

## Global Early Modernity and the Problem of What Came Before

Alan Strathern

This chapter is placed at the end of this volume but it is not intended as a formal conclusion which responds directly to the other chapters. Instead, in common with the other contributions to the book, the discussion presented here arises out of my participation in the ‘Defining the Global Middle Ages’ project and my informal role within the project workshops as something like the resident early modernist. In that sense, the function of this chapter is to connect the emerging field of the Global Middle Ages with the somewhat more established field of Global Early Modernity, and to flesh out some of the conceptual problems and points of tension that arise when we consider them together. Indeed, as I look back on the project discussions that gave rise to this volume, I am reminded of the degree to which there appeared to be a distinct disconnect between these two fields. Medievalists at those workshops occasionally wanted to address (or more regularly critique) the notion of modernity, but the notion of *early* modernity was something that was barely considered as a distinct concept. Equally surprising was the discovery of the rather different political landscapes which the two tribes of scholars seem to inhabit. Among specialists of the middle ages, notions of globalization, modernization, imperialism were liable to be viewed with a certain suspicion, partly because they were in turn identified with European agency. For scholars in the field of Global Early Modernity, on the other hand, ‘decolonizing the discipline’, has often meant an insistence on non-European agency in such phenomena.

One of the reasons why a stronger connection was not made in workshop discussions themselves was that the question of periodisation was quite quickly set to one side as something that would draw us into an interminable rabbit warren of nominalist anxieties and

thereby impede more grounded discussions. This pragmatic approach had the merit of clearing a space in which scholars could get on with the job of experimenting with new forms of collaboration. But as far as future research into the field of the Global Middle Ages goes, it seems unlikely that questions of periodisation will go away; at some point they become unavoidable. Indeed, it is striking that as the ‘Defining the Global Middle Ages’ project itself moved into its latter stages, issues of periodisation did begin to impinge more strongly, if perhaps only implicitly: first, as the group as a whole moved towards the identification of the distinctive characteristics of the Global Middle Ages, a discussion which gave rise to the shape of the current chapters; and second, during the writing phase itself when Catherine Holmes and Naomi Standen drew on those distinctive characteristics to develop a hypothetical model of the Global Middle Ages itself. While not explicitly framed around the question of periodisation, these developments within the project quite clearly have the potential to set up a direct dialogue with the early modern.

Project workshop discussions also revealed the extent to which an evocation of the ‘global’ has become something at once desired and resisted and frustratingly hard to encompass. This is not so surprising if we consider the various ways in which the rise of global history has cut against the grain of the wider discipline: the weight of professionalization and specialisation, the demands of linguistic expertise, and the mountains of secondary literature have all militated against the attempt to adopt lofty positions of perspective. Nor was the intellectual climate of academia in the last decades of the twentieth century conducive to such ambitions, for one could arrive at scepticism towards grand narrative via both conservative and radical impulses. Meanwhile the elevation of teleology and anachronism to the status of cardinal sins has sometimes amounted to an aversion towards asking basic questions about how we got where we are today. Historians have reserved the right to explore what any given period was

like in its own right and in its own terms – not as part of some sweeping account of the story of humanity or as some social science dissection of its universal forms.

As always, then, it has been the world beyond the walls of academia that had summoned a new perspective into being. Our sense of shared global predicament and the visible end of Western hegemony has meant that global or world history has emerged nonetheless, forcing faculties and departments to generate new courses and devise new kinds of post.<sup>1</sup> And the impulse of global history to explain ‘how we got here’ is often un-disguisable. The ‘here’ in question may mean either (1) our globalised condition or (2) the balance of power maintaining among the different states and regions of the world. Indeed, it has been the salience of both questions to historians of regions outside the West that has generated the momentum behind the striking development of the global history of the Early Modern period (roughly 1400 or 1500 to 1800 CE).<sup>2</sup> It is a challenge for the field of the Global Middle Ages that these questions make less sense in the period 500-1500 CE, and that it therefore has to work harder to generate meaningful questions of its own.

## **1. Degrees of Connectivity**

To begin with the first question or teleology, ‘medieval’ to ‘early modern’, mentioned above: perhaps the most important reason why the notion of a Global Early Modern period has

---

<sup>1</sup> Some typologies distinguish between ‘global’ and ‘world’ history, but these are not deployed here and did not form a significant part of the collaborative discussion.

<sup>2</sup> The 1400 start date is preferred by the authoritative *Cambridge World History, Volume 6: The Construction of a Global World, 1400–1800 CE*, ed, Jerry H. Bentley, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, Merry E. Wiesner-Hanks, (Cambridge, 2015).

gained traction has been its capacity to capture the connective flux of these centuries. To what extent may the Global Middle Ages simply follow suit? In this volume, the chapters by Glen Dudbridge and Jonathan Shepard make a strong case for much earlier forms of Eurasian connectivity, and the introduction explicitly uses this to erode the distinction with post 1490s interconnection.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it has long been recognized that Eurasia was already host to at least two vast zones of interaction – the Silk Road and the Indian Ocean – for centuries before the European arrival (Map 3).<sup>4</sup> These were not just trading networks allowing for the circulation of goods and people but also great engines of cultural transference. Indeed, as shall be emphasized again below, the expansion of the world religions and philosophies across Eurasia and parts of Africa is an extremely important characteristic of the Global Middle Ages (Maps 6 and 7). The Buddhist world stretched from the Himalayas to Sri Lanka and to Japan by the latter half of the first millennium (Map 5).<sup>5</sup> The Muslim ecumene stretched from Mali in West Africa to Aceh in Southeast Asia by the end of the period (Map 3 and 7).<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Shepard's chapter, emphasising in particular the silk roads; Dudbridge; Introduction pp. [5, 29].

<sup>4</sup> Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250-1350*, (New York, 1989); Jerry Bentley, *Old World Encounters. Cross-Cultural Encounters and Exchanges in Pre-Modern Times* (New York, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> See Yarrow, Dudbridge, Shepard in this volume. As one example of the Buddhist ecumene, see Tilman Frasch, 'A Pāli Cosmopolis? Sri Lanka and the Theravāda Buddhist Ecumene, c. 500– 1500' in *Sri Lanka at the Crossroads of History*, eds. Zoltán Biedermann and Alan Strathern (London, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Nor were these closed-off systems, of course: the lateral axis of Eurasia from the Bosphorus to the Sea of Japan played host to inter-minglings of different strands of Manichaeism,

Indeed, from this angle, the significance of Vasco da Gama's rounding of the Cape of Good Hope and entry into the Indian Ocean in 1498, may appear to be simply Europe finally breaking out of its relative isolation in order to gate-crash a party that was already rocking – and thereby rather frenetically intruding itself into that part of the world where the most impressive feats of material production, long-distance commerce, wealth accumulation and great empire construction had long been underway. There is, then, surely more profit to be gained from establishing further dimensions and implications of connectivity in the Middle Ages. It may also be possible to claim that this represents an advance on the ancient period, as Holmes and Standen imply in their introductory remarks. This would place the Global Middle Ages within the grand narrative of globalization, after all, just as many Early Modernists have sought to do: both were phases of human history in which connective links multiplied, deepened and intensified.<sup>7</sup>

---

Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Daoism, Saivism and Vaishnavism and so on. One example of the unexpected connections that may result from such a focus is the suggestion that Constantine's conversion to Christianity may have had an impact on the conceptualization of Ashoka's embrace of Buddhism (Antonello Palumbo 'From Constantine the Great to Emperor Wu of the Liang: The Rhetoric of imperial Conversion and the Divisive Emergence of Religious Identities in Late Antique Eurasia' in Arietta Papaconstantinou *et al* (eds.), *Conversion in Late Antiquity. Christianity, Islam and Beyond* (Farnham, 2015), 108-115.

<sup>7</sup> Introduction.

We should note, however, that the more medievalists seek to describe the Global Middle Ages in these terms, the more profoundly their work will undermine the premise on which much work within the broad field of Global Early Modernity is based. At the very least, one would expect border disputes to break out, particularly where early modernists – no less wary of default attention to European agency – have sought to dislodge the 1490s by reaching back to earlier Asian acts of expansion and exploration. It is tempting, for example, to appeal to the extraordinary feats of Chinese seaborne exploration under the leadership of Zheng He in the first decades of the fifteenth century: do these signal the opening of an Asian-initiated Early Modernity, or a characteristic flourish of the middle ages? What about early modernists tempted to alight on the feats of Tamerlane as the opening act of their era, though he died in 1405?<sup>8</sup> Or even, in order to embrace the Song, pushing back to 1100?<sup>9</sup> To the extent that early modernists *really* see these moments as inaugurations of their period, they are already blurring the line with ‘medieval’ connectivity.

