasing role for state-sponsored religious law. Even so, the process was two way: if the ‘ulama were bureaucratized, then the state in turn was clericalized. A comparable trade-off to that seen in the Ottoman Empire occurred in Persia. For while under the Safavids the state sponsorship of legal clerics and their institutions clearly helped to create a more uniformly ‘orthodox’ society, there remained clerical objectors to the expansion of imperial influence into the propriety realms of the ‘ulama. But if the Safavids and Ottomans appear to cohere with this picture of increasing state promotion of a ‘confessional’ identity through recourse to legal definitions of Muslim behaviour for their subjects, the case is less clear for the other great Muslim imperial polity of the period. Despite what we have seen of persecutions in Mughal India, as yet we know too little about state–‘ulama relations there to paint the Mughal Empire as another confessional state. Arguably, the demographic position of a ruling Muslim minority may have rendered such policies unthinkable: Mughal elite translations of Hindu scriptures clearly point to a complicated picture of religious engagement. Even so, the reign of Aurangzeb between 1658 and 1707 does seem to point to increasing attempts to draw sharia into state policy and to use legal rulings to articulate a more ‘orthodox’ Sunni identity for the Mughals, not least with regard to their Shi’ite neighbours – and enemies – in the Deccan and Persia.
We can also detect the increasing influence of Mecca- and Medina-trained legalistic ‘ulama in Southeast Asia during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, some of whom found employment in the Malay sultanates. Africa’s eighteenth century also saw increasingly close ties between state and ‘ulama, with the latter becoming increasingly dependent on state stipends and employment. When the Qing Empire in China began its westwards conquests into Central Asia between the 1690s and 1750s, in oasis towns such as Hami, Turfan and Wushi, Sufi-‘ulama emerged as middlemen who used sharia as the basis of negotiated rights for the Qing’s new Muslim subjects. The policy had multiple beneficiaries: the Qing state gained local agents and legitimacy; the Muslim populace gained customary rights and protection from Zunghar nomads; and the middlemen gained authority and wealth at the expense of other Sufi families unwilling to work with the non-Muslim Manchus.

What we see in these various forms of interplay between ruling elites and religious professionals was not so much a straightforward pattern of state domination and hegemony, but rather a picture of compromise and negotiation. The increasing need of various states (including non-Muslim empires like the Qing and Romanovs) for the services of Muslim religious experts created increased opportunities for such figures. Like the genealogies and miracles examined earlier, legal expertise and ethical credibility formed a source of cultural capital with which religious professionals could exert agency over state representatives. The financial rewards that came with administrative employment or favoured trading access may also have increased competition among ‘ulama seeking these positions, which in turn found expression in doctrinal polemics and personal denunciations.

Yet legal expertise and moral authority did not only afford Sufi-‘ulama the opportunities of incorporation into existing state systems. In some cases, they also afforded them the possibility of founding their own states through the legal and just war of jihad against infidels. The most striking case is seen in the foundation in 1679 of theocratic rule over eighteen oasis towns centred on the Central Asian city of Kashgar. Established by Afaq Khwaja (d. 1694) after violent campaigns against non-Muslim nomads and surviving until around 1760, this Sufi state endowed hundreds of schools, Sufi lodges and pilgrimage sites that promoted the sharia-derived rules of the Naqshbandi brotherhood as a source of social order. In a pattern that would continue into the nineteenth century, in West and Saharan Africa the eighteenth century saw militant Sufi-‘ulama succeed in founding a sequence of jihad states, such as Bundu, as well as fail to establish others. Anti-Sufi figures were also part of
this pattern of state formation, as with the obscure Najdi scholar Muhammad ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab (d. 1792) who entered a marital alliance with the family of Muhammad ibn Saʿud (d. 1765), the founder of the first Saʿudi emirate in Arabia. While Ibn ʿAbd al-Wahhab’s influence would spread widely in the modern era, in his own time he was only one of many ascendant ʿulama – more often than not affiliated with the Sufi brotherhoods – who channelled the political turmoil of the eighteenth century towards the founding of godly polities.

Renewal: from cumulative accretion to colonial crisis

The activities of such activist ʿulama have lent the eighteenth century the moniker of an ‘age of reform’ when a crisis of conscience spread among Muslims as far apart as West Africa and Southeast Asia. As mechanisms for organizing and disseminating the ideas of such ʿulama, the Sufi tariqas were crucial to these developments in almost every region. To state that there was little intrinsically new in the teachings of the many Prophet-centred ʿulama of the eighteenth century is less to denigrate their lack of originality than to recognize what they were trying to achieve. In this respect, it is more effective to consider these figures as ‘renewers’ (mujaddid) who were self-conscious participants in a deliberate process of ‘renewal’ (tajdid) which they regarded as both a general feature of Islamic history and a particular duty of Sufis and ʿulama as the rightful heirs of the Prophet. Correspondingly, it seems best to set aside the term ‘reformist’ for later colonial Muslim intellectuals whose contacts with European ideas pushed them into quite distinct intellectual ventures with little or no antecedent in Islamic tradition.

To recognize the discursive continuities between the eighteenth-century renewers and their predecessors in the sixteenth and particularly the seventeenth century is not to suggest that little had changed. The fact that eighteenth-century calls for renewal found much greater traction among various segments of society than their predecessors is itself a pointer to significant changes in intellectual context if not necessarily content. As perhaps the most widely influential institution of renewal, the Naqshbandi–Mujaddidi brotherhood is a case in point. For while the early seventeenth century saw the imprisonment of its founder, the ‘renewer of the second millennium’ Ahmad Sirhindi, the eighteenth century saw his followers successfully expand into Central Asia and the Ottoman Empire. In addition to the trans-regional networks of renewal fostered by these Naqshbandis or
the Qadiris in Africa and Southeast Asia, there were also more regional movements, as with the Kadizadeli preachers of Istanbul and its provinces. In each of these calls for renewal, the central idea was for a return to the practices sanctioned by the Prophet’s example. In terms of undermining the religious status quo, the key discursive weapon in the renewers’ arsenal was the concept of bid’a (‘innovation’), which they used to discredit the vast range of religious practices they regarded as having no precedent in Prophetic sunna.

In conceiving the call for renewal’s expansive spread as part of a larger process, it is helpful to think through the internal logic of these charges of ‘innovation’ in the contexts where they emerged. As we saw earlier, the elevated status of the Sufis had led to the development of grand mausoleums, pilgrimages and a carnival culture of popular religiosity. Such practices were as common in Cairo as in Delhi. As historians, it is important to recognize the cumulative nature of these developments, which had expanded over time as various local accretions were incrementally added to these common practices of saint veneration. Such cumulative accretion – the addition of increasing layers of ritual and theological superstructure – was the outcome of a process of localization through which the teachings and practices associated with trans-regional Sufi networks took on increasingly local characteristics as holy families at every node along these networks accommodated to local cultural demands. In many settings, such accommodation was the outcome of the conversion process we have seen as an ongoing acculturation from former non-Muslim practices towards some ideal Islamic end point.

As the processes of accretion and accommodation worked together over a period of centuries, there evolved a tremendous variety of popular customs. This diversifying trajectory of religious development emerged from the cultural negotiations in any given setting between the Islamic practices imported by the immigrant and often learned representatives of the tariqas and the demands of local audiences for intelligible forms of religion. With regard to the emergence of renewal, what is important is that the outcome of these innumerable local negotiations meant that, in practice, Islam looked different wherever one found it. For while the brotherhoods had transmitted enough cultural markers to render such practices ‘recognizable’ as Islam, the diversifying effects of acculturation and accretion meant that they were inevitably not all the same Islam. Clearly, if local representatives claimed that each of these Islams was true Islam, then the visitor faced the logical problem that not all of them could be the single true Islam of the Prophet.
Faced wherever they travelled with such varieties in actual practice, ‘ulama drew two concepts from their discursive toolbox: first, the Prophet’s sunna (‘way’) as a benchmark against which to measure what was and was not truly ‘Islamic’; and second, the category of bid’a with which to castigate whatever seemed to fall beyond the sunna’s pale.

In the intellectual framework of the ‘ulama, the call for renewal was often therefore the outcome of an experience of dissonance that occurred in social or geographic settings where Islam was no longer sufficiently ‘recognizable’, where the transmission of universal cultural markers had either been weak to begin with or diluted by acculturation. Paradoxically, as over time the holy lineages that the Sufis claimed connected their followers to the Prophet had become embedded in local environments, in the eyes of later generations of Sufi-‘ulama the old lineages had become vehicles for leading their charges astray. It is the internal logic of this process as it moved from observation to rumination and action by these latter day ‘ulama that helps us understand the venture of ‘renewal’ (tajdid) in which they saw themselves participating.