One of the results, then, of taking the Global Middle Ages seriously, is that it forces us to acknowledge that 1492 and 1498 have to be central to any defence of the idea of a Global Early Modernity based on connectivity. It is only with the creation of sea-lanes that joined up

---

<sup>8</sup> Sanjay Subrahmanyam ‘Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia’ *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 31, no. 3, (Jul., 1997), pp. 735-762, p. 737, and he draws back from reaching even further back for a starting point, to the Mongol moment of the thirteenth century, after anticipating howls of protest from medievalists... See also John Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire* (London, 2007).

<sup>9</sup> David Porter ‘Introduction’ in Porter (ed.), *Comparative Early Modernities* (Basingstoke, 2012), 4-5

the Atlantic, Indian and Pacific oceans for the first time that truly global interconnections were established.<sup>10</sup> From this point on empires could now extend from the forests of the Amazon to the waters of the Melaka straits; new fiscal systems in Asian polities could be propelled or undermined by the quantities of silver mined in Bolivia and sent across the Pacific via Manila (Map 2). This is the backdrop to a historiography in which an historian of Japanese art can argue that the tales told by English merchants in Japan of the Spanish armada sent to invade England in 1588 helped to precipitate Tokugawa persecutions of its own recently formed Christian communities.<sup>11</sup> This is a world in which, according to a recent argument by a historian of Central Africa, an internal rebellion in Kongo may affect the outcome of the war waged between the Dutch and the Portuguese across Brazil and Atlantic Africa and thus even the Thirty Years war in Europe.<sup>12</sup> Consider that before the arrival of the Portuguese in the 1480s the Kingdom of Kongo appears to have not been in contact with the kingdom of Benin to the north (in what is now southern Nigeria), one of the few other major

---

<sup>10</sup> Judgement here is likely to be informed by the question of just how macro a perspective has to be before it qualifies as ‘global’. A historian of the Global Middle Ages may quite reasonably argue that historical work presented under the global label often deals in fact with regional or transregional geographies equivalent to the Indian Ocean or even the Mediterranean in scale. Arguably, however, ‘global history’ becomes most distinctive when it deals with truly global perspectives.

<sup>11</sup> Timon Screech, ‘The English and the Control of Christianity in the Early Edo Period’, *Japan Review*, 24 (2012), pp. 3-40.

<sup>12</sup> John K. Thornton ‘The Kingdom of Kongo and the Thirty Year’s War’, *Journal of World History* 27 (2016) pp. 189-213.

sites of state construction south of the Sahel by this point.<sup>13</sup> Or that across the Atlantic, where many Central Africans were now destined to travel, the Aztecs and Incas were apparently unaware of each other's existence before the Spanish subjected both of them to an improbable authority ultimately located in Madrid.

But if, outside Asia, Iberian oceanic sea-lanes created new connections within macro regions, it is the fact that all such regions were now brought into sustained conversation with each other that is truly significant. The unprecedented global nature of this human, animal, vegetable and microbial interaction is certainly routinely asserted in the literature.<sup>14</sup> It is from

---

<sup>13</sup> John K. Thornton, personal communication 2 June 2017. The capital of the Kingdom, Mbanza Kongo, lies close to the northern border of present-day Angola. Kongo was apparently a site, then of pristine primary state construction. See Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony*. p. 36, for a general comment on sub-Saharan Africa's *relative* isolation from other macro-regions in this period. One should note however, that the vast interior of sub-Saharan Africa played host to all manner of movements, circulations and migrations of course, while the East coast was firmly linked with Indian Ocean trade.

<sup>14</sup> Charles H Parker, *Global Interactions in the Early Modern Age, 1400-1800* (Cambridge 2010), p. 3; Subrahmanyam, 'Introduction', in Bentley *et al* (ed.), *Cambridge World History, Volume 6*, p. 8; Kerry Ward, 'People in Motion', in *A Companion to World History*, ed. Douglas Northrop (Chichester, 2012), pp. 344-45; Tonio Andrade, 'Cannibals with Cannons: The Sino-Portuguese Clashes of 1521-1522 and the Early Chinese Adoption of Western Guns,' *Journal of Early Modern History*, 19 (2015): 315-316. Note that Jerry Bentley, 'Early Modern Europe and the Early Modern World' in Charles H. Parker and Jerry Bentley (eds.) *Between the Middle Ages and Modernity* (Lanham, MD, 2007), pp 22-5, and Jürgen



this basis that many Early Modernists argue that such developments are not just noteworthy or interesting but *definitive* of their period. Historians of the Global Middle Ages may point to the presence of impressive extended zones of interaction, and even their expansion following the ancient period, but can they argue that it sets their period apart? This would depend in turn upon a rigorous assessment of pre-500 CE connectivity.

To be fair, as the introduction to this volume notes, historians of ‘modernity proper’ may take a similar stance towards the Early Modern thesis, arguing, for example, that global flows in this period were relatively trivial when set alongside the step-change in globalization afforded by the industrial revolution.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, there are some good grounds for arguing that the more significant shift – across a harder periodization barrier – is indeed into the inorganic-energy fuelled world of the later nineteenth century, against which the tentative steps towards globalization and certain features of modernity (whatever that might mean) made in earlier epochs were left far behind.<sup>16</sup> But we should note, at least, that early modernists do not typically set out to insist that their period sees the sudden arrival of modernity per se; rather

---

Osterhammel and Niels P. Petersson, *Globalization: A Short History* (Princeton, 2009), 36-43 explicitly compare with medieval connectivity.

<sup>15</sup> See, for eg, Jan de Vries, ‘The Limits of Globalization in the Early Modern World’, *Economic History Review*, 63 (2010), pp. 710-733, on the lack of price convergence in the early modern period, partly due to basic limitations of communication and travel technology.

<sup>16</sup> Jack A. Goldstone, ‘New Patterns in Global History: A Review Essay on Strange Parallels by Victor Lieberman’, *Cliodynamics* 1 (2010). See Sebastian Conrad, *What is Global History* (Princeton, 2016), p. 97 for a consensus on the importance of the 1880s as a vital step forward in global integration (but also the sixteenth century).

their period is distinctive precisely because it ‘looks both ways.’<sup>17</sup> Nor are hard economic criteria such as price convergence typically seen as the definitive means of assessing the significance of connectivity, but rather such typical concerns of the historian as imperial expansion, the exchange of disease, or the flow of religious ideas.

It may be dismayingly conventional to use the nascent globalization stimulated by the Iberian voyages of the 1490s as a periodization marker, but this should not at all be understood as tantamount to identifying the entire early modern period with European agency. Apart from highlighting the role of non-European expertise and precedent in many of the naval exploits themselves, the more important point is that the historiography now tends to take for granted the Asian and African capacity to respond to and take advantage of the new conjuncture.

Indeed, this could be considered a chief means of distinguishing the period from that of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Just as gunpowder weapons introduced by the Portuguese in Japan were very quickly copied and perfected by Japanese metalworkers and deployed in the wars of unification in the late sixteenth century, so naval technology itself was adapted such that Asian thalassocracies emerged to challenge European seaborne power (Map 5). The vision of early modern oceanic space as a backdrop against which European powers wrestled

---

<sup>17</sup> Parker, *Global Interactions*, 68 and Osterhammel and Petersson, *Globalization*, 49-56 stress, for example, that the world is still polycentric. On early modernity ‘looking both ways’, see Markus Vink, ‘Between Profit and Power: the Dutch East India Company and institutional early modernities in the age of mercantilism’, in C. Parker and J. Bentley (eds.) *Between the Middle Ages and Modernity*, Lanham; Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, 2007, pp. 285-306.

for supremacy has yielded to one crowded with diverse agents and activity.<sup>18</sup> Elsewhere in this volume, Serge Gruzinski's description of early modern globalization as 'a response, on a global scale, to the shocks set off by the Iberian initiatives' has been quoted for its alleged Eurocentrism.<sup>19</sup> But one could argue that the point he is trying to make is that 'globalization had no author.'<sup>20</sup> The globalization he refers to here is not only a material matter, but also a phenomenon of the imagination – and new conceptions of the wider world are not confined to Europeans either. As he described in an earlier work, an Ottoman author in 1580 may now describe the palaces of Moctezuma, or the mining city of Potosí in the Andes, thereby attacking the geographical ignorance of 'the ancients of the ulema', while a couple of decades later a history of the Ottomans themselves issued from a printing press in Mexico (Map 2).<sup>21</sup> Some of the most intriguing research into the travel literature of the period concerns non-

---

<sup>18</sup> Tonio Andrade, 'Beyond Guns, germs and steel: European expansion and maritime Asia, 1400-1750', *Journal of Early Modern History*, 14 (2010), pp. 165-186; Tonio Andrade, *Lost Colony: The Untold Story of China's First Great Victory over the West* (Princeton, 2011); Sebastian R. Prange, 'A Trade of No Dishonor: Piracy, Commerce, and Community in the Western Indian Ocean, Twelfth to Sixteenth Century', *The American Historical Review*, 116:5 (2011), pp. 1269-1293

<sup>19</sup> Pennock and Power, this volume.

<sup>20</sup> Serge Gruzinski. *The Eagle and the Dragon: Globalization and European Dreams of Conquest in China and America in the Sixteenth Century*. Translated by Jean Birrell. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014, p. 3..

<sup>21</sup> Serge Gruzinski, *What time is it there?* (2010), pp. 1-11, 47.

Europeans writing about non-Europeans.<sup>22</sup> If all societies situate themselves within cosmo-geographic imaginaries, for many those visions now had to come to terms, in some form, with the awkward reality of other geographies and cultures.

## **2. Global Early Modernity as a Comparative Exercise**

The preceding comments have assumed, for the sake of discussion, that it is the connectivity of the Global Early Modern period which matters. But this may not be the most useful or interesting way of deploying the concept. Many historians engaging with the proposition of a Global Early Modernity have been prepared to make bolder claims by arguing for a certain *comparative* coherence to their period. Undoubtedly the whole ‘Great Divergence’ debate has greatly enhanced the status of comparative history as a means of addressing important questions about causation. But even before that debate emerged in the early years of the current millennium, there were signs that both global and Asia-specialist scholars were more inclined to think comparatively using the notion of Early Modernity. A rough sample of features that such historians have been willing to perceive as distinctive of their period would include: demographic leaps, monetization and silver, administrative centralization, paper bureaucracy, banking-state nexuses, tax-farming, seaborne mercantilism, standing armies, gunpowder weapons, world wars, trans-regional religious conjunctures, religious

---

<sup>22</sup> Muzaffar Alam, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels in the Age of Discoveries, 1400-1800* (2007); J-P. Rubiés and Manel Ollé, ‘The Comparative History of a Genre: The production and circulation of books on travel and ethnographies in early modern Europe and China’, (*Modern Asian Studies*, August 2015); Nabil Matar, *In the Lands of Christians: Arabic Travel Writing in the Seventeenth Century* (2003)

confessionalisation, renaissances, literary genres of self-expression, secular history writing, the growth of a public sphere, civilizing processes, cosmopolitan urbanism, and so on.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, the connective and the comparative approaches have strengthened each other in certain ways: if the diverse societies of the world are becoming more inter-connected it makes sense that they will come to exhibit other comparable developments to the extent that there is some kind of loose holistic logic to their emergence. For example, if greatly increased silver flows drove monetization, this in turn enabled new forms of taxation, new links between entrepreneurs and the state, and more ambitious forms of military fiscalism. Therefore even historians such as Victor Lieberman, who has undertaken a relatively pure and systematic form of comparative history that pays due attention to autonomous dynamics, have nevertheless appealed to the growing inter-connectedness of the Early Modern period – in this case to explain apparently co-ordinated rhythms in the phases of political growth and collapse.<sup>24</sup> Jerry Bentley, on the other hand, starts from the opposite position and makes new

---

<sup>23</sup> It would be otiose to attempt a list of works here, but see, for example Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global context c.800-1830, Volume 2: Mainland Mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia and the Islands*. (Cambridge, 2009). Virginia Aksan and Daniel Goffman, *The Early Modern Ottomans: Remapping the Empire* (Cambridge, 2007); André Wink, *Akbar* (Oxford, 2009); J. F. Richards, 'Early Modern India and World History', *Journal of World History*, 8 (1997), pp. 197-209; Craig Clunas, *Empire of Great Brightness: Visual and Material Cultures of Ming China, 1368-1644* (Honolulu, 2007); Jack Goody, *Renaissances: The One or the Many* (Cambridge, 2010); Anthony Reid (ed.), *Southeast Asia in the Early Modern Era* (Ithaca, 1993).

<sup>24</sup> Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, vol. II.

connections the primary features of Early Modernity, but then is drawn to establish some comparable results of such connections.<sup>25</sup> It makes sense then to reflect on whether we can also see identifiable shared consequences of the increased connectivity in the Global Middle Ages?

It would not do to imagine that attempts to define the Early Modern period in comparative terms have been easily constructed and smoothly received: they have arisen amidst much debate, which has hardly been resolved.<sup>26</sup> Certain paradoxes embedded in the conceptualization of modernity itself do not look like fading any time soon given the continuing disinclination of the world to settle into the clothes laid out by classic forms of modernization theory. What most besets any use of the term is a most awkward conundrum: is it possible to move far enough away from what had been the traditional Europe-focussed vision of modernity without making nonsense of the concept?<sup>27</sup> It is also unclear whether the concept must only establish certain characteristic features of the period in order to be functional – or whether such features must also visibly pave the way towards modernity? There is an even greater irony to consider here. R. I. Moore has commented that ‘it is hard to identify ... questions about ‘the middle ages’ at or anywhere near the cutting edge of current or recent debate, either academic or popular. The idea has become for European history

---

<sup>25</sup> Bentley ‘Early Modern Europe’.

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Randolph Starn, ‘The Early Modern Muddle’, *Journal of Early Modern History*, 6:3 (2002), pp. 296-307, and Jack Goldstone, ‘The Problem of the ‘Early Modern’ World’, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 41/3 (1998), pp. 249-284.

<sup>27</sup> Hence, the emergence of the notion of multiple modernities, for example: Shmuel Eisenstadt, ‘Multiple Modernities’, *Daedalus*, 129 (2000), pp. 1-29.

effectively useless and, in most ways, a nuisance.’ This sentiment could hold nearly as well for the concept of Early Modernity.<sup>28</sup> Rarely in the last generation have specialists or synthesis writers of *European* history sought to do anything profound with the concept, alarmed perhaps at the schematisation involved. And yet it is exactly over this time that global and non-Western historians have seized hold of the concept of Early Modernity and run with it – necessarily working on a far higher level of generalization. One could attribute this to the naiveté of world historians; it is better, I think, to acknowledge that a shift upwards to the global or trans-regional scale of perspective requires a different and much bolder approach to the business of conceptualization, a willingness to find intellectual reward not just in nuance but in pattern-spotting.<sup>29</sup>

Why then have scholars working within more traditionally-focussed historiographies of *regions* outside Europe, particularly Asian ones, also engaged so strongly with the Early Modernity thesis? Many historians of the Ottomans, Mughals, China, Japan and Southeast Asia have used it as a means of moving their fields on from stale debates, confident that it can be sufficiently re-fashioned in the process. In particular, the concept has allowed historians to escape arguments about imperial rise and fall. Thus for the Ottomans, Giancarlo Casale has argued for an Ottoman age of exploration, in which they too set up seaborne

---

<sup>28</sup> R. I. Moore, ‘A Global Middle Ages’, in James Belich et al. eds, *The Prospects of Global History* (Oxford, 2016), p. 82. Analogously, on p. 81, with regard to the concept of feudalism, he asks if Europeans have largely abandoned it, what is to be gained by prolonging its exposure to the wider world?

<sup>29</sup> On scale in world history, see Adam McKeown ‘What are the Units of World History?’ in Douglas Northrup (ed.) *A Companion to World History* (Oxford, 2012)

empires, sought to control long-distance trade and patrol oceanic space, giving rise to new genres of cartography and travel writing; Baki Tezcan can argue that from 1580 there was a ‘Second Ottoman Empire’ characterised by the development of a kind of public sphere in which proto-democratic and modernising forces acted upon government amidst deepening commercialization; while Tijana Krstić has fruitfully pondered the applicability of some version of confessionalization theory to aspects of the Ottoman religious field in this period (Map 1).<sup>30</sup> If we cross to the other end of Eurasia, meanwhile, we find historians of Japan describing political unification in a period of rapidly adopted firearms, the crushing of independent religious institutions and reformist salvific movements under the heel of a determinedly centralizing government, the transformation of the samurai class into a class of bureaucrats... it is no surprise that the language of early modernity has long been adopted and adapted.<sup>31</sup>

To return to more globally-oriented scholarship, it is interesting to observe that even historians who have otherwise shown an aversion to the appeal of grand narrative – and certainly to older rise-of-the-West stories – have argued strongly for the utility of the concept

---

<sup>30</sup> Giancarlo Casale *The Ottoman Age of Exploration* (Oxford, 2010); Baki Tezcan, *The Second Ottoman Empire: Political & Social Transformation in the Early Modern World* (Cambridge, 2010); Tijana Krstić, *Contested Conversions to Islam: Narratives of Religious Change in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire* (Stanford, 2011).