The connections between the teaching circles of renewers emerging in different regions help us explain in turn why what was not in itself a new call for renewal was able to spread so widely and so quickly in the eighteenth century. For we are dealing with a question of, on the one hand, the increasing exposure of Sufi-‘ulama to popular religious practices and, on the other hand, the increasing ability of such learned men to compare divergences between religious practices across different regions. This process of comparison occurred through several means: ‘ulama service in bureaucratic positions that required them to move between different cities or administer to rural populations; the migration of former country people and their religious practices into the towns; increasingly lavish carnival and pilgrimage celebrations in late imperial cities; and perhaps most importantly, the accelerated movement of Sufi-‘ulama between different regions. At present, it remains unclear whether we can also link the increasingly widespread calls for renewal to a demographic expansion in the number of ‘ulama. But whether or not such a clerical super-abundance did emerge from the new madrasas sponsored by the state and brotherhoods, it is clear that renewal was the outcome of greater interaction between trans-regional and literate forms of Islam and localized and non-literate religious practices.

The spread of trans-regional Sufi brotherhoods and scholarly networks dedicated to the cause of renewal was therefore a crucial component in these developments as the increasing interaction of the tariqa networks connected Sufi-‘ulama across vast distances and allowed them to transfer their ideas.
Two cases in point are ‘Abdullah Nidai (d. 1760), who after leaving his home city of Kashgar in East Turkestan resided in towns across Central Asia and Persia before settling in Istanbul, and Murtada al-Zabidi (d. 1791), who after leaving his North Indian home resided among scholars of Yemen, the Hijaz and Egypt. The eighteenth century also saw more African and Southeast Asian Sufi-‘ulama visit Mecca and other centres of learning in Yemen, Egypt, Morocco and India. Even the Hui Muslims of inland China, for centuries probably the least connected of all Muslim communities, responded to the call for renewal carried from Arabia by the Chinese Naqshbandi Sufi, ‘Aziz Ma Mingxin (1719?–81). For after years of study in Yemen and the Hijaz, in 1761 Ma Mingxin returned to China determined to free its Muslims from the errors of ‘innovation’.

By moving from far-flung homelands to major centres of learning then returning home, journeys that often involved long passages through many lands, such Sufi-‘ulama were more easily able to compare the Islams of different regions. The circulation of scholars thus initiated the sequences of comparison, dissonance and criticism that fed the many renewal movements of the eighteenth century. Increased scholarly mobility and interaction between different regions created an unprecedented degree of awareness among learned Muslims of the varieties of Islam that had emerged in the previous centuries. In their own eyes at least, the renewers were active agents in an Islamic reading of history that saw the conversions of earlier periods as incomplete and the negotiated Islams of acculturation as needing replacement by a more thoroughgoing commitment to sharia. Connecting religious renewal to the formation of states, such calls fed the ‘ulama-led jihads that founded many new African polities in the decades either side of 1800.

If this chapter has emphasized the processual integrity of religious developments, then there was also of course a political context. For as the eighteenth century wore on, calls for renewal in some regions drew strength from the sense of moral crisis that accompanied the contraction or collapse of the Ottoman, Mughal and Safavid empires and the alarmingly novel experience of being conquered by former Muslim subject peoples (whether Afghans or Arab Bedouin) or non-Muslims (whether Christians or Hindus). The loss of state employment opportunities, and the closing of frontier settlement zones, may have rendered these imperial contractions especially painful to a scholarly class that had increasingly come to rely on the expansive Muslim states of early modernity. Yet the fall of the Safavids and Mughals did not mean the end of Islamic renewal, and by the late eighteenth
century, renewal – and, in time, outright reform – was accelerated through interaction with the European empires. In some cases, colonial policies helped to further empower ‘ulama who took on the role of middlemen between new colonial states and their communities. Both the Russian Empire in the Volga–Ural region and the Company Empire in Bengal cultivated links to Muslim scholars through their need to understand existing laws and create standardized codes with which to govern their Muslim charges. In 1797, the influence of these cooperative ‘ulama was enhanced by the Russian opening of a Muslim printing house in Kazan under Abu’l Ghazi Buraš-uglî, though the Muslims of India, Iran and Egypt would have to wait another twenty years for a similar technology transfer. If Prophet-centred renewal made much headway in the eighteenth century, the fuller and more truly ‘reformist’ transformation of Islam would not take place until the Muslim modernists and missionaries made their impact in the colonial nineteenth century.

FURTHER READING

Regional Studies


Babayan, Kathryn, Mystics, Monarchs and Messiahs: Cultural Landscapes of Early Modern Iran (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).


Crews, Robert D., For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).


Green, Nile, Making Space: Sufis and Settlers in Early Modern India (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012).


**Thematic studies**


Barletta, Vincent, Covert Gestures: Crypto-Islamic Literature as Cultural Practice in Early Modern Spain (University of Minnesota Press, 2005).


**Case studies in connectivity**