<sup>31</sup> Conrad Totman, *Early Modern Japan* (Berkeley, 1995); Mary Elizabeth Berry, *Japan in Print: Information and Nation in the Early Modern Period* (University of California Press, 2006); Eiko Ikegami, *Taming of the Samurai: Honorific Individualism and the Making of Modern Japan* (Cambridge, MA, 1995).



of the early modern. One of the most prominent pioneers of the ‘early modernisation’ of global historiography is Sanjay Subrahmanyam, who is also a champion of the primacy of archival, linguistic and philological expertise and often a sceptic with regard to social science-style model building. Yet for all the evident risks of both Eurocentrism and teleology that lurk within the concept, he has seen it nonetheless as a resonant means of disrupting older historical stories. In part, this tension has been resolved in his own work by seeing Early Modernity through the lens of connectivity rather than through a template of check-list features. Yet, in practice, a distinct comparative urge is also observable in his oeuvre.<sup>32</sup> Some of the elements of Asian societies explored in his work (often produced with collaborators) are: the growing role of trade and finance in state affairs, and their reliance on ‘portfolio capitalists’; the development of forms of history-writing recognizable to modern practitioners; new genres of travel writing and comparative ethnology reflecting the expanded horizons of this period; even a greater consciousness of individual agency and more secular traditions of political thought.<sup>33</sup> These are all evocative of standard images of modernity.

---

<sup>32</sup> Sometimes it is explicit, as in S. Subrahmanyam, ‘A Tale of Three Empires: Mughals, Ottomans, and Habsburgs in a Comparative Context’, *Common Knowledge*, 12 (2006), pp. 66–92.

<sup>33</sup> Sanjay Subrahmanyam and Christopher A. Bayly, ‘Portfolio Capitalists and the Political Economy of Early Modern India,’ in Sanjay Subrahmanyam (ed.) *Merchants, Markets and the State in Early Modern India* (New Delhi, 1990), 242–65; Subrahmanyam, *The Political Economy of Commerce: Southern India, 1500–1650* (Cambridge, 1990); Velceru Narayanaravu Rao, David Shulman, Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India, 1600–1800* (New Delhi, 2001); Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ‘Hearing Voices: Vignettes of Early Modernity in South Asia, 1400–1750’, *Daedalus*, 127:3 (1998),

Subrahmanyam is representative of a larger trend in this regard. The reason why historians of Asia – whether regional or transregional in focus – have been prepared to suppress certain epistemological qualms in order to engage seriously with the Early Modernity thesis is in the end rather simple: because the pay-off is an innovative reconsideration of the dynamic potential of non-Western societies in the period immediately before the arrival of full-blown European imperialism in the nineteenth century blew all others off course by imposing its own reductive brand of modernity across the board. If the generations witnessing and following decolonisation needed to digest the tyranny of European empire, the fact that we are now able to envisage the end of Western domination has perhaps made us more open to considering Asian iterations of imperial might, political cohesion, commercial fecundity, and intellectual tumult that immediately preceded it. Thus, for all that Early Modernity's origins in European scholarship render it vulnerable, it can appear not so much as a form of Eurocentric cognitive tyranny as a means of ambushing a Eurocentric version of grand narrative. Lingering assumptions of Europe as history-maker and Asia as tradition-taker are thereby ushered off the stage. The Mughal empire, for example, may instead move into view as a particularly successful participant in the early modern conjuncture, developing political mechanisms that allowed it to claim sovereignty over a vast area with a population greater

---

pp. 75-104; Velcheru Narayanrao and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Notes on Political Thought in Medieval and Early Modern South India', *Modern Asian Studies*, 43:1 (2009), pp. 175-210; Muzaffar Alam, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Indo-Persian Travels*; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Courtly Encounters: Translating Courtliness and Violence in Early Modern Eurasia* (Cambridge MA, 2012).

than that of Europe, and an economy that made it Eurasia's centre of textile production as late as the nineteenth century.<sup>34</sup>

In other words, the suggestions in the introduction and some other chapters in this volume that the world after 1500 may be defined according to European agency and imperialism is precisely what the field of Global Early Modernity has been intent on undermining.<sup>35</sup>

Scholars of this period have refused to perceive these centuries with the hindsight of the nineteenth century triumph of colonialism. European settlement of other regions does begin in this period, but if this is hugely significant in the Americas, it is far less so elsewhere. To the east, in particular, it is Asian empire-building that catches the eye. Even on the sea, the tendency has been to downplay the capacity of the Portuguese to shape the Indian Ocean space in either commercial or political terms.<sup>36</sup> On land, it has long been recognized that European powers were little match for the major Asian empires until at least 1750. These were not static behemoths waiting for their coup de grace at European hands. The Qing, for

---

<sup>34</sup> Prasannan Parthasarathi and Giorgio Riello 'The Indian Ocean in the Long Eighteenth Century' *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 48 (2014), pp. 1-19. On the population of the Mughal empire by 1600, see Audrey Truschke, *Aurangzeb: India's Most Controversial King* (Stanford, 2017), p. 3.

<sup>35</sup> See Introduction, Yarrow, and Pennock and Power in this volume.

<sup>36</sup> Parthasarathi and Riello, 'Indian Ocean'; Uma Das Gupta (ed.), *The World of the Indian Ocean Merchant 1500-1800: Collected Essays of Ashin Das Gupta* (New Delhi, 2004); Michael Pearson, *The Indian Ocean* (London, 2003); Prange, 'Trade of No Dishonor'; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'The Birth-Pangs of Portuguese Asia: Revisiting the Fateful "Long Decade" 1498-1508, in *Journal of Global History*, 2 (2007), pp. 261-280.

example, expanded the reach of the Chinese state to double the area that the Ming had ruled.<sup>37</sup> Of course, if training our gaze on aggressive non-European gunpowder-wielding empires destabilizes assumptions of deep-rooted and inevitable Western dominance, it also does strange things to an academic ethics of anti-colonialism. In a properly global perspective, empire-building becomes a rather universal tendency of mankind before the advent of nationalism. There remain, of course, very good reasons for distinguishing some particularly distinctive and troubling features of both early modern and modern European imperialism.<sup>38</sup> But other features more typically associated with the latter – notions of cultural supremacy and civilizing discourse, the erection of imperial bureaucracies, the monetization of the economy, military fiscalism, the classificatory projects of imperial ethnology – may now be extended to Asian examples.<sup>39</sup> Pennock and Power in this volume suggest that Europeans and Aztecs may be compared for the way in which they both

---

<sup>37</sup> Peter Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, M.A., 2005)

<sup>38</sup> Too many to elaborate here, but the scale and nature of the Atlantic slave trade, the devastating impact of Old World diseases in the New, the reluctance to countenance multi-ethnic imperial elites, the particularly determined forms of economic extraction, and the developing notions of racial and religious purity... would be starting points.

<sup>39</sup> On ethnology Laura Hostetler, *Qing Colonial Enterprise: Ethnography and Cartography in Early Modern China* (Chicago, 2001); Peter C. Perdue, 'Nature and Nurture on Imperial China's Frontiers', *Modern Asian Studies*, 43 (2009), pp. 245-267; Subrahmanyam, 'Connected Histories', 761.

produced imperial expansions fuelled by cosmologically-charged visions of space and time.<sup>40</sup> Indeed, this might describe all forms of pre-modern empires.<sup>41</sup> At any rate, historians of the early modern period have long elaborated on such visions, in particular on notions of universal empire and astrological-millennial import, which shaped not just imperial self-representations but also imperial action.<sup>42</sup> Indeed, rather than ascribing the Iberian exploratory feats of the 1490s to some innate modernizing impulse, they may be related to religious and cosmological concerns. This means, in particular, the influence of millenarian currents of thought, which were themselves not solely the product of European tradition, but which drew upon circulations of ideas and sentiments journeying around an expanded Mediterranean zone and extending deep into the Islamic world.<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Pennock and Power [this volume], seek to rescue the language of ‘globalization’ for indigenous and subaltern peoples by invoking a rather different and more inclusive concept, that of ‘globalizing cosmologies’. All societies, however, even the most small-scale ones, produce elaborate and expansive cosmologies which necessarily shape and drive engagement with the world, and all imperial projects deploy/are shaped by such cosmological visions.

<sup>41</sup> See Alan Strathern, *Unearthly Powers; Sacred Kingship and Religious Change in World History* (forthcoming).

<sup>42</sup> Peter Fibiger Bang and Dariusz Kołodziejczyk, *Universal Empire: A Comparative Approach to Imperial Culture and Representation in Eurasian History* (Cambridge 2012) As this volume shows, however it is difficult to endorse the notion that ideologies and cosmologies of Universal Empire may be considered a particular characteristic of either the middle ages or the early modern period: they flourished deep in antiquity.

<sup>43</sup> Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ‘Sixteenth-century Millenarianism from the Tagus to the Ganges’, in Subrahmanyam, *Explorations in Connected History: from the Tagus to the Ganges*

### 3. Comparability and the Global Middle Ages

How, then, might the comparative approach to global history work within the framework of a Global Middle Ages? As already been indicated, rather contrary to the politics of conceptions of Global Early Modernity, discussions in the Global Middle Ages project workshops were more likely to be shaped by two instincts. Firstly, there was the sense that globalization and modernization theories necessarily privilege economic – even neoliberal – reductiveness, and are inevitably preoccupied with the rise of the West. But also secondly, and in some degree of tension with the first, that master concepts (modernity, globalisation) must either be temporally and geographically inclusive or intellectually and politically suspect. That such concepts only perform any kind of useful function to the extent that they are discriminatory is apparently of little moment if one feels on the ‘wrong’ side of the discrimination – i.e. the pre-modern and the parochial. But, ideally, at least, there is surely no need to view such analytical categories in judgemental terms and to endow them with some kind of moral power.<sup>44</sup> We all know that modernity has given us some of the most terrible events imaginable; its ills are plain to see. Globalization, meanwhile, is, at the time of writing

---

(Oxford 2005); A. Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam (1400-1700)* (New York, 2012).

<sup>44</sup> ‘There is no shame in premodernity,’ Sheldon Pollock, ‘Pretextures of Time’ *History and Theory*, 46 (2007), p. 381.

subject to a painful backlash amongst many elements of the ‘West’ that simply refuse to see it in unambiguously positive terms.<sup>45</sup>

Yet, it is more difficult to avoid the risk that the term ‘Middle Ages’ then becomes one defined by what it is not, a kind of shadow zone languishing between the bookends of Antiquity and Modernity. What will it profit us, medievalists may feel, to characterise ‘our’ period as merely the absence of an abstraction like modernity, and will such a conception in fact bring us much closer to popular images of the period as stagnant and regressive, images that we have spent our careers fighting against? Even to argue for an internal development (some form of ‘progress’) over the Middle Ages itself may be seen to yield too much to teleology or to reiterate an old story of the collapse of a higher order before the slow work of civilization began again.

The problem then remains as to why the Middle Ages should be used as a framework at all. I shall try to indicate below some ways in which the concept might be lent a certain comparative content akin to that of Early Modernity – albeit at the cost of sacrificing a properly global scope. The alternative is of course to leave it content-less so that it acts as a neutral container.<sup>46</sup> This was the route initially taken by the Global Middle Ages project, which allowed contributors to proceed without any analytical preconceptions. Given how anxious scholars are about terminology, even deploying the term in this open way risks

---

<sup>45</sup> Why ‘the global’ should be deemed a master concept that must be appropriated by all academic fields is not clear.

<sup>46</sup> This is, after all, how most historians of Europe use the term ‘Early Modern’.

accusations of Eurocentricism – though hardly compelling ones.<sup>47</sup> One reply to essentially political anxieties about the concept could be to underline the way in which a global focus on 500-1500 CE works to provincialize Europe precisely because this is the period when any claims that it represents the forefront of ‘progress’ are at their weakest: it is just one small part of the world, comparatively poor by some standards, and comparatively isolated, lacking the means to impose itself in the outer world.<sup>48</sup>

The more substantial problem is that once the Global Middle Ages concept is left without comparative content then it is difficult to think of an intellectual basis for restricting comparators to the 500-1500 CE period. One of our invited occasional regional specialists was Emily Umberger, who works on the pre-Columbian and colonial Mexico, and one theme of her presentation at the workshop on cultures of recording was the way in which mythical thought might serve to organize visible political and military action. But we may find the most illuminating comparisons for this in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Hawaii.<sup>49</sup> And if one wants to conceptualize what kind of empire the Aztecs created and where one might situate it within a spectrum of political centralization, then why not consider it in light of the literature on ancient Rome? If it is orality than one wants to understand then the richest

---

<sup>47</sup> See the introduction.

<sup>48</sup> The concept of ‘progress’ is in itself dubious, of course, but it still animates political concerns in historiography.

<sup>49</sup> As emerged in discussion following presentation [Title?], Oxford, 8 April, 2014; Patrick V. Kirch and Marshall Sahlins, *Anahulu: The Anthropology of History in the Kingdom of Hawaii, volume 1: Historical Anthropology* by Marshall Sahlins (Chicago, 1993). See also Pennock and Power in this volume for related thoughts.



source of comparisons may be found in modern anthropological work in non-literate societies. And so on. This form of comparative history – one that sets out to answer specific questions about how certain phenomena tend to work by watching how they function and evolve in diverse settings – does not need periodisation at all. It grants that the histories of different parts of the world may proceed according to different rhythms.<sup>50</sup> Sheldon Pollock, amongst others, has commented on the problems of assuming that periodization by itself magically produces similarity or comparability: if this is so for the Early Modern period, it is all more the case for the Middle Ages.<sup>51</sup> In short, we are confronted by this question: do we wish to understand certain processes that tend to occur in certain kinds of society (regardless of when they occurred), or do we wish to understand a time period? Notice that the former question draws us rather close to sociology; indeed, the conclusions that result from comparative endeavours will often have a sociological quality.<sup>52</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> It is actually more important to note that the comparison of any one feature or societal mechanism does not require that the contexts in which it is embedded are all somehow equivalent.

<sup>51</sup> Sheldon Pollock, 'Pretextures of Time', *History and Theory*, 46 (2007), 366–383. Pollock has warmed up a little to the concept of early modernity in his Introduction to Sheldon Pollock (ed.), *Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern Asia: Explorations in the Intellectual History of India and Tibet, 1500–1800* (Durham, NC, 2010), p. 4, but still cautions that we 'have no reason to expect conceptual symmetry' from 'historical synchronicity.'

<sup>52</sup> This is a good thing in my view. See, Jürgen Osterhammel 'Global History and Historical Sociology, in James Belich *et al.* (eds.), *The Prospect of Global History* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 22–43, for a discussion of the affinities between the two sub-disciplines.

Perhaps, then, the next step for the analyses presented in some of the chapters of this volume is to identify whether the conclusions may be considered as timeless or periodized. For example, as demonstrated by the chapter in this volume on ‘Politics, c.1000-1500’, it is inherently interesting that the historiographies of Song China, eleventh- to thirteenth-century Byzantium and fifteenth-century France, should each have moved towards an emphasis on the informality of social action, increased power sharing between state and people and the importance of communication as a political mechanism. This is presented as potentially extendable to other societies across the world in the 500-1500 period. But to what extent is it a product of conditions particular to that period, such as the nature of available administrative instruments, communication technology, surplus production, or ideological configuration? Or might its applicability extend across all pre-modernity – or all time and space? Certainly there is considerable scope to extend these themes to many societies of the early modern period: in European history the image of absolutist rule has long given way to an emphasis on negotiation, in Mughal history, some historiography prefers an image of the imperial state as a chimera held together through dialogue with local lords, in late imperial China the profoundly important role of local gentry and literati in sustaining the material and ideological feasibility of imperial rule continues under the Ming and Qing; while among the Ottomans, an old narrative of imperial decline may now be interpreted in terms of maturing forms of power-sharing and institutional pluralism.<sup>53</sup>

---

<sup>53</sup> Mughals: Farhat Hasan, *State and Locality in Mughal India: Power Relations in Western India, c. 1572–1730* (Cambridge, 2004), and Muzaffar Alam and Sanjay Subrahmanyam ‘Introduction: The Old and New in Mughal Historiography’, Muzaffar and Subrahmanyam (eds), *Writing the Mughal World: Studies on Culture and Politics* (New York, 2012); China: R Bin Wong *China Transformed. Historical Change and the Limits of*

The Global Middle Ages project has not needed to answer all such questions in order to produce valuable work. It existed as a means of bringing scholars of this period into the global history conversation, opening a space in which debate could proceed. If comparators from other periods could be found for any one theme, 500-1500 still gives us rather a lot to choose from. A minimum pay-off is that different historiographies will be brought into dialogue, and by no means need the traffic of intellectual colonisation proceed from Europe outwards. One example of this is the concept of the galactic polity, which was taken from the use of Stanley Tambiah's work on Southeast Asia as a discussion piece during the workshop phase of the project, and is explicitly referred to in two chapters of this volume.<sup>54</sup>

Nevertheless it may be worth considering briefly what attempts to give the Global Middle Ages concept more comparative substance might look like. The intellectual challenge here is huge, not because it requires us to achieve a grip on one thousand years of global history, but because we really need to have a proper conceptualisation of what came before and after as

---

*European Experience* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1997), pp. 110-222; Ottomans: Tezcan, *Second Ottoman Empire*.

<sup>54</sup> See chapters by Pennock and Power; De Weerdt, Holmes, Watts; Stanley J. Tambiah, *World Conqueror and World Renouncer: A Study of Buddhism and Polity in Thailand against a Historical Background* (Cambridge, 1978). Lieberman has also incorporated a version of this concept in his work, *Strange Parallels*, but notes (vol. II, p. 22) that a more apt analogy would be 'solar polity', as this captures the centrism that Tambiah was alluding to more effectively. For the wider utility of models driven by experiences outside Europe see also the chapter on settlement by Leyser, Standen and Wynne-Jones.

well. Dwelling within the period itself, all one is liable to see is its richness and diversity; only by panning out to an exceptionally long-term perspective might it become possible to see any vaguely characteristic features. Naturally there are serious risks involved. I first discuss three possibilities presented by existing work, all of which incur one major cost: a focus on Eurasia rather than the world in its entirety.

When set against the post 1500 world, the Global Middle Ages can appear as a period of relative regional isolation.<sup>55</sup> The crucial word here is ‘relative.’ The celebration of connectedness in global history writing risks analytical banality unless we are also able to make visible temporal and geographic variations in its extent. It would be perverse to imbue connectedness with some sort of innate glamour; from the perspective of sociology and anthropology certain kinds of isolation are no less exciting. In parts of the Global Middle Ages then, not only were interactions within large parts of the Americas, sub-Saharan Africa and the Pacific (partly shown on Map 4) largely confined to their own macro-regions, but also parts of Eurasia became effectively distanced from each other such that they were barely able to imagine or represent each other.<sup>56</sup> R. I. Moore, for example, has suggested that for the

---

<sup>55</sup> This in turn is subject to much variation in its applicability, if we recall the extraordinary demonstrations of interconnectedness in the Silk Road and Indian Ocean regions as mentioned above.

<sup>56</sup> Jerry Bentley, ‘Periodization in world history, *AHR* 101 (1996), 749-70, emphasizes separation between the Eastern Hemisphere, the Western Hemisphere and Oceania.

period 600 and 1000 C.E. ‘more nearly than at any time before or since, the civilised societies of Eurasia lived separately.’<sup>57</sup>

This seems to open up a particular opportunity for comparative history, as we can watch each region experiment with distinct strategies or solutions to typical challenges presented by pre-modern conditions. However, comparative history works best as a species of *histoire problème*: what might be the problems, questions or theories that may be applied to this period in particular? Moore is one of at least three scholars have provided large scale historical schemas or visions that substantially involve the 500-1500 period, and the work of each one was discussed in the group meetings and has influenced some of the chapters in this volume.<sup>58</sup>

The first is Victor Lieberman, whose extraordinary analysis of 1000 years of Eurasian history begins in 800 CE with the flourishing of ‘charter polities’, which provided a reference point for subsequent state-building projects – a concept that several contributors found good to think with during the group discussions.<sup>59</sup> Charter polities tended to collapse during the

---

<sup>57</sup> R. I., Moore, ‘The Eleventh Century in Eurasian History: A Comparative Approach to the Convergence and Divergence of Medieval Civilizations’, *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 33 (2003), p. 3.

<sup>58</sup> Chris Wickham *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800* (Oxford, 2005) also deserves further discussion in this context.

<sup>59</sup> Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, vol II, is mentioned by De Weerdt, Holmes and Watts, p. 33 00, and the analysis of Song China on p. 11 00 conveys an echo of Lieberman in its evocation

fourteenth century, and fragmentation held sway until a late fifteenth century rebirth. There is still much opportunity for regional experts to corroborate or challenge this vision and the great number of other analytical interventions buried in Lieberman's vast text.<sup>60</sup> Climate is one of the factors that Lieberman identified as producing increasing pan-Eurasian co-ordination of the rhythm of these movements. Subsequent scholarship has underlined the potential of climate as an explanatory feature more heavily since the second volume of Lieberman's *Strange Parallels* appeared in 2009, and there is surely room for a project that sets out to do for the Global Middle Ages something akin to what Geoffrey Parker attempted with his book on the 'global crisis' of the seventeenth century.<sup>61</sup>

The second is Sheldon Pollock, whose no less ambitious *Language of the Gods in the World of Men* not only considered a millennium of history over a great swathe of the Indian Ocean region through its participation in a Sanskrit ecumene (or 'cosmopolis') but also set up a sustained comparison with equivalent Roman and medieval European developments.<sup>62</sup> Pollock succeeded in establishing an intriguing commonality: in both these great regions we see the flourishing of a common language of high culture that sets the benchmark for

---

of simultaneous forms of integration – marketisation, centralisation and participation in imperial political culture.

<sup>60</sup> See also Alan Strathern, Feature Review Article of 'Victor Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, vol. II' in *Journal of Global History*, 7 (2012), pp. 129–142, for some of these interventions.

<sup>61</sup> Geoffrey Parker, *Global Crisis: War, Climate Change and Catastrophe in the Seventeenth Century* (2013); although see Whittow in this volume.

<sup>62</sup> Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India* (2009). Mentioned by Simon Yarrow, p. 5.

prestigious intellectual and artistic endeavour, but this is then subject to a gradual but no less visible process of vernacularization. More controversially, he has also argued for a whole series of contrasts between Europe and the Indic world with regard to the way in which ethnic, political and religious identity formation functioned in these regions.<sup>63</sup> Although this may be problematic in some respects it lays down a gauntlet of comparison that Global Middle Ages scholars could easily take up, and is all the more intriguing for the way that it unfashionably emphasizes cultural difference and incommensurability.

Third, R. I. Moore has sought Eurasian parallels across a range of developments starting with the intensification of agriculture and the development of cities, but more strikingly in a common crisis of the eleventh century.<sup>64</sup> He describes the period as one in which a great age of ‘classical’ empires (Rome, Han, Gupta, Sassanids) had come to an end and yet the universal religions were spreading inexorably to all ends of the Eurasian landmass.<sup>65</sup> Clerical elites and their expanding mycelium of institutional networks were often at the frontier of agrarian cultivation and the means by which local societies were drawn into larger political and cultural macrocosms. Moore has argued that across at least Christendom, the Islamic world and China, intensifying economic growth precipitated a major challenge to the status of elites which demanded a response. This ‘entailed a reformulation of the interpretation and

---

<sup>63</sup> Some of the problems with Pollock’s approach are discussed in Alan Strathern ‘The Digestion of the Foreign in Lankan History, c.500-1818’ in Strathern and Biedermann (eds.) *Sri Lanka at the Crossroads*.

<sup>64</sup> R. I. Moore, ‘The Transformation of Europe As a Eurasian Phenomenon’, *Medieval Encounters*, 10 (2004) 77-98; idem, ‘Eleventh Century’.

<sup>65</sup> ‘Moore, ‘Eleventh Century’, p. 2.

transmission of the high culture, and with it of the means of recruitment to the clerical elite, and hence of the relationship of that elite both to government and to society at large.’<sup>66</sup> If this was a shared experience, the nature of the responses, however, was different – to the extent that ‘the Eurasian civilizations became much more different to one another than they had been before 1000 in their high cultures, in their social and political structures, and especially in the balance of power between central institutions and local elites.’<sup>67</sup>

The relationship between the clerisy and the state is placed at the heart of this analysis, and we might consider this as a more general means of constructing a comparative framework: a fourth proposition, taking its cue from historical sociology, which has always kept alive the flame of large-scale analysis.<sup>68</sup> It is important to note that this relationship is not quite a universal of history, rather it is a product of what has been called the ‘Axial Age’ of human history.<sup>69</sup> In the middle centuries of the first millennium BCE, extraordinarily influential

---

<sup>66</sup> Moore, ‘Transformation of Europe’, p. 97.

<sup>67</sup> Moore, ‘Eleventh Century’ p. 16.

<sup>68</sup> I take the term ‘clerisy’ from Ernest Gellner, *Plough, Sword and Book: The Structure of Human History* (Chicago, 1988). The relationship between clerisy and state is a major theme of Johann P. Arnason and Björn Wittrock (eds.) *Eurasian Transformations, Tenth to Thirteenth Centuries: Crystallizations, Divergences, Renaissances* (Leiden, 2004).

<sup>69</sup> There is not the space here to defend this concept, a great generalization that only begin to make sense once the full diversity of human cognition and religious behaviour is appreciated, but it will be further explained in Strathern, *Unearthly Powers*. Two important works are Shmuel N. Eisenstadt (ed.) *The Origins and Diversity of Axial Age Civilisations* (Albany,



intellectual revolutions broke out in parts of China, Northern India, West Asia and Greece. In the religious sphere, one consequence was the rise of ‘transcendentalist’ systems of thought prioritising salvation as the ultimate desideratum – as expressed through Abrahamic monotheism, and certain strands within Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism.<sup>70</sup> These traditions were borne by clerisies that achieved enduring social status through their relationship with authoritative texts and teachings, and which developed institutions, particularly forms of monasticism, that were often more resilient than states. While the relevant intellectual breakthroughs may have occurred in the mid-first millennium BCE, they arose initially as phenomena detached from or even antagonistic to the state. By or in the early centuries of the first millennium CE they then achieved their first great union with imperial power: they were domesticated and politicized but hardly neutered as they evolved into an ‘antagonistic symbiosis’ with the state.<sup>71</sup> It is in the 500-1500 period that they display their capacity to survive and expand even as imperial vehicles crumbled around them or subsequent iterations rose and fell. They formed indeed the engines of cultural formation and homogenisation par excellence.

---

NY, 1986), and Robert N. Bellah and Hans Joas (eds). *The Axial Age and Its Consequences* (Cambridge, MA, 2012). Also note Arnason and Wittrock, *Eurasian Transformations*.

<sup>70</sup> I do not have the space here to explore how Confucianism fits into this schema.

<sup>71</sup> The phrase is from R. A. L. H. Gunawardana *Robe and Plough: Monasticism and Economic Interest in Early Medieval Sri Lanka* (Arizona, 1979), p.344, and see Steven Collins, *Nirvana and other Buddhist Felicities. Utopias of the Pali Imaginaire* (Cambridge, 1991), 14-21, 32-7.

Many opportunities for comparison thus present themselves: one can watch how the clerisy and the state engage in a constant struggle for power as each side steals the symbolic and institutional functions of the other, for example; or for how monastic systems exploit a relative power vacuum to expand their control over land and labour such that they threaten to become a state within the state. It may be most revealing here to briefly consider here a by-way of the world that is almost never brought into global history discussions, Sri Lanka. For R. A. L. H. Gunawardana has discerned here a ‘feudalizing trend’ evident in the ninth to the thirteenth centuries which renders the term ‘early medieval’ appropriate. This was expressed in the accumulation of wealth and power by monasteries receiving immunities and privileges from royal centres and lavish patronage from burgeoning provincial elites.<sup>72</sup> It would not be hard for historians of Europe or China, or the Islamic world, to find parallels for this.<sup>73</sup> Nor indeed for the subsequent attempts by the state to rebalance the situation in their favour, as occurred most successfully in Sri Lanka with the unification of monastic orders under the umbrella of the Mahāvihāra in the twelfth century.<sup>74</sup> In the Buddhist world such interventions

---

<sup>72</sup> R. A. L. H. Gunawardana, *Periodization in Sri Lankan History* (Social Scientists’ Association, Colombo, 2008) 2008: 33-36; See also Alan Strathern, ‘Sri Lanka in the Long Early Modern Period: Its Place in a Comparative Theory of Second Millennium Eurasian History’ in *Modern Asian Studies* 43, Part 4 (July 2009), 809-864.

<sup>73</sup> One example: the conference on *Religious Exemption and the State 400-1300*, Sheffield 14<sup>th</sup>-16<sup>th</sup> April 2016, organized by Charles West.

<sup>74</sup> Jonathan S. Walters, ‘Buddhist History: The Sri Lankan Pali Vamsas and Their Community,’ in Ronald Inden, Jonathan Walters, and Daud Ali (eds.), *Querying the Medieval: Texts and the History of Practices in South Asia*, (New York, 2000): 144.

were rarely simply a power-grab but were accompanied by the regulation of theological, ritual and disciplinary matters.

In their overview of Buddhist History, Charles Hallisey and Frank Reynolds described this as one aspect of movement from a 'civilizational phase' to a 'cultural' phase, a trajectory that has intriguing elements in common with both Pollock's arc of vernacularization and Lieberman's analysis of religious development.<sup>75</sup> In the 'civilizational' phase, the great monastic centres had relative autonomy from royal control but also relatively superficial links with the mass of the population; instead they looked outwards to participate in a more expansive ecumene by means of universal languages. In the cultural phase they spread deeper roots among the masses, popularizing their teachings by means of vernacular languages or ritual innovations, and identified more closely with and sacralised their particular host societies. The extent to which this any of this finds a parallel in Christian and Islamic societies is worth pondering. Lastly, these transcendentalist traditions are also analysable in terms of comparable waves of 'reform'.<sup>76</sup> These are identifiable by the way that concepts of textual purity, doctrinal authenticity, and ascetic rigour lent authority to movements that surged through both religious and political structures. There is a Weberian irony to savour here: that pulsations of world rejection could become most powerful forms of world

---

<sup>75</sup> Frank E Reynolds, and Charles Hallisey, 'Buddhist Religion, Culture and Civilization', in Joseph M. Kitagawa and Mark D. Cummings (eds.), *Buddhism and Asian History* (New York, 1989): 17.

<sup>76</sup> Again, this will be discussed at greater length in Strathern, *Unearthly Powers*.

transformation.<sup>77</sup> Once again, such dynamics are interesting because they are *not* universals of history; rather they arose within a limited set of otherwise very diverse Eurasian high cultures.

One implication of the argument presented in the introduction to this volume is that more ‘reformist’ and insistent unions of clerical and state power were then projected across the world in the early modern period. This is the fifth and last model endowing the Global Middle Ages with comparative weight to be considered here – and, fittingly, it involves a direct contrast with Global Early Modernity. In the spirit of a working hypothesis, Holmes and Standen suggest that the Global Middle Ages may be characterised as ‘a period of dynamic change and experiment when no single part of the world achieved hegemonic status.’<sup>78</sup> It is immediately striking that this is precisely how many early modernists would like to think of their period too. If the increasingly profound and widespread patterns of connectivity in the Middle Ages worked to enhance the diversification of choice open to people at all social levels, why would the even more enhanced connectivity of the early modern period not enhance choice still further? The answer seems to be that such post 1490s

---

<sup>77</sup> This is, for example, very clear in Michael Charney, *Powerful Learning: Buddhist Literati and the Throne in Burma's Last Dynasty* (Michigan, 2006), though its period lies after the Global Middle Ages.

<sup>78</sup> Introduction, pp. xx. Compare Subrahmanyam, ‘Introduction’, Bentley *et al* (eds), *Cambridge World History, Volume 6*, p. 6. ‘it is one of the characteristics of the early modern period that no single empire ... achieved a hegemonic status, even to the extent that the British Empire was able to do so in the nineteenth century.’

connections were now controlled or propelled by imperial structures, and particularly European ones.

There is something to be said for this: if early modernists insist on emphasizing the role of newly expansive empire building in their period, they can hardly complain if medievalists celebrate precisely that relative absence of imperial surveillance. It chimes, too with Pollock's evocation of profound waves of cultural importation that cannot be explained through the force-field created by imperial expansion. Nevertheless, empires too may be agents of cultural extension and combination, as – by definition – they bring together diverse groups, promote peaceful forms of trade, travel and communication within their borders, and engage in diplomacy and shared forms of ideological one-upmanship with peers near and far.<sup>79</sup>

Religion here carries much of the burden of the argument. It is important, then, to distinguish between the diversification of options open to any one society and the presence of pluralism and diversity on a global level. The latter – that is, the proliferation of genuinely distinct cultures – may rather be assisted by certain forms of disconnection. For example, parts of the interior of New Guinea were relatively isolated from trans-regional interconnections until the twentieth century (Map 4). It is no coincidence that this large island played host to some of the densest cultural and linguistic diversity to be found anywhere in the world: Papua New

---

<sup>79</sup> Moreover, early modern historiography has also shown a distinct interest in the movements of non-state actors, of trading diasporas, merchants, travellers, pilgrims: see, for example, John-Paul Ghobrial.. 'The Secret Life of Elias of Babylon and the Uses of Global Microhistory', *Past and Present* 222 (2014), pp. 51-93.

Guinea itself (the western half of the island) boasts 800 languages, including 60 different language families, and each of the latter correspond to social, cultural, and cosmological differences.<sup>80</sup>

Think of the sheer religious diversity this implies – a diversity now profoundly threatened in certain ways by the rapid waves of conversion to Christianity in the last two generations.<sup>81</sup> To put it another way, consider what distinctiveness was *lost* as diverse elites in Southeast Asia were swept into a Sanskrit *imaginaire*: as cosmologies and poetic forms were reconfigured according to a trans-regional aesthetic and normative ecumene in which every capital city has its Mount Meru and the Indic pantheon reigns supreme.<sup>82</sup> In one sense, at least, the expansion of the world religions and great traditions over the last two thousand years has amounted to a massive dwindling of religious and cultural diversity.

---

<sup>80</sup> Alan Rumsey, ‘Melanesia as a Zone of Language Diversity’, unpublished MS, to appear in Eric Hrisch and Will Rollason (eds.) *The Melanesian World* (Oxford, forthcoming). Please note, *relatively*; the island has its history of connectedness too, just like anywhere else, including the most remote inhabited islands of the Pacific. Moreover, there is also an important history of interconnectedness among the societies of this very large island; indeed, indigenous practices of multilingualism suggests that at times a positive value may have been put on sustaining diversity. In Melanesia as a whole there are 1400 languages, about 22% of all the world’s languages inhabiting less than 1% of the world’s landmass.

<sup>81</sup> Albeit to many different Christian sects and with inevitable degrees of syncretism and local resistance.

<sup>82</sup> Of course, the Sanskrit *imaginaire* was strongly localised in many ways too; see O. W. Wolters, *Early Southeast Asia: Selected Essays*, ed. Craig J. Reynolds (Ithaca, N.Y., 2008).

That being said, Holmes and Standen's argument is focussed on the choices open to any one society, which may be taken to multiply even as they diminish in a global scale. Here, they draw on an intriguing suggestion made in Jonathan Shepard's chapter, to the effect that a collusion of imperial power and hard-edged religious assertion started to close down these options in the Silk Roads and Indian Ocean circuits in the sixteenth century (Map 3). The main agents of this are identified as the Portuguese, Muscovites and Ottomans: it is immediately apparent that the underlying shift must therefore be the increased power and determination of monotheists, with their distinctive tendencies towards policing religious boundaries now waxing strong. Many of the great cultural disseminations in the Middle Ages had concerned Indic and East Asian traditions such as Buddhism which were intrinsically capable of much more profound forms of mutual co-habitation, combination and merger. The early modern period, however, sees a peculiarly Christian obsession with religious purity previously contained within Europe now leaking out into the wider world, and particularly the Americas. And if Muslim imperial elites had found important ways of tolerating religious diversity among their subjects, it is suggested that these were now increasingly under strain.

These suggestions find an echo in certain barely developed tendencies within the literature on the early modern world, and which one day might coalesce into a rather grand narrative providing further substance to a comparative construction of global early modernity. It would pick up Lieberman's as-yet-little-addressed arguments about cycles of religious integration and state formation, and Krstić's work on Ottoman confessionalisation, and find an ancestral origin in a reference to reform movements in one of the earliest examples of Global Early Modernity scholarship, Joseph Fletcher's article on 'integrative history', published

posthumously from some notes he left behind in a journal of Turkish studies in 1985.<sup>83</sup> There is, in short, a daring thesis to be made about the 1500-1800 period and the ways in which emboldened ruling elites sought to use and control the religious sphere. Nevertheless, the argument that this amounts more generally and globally to a closing down of options in the religious and ideological dimensions must first surmount various obstacles.

Too much focus on the power of state-enforced Christianity again risks giving too much weight to Iberian and Dutch activity outside the Americas, where, if it bears repeating, the focus of Global Early Modernity has rather been trained on Asian state expansion. Shepard is right to highlight the way that the Iberians brought a novel union of religious and political coercion with them into the Indian Ocean, but he also acknowledges that their ability to project this beyond a few areas such as the lowlands of Sri Lanka, Goa and the Philippines was distinctly limited.<sup>84</sup> He is right too, to point to the way in which the presence of Christian minorities – almost universal irritants of state-builders – in some places stimulated unusual spasms of persecution among Asian elites, most notably in early Tokugawa Japan.<sup>85</sup> But it is

---

<sup>83</sup> Lieberman, *Strange Parallels*, vol. II; discussed in Strathern, Review Article, *Journal of Global History*, 7 (2012), pp. 129-142; Krstić, *Contested Conversions*; Joseph Fletcher 'Integrative History: Parallels and Interconnections in the Early Modern Period, 1500–1800,' *Journal of Turkish Studies* 9 (1985).

<sup>84</sup> Even where Christianity did arrive as a corollary of conquest, as in the Americas, it also involved the opening out of choices in one sense, through more muted forms of syncretism and co-survival.

<sup>85</sup> George Elison, *Deus Destroyed: The Image of Christianity in Early Modern Japan* (Cambridge, M.A., 1973). I agree with Shepard that the global leakage of Christianity did



also worth noting that the conversions of *daimyo* such as Ōtomo Sorin of Bungo, and the hundreds of thousands of subjects under their command, occurred quite outside any field of imperial coercion – and that it involved the introduction of another ‘option’ into Japanese cultural life, in which European philosophy was forced to engage in complex dialogue with Confucian and Buddhist traditions.<sup>86</sup> The Muslim ecumene also continued its expansion well beyond the borders of the empires that championed it, as elites in maritime Southeast Asia and parts of Africa south of the Sahara continued their conversion to capacious forms of Islam begun in the Middle Ages.<sup>87</sup> And although in West and South Asia one can see the first stirrings of a more insistent brand of Muslim reform from the seventeenth century, for much of the early modern period, it is the ecumenical nature of Muslim imperium that stands out.<sup>88</sup>

---

indeed help to precipitate sharper political supervision of religion in a number of places. On a newly politicized sense of conflict between Islam and Christianity in maritime Southeast Asia, see Anthony Reid, ‘Islam in Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean littoral, 1500-1800: Expansion, Polarisation, Synthesis’, in David Morgan and Anthony Reid (eds.), *New Cambridge History of Islam, Volume 3: The Eastern Islamic World, Eleventh to Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 2010).

<sup>86</sup> Kiri Paramore, *Ideology and Christianity in Japan* (Routledge 2009).

<sup>87</sup> Alan Strathern ‘Global Patterns of Ruler Conversion to Islam and the Logic of Empirical Religiosity’, in A.C.S. Peacock (ed.), *Islamisation: Comparative Perspectives from History*, (Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

<sup>88</sup> On stirrings of reform Nile Green, *Sufism: A Global History* (Chichester, 2012), ch. 3, on a ‘crisis of conscience’; Jamal Malik, ‘Muslim Culture and Reform in 18th-Century South Asia’, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 13 (2003), 13, 2, 227–43; Mark David Baer, *Honored by the Glory of Islam: Conversion and Conquest in Ottoman Europe* (Oxford,

The Mughals are the shining example of how much religious fluidity, pluralism and diversity may be assembled under and through the assertion of Islamic sovereignty.<sup>89</sup> They are one manifestation of a broadly influential Central Asian conception of imperial rule (or cosmological politics) as transcending all religious differences, exemplified by the Mongols but producing echoes across all the great (non-Christian) land empires of Eurasia.<sup>90</sup> Should Ottoman dominion be seen as thwarting cultural circulation – or rather as a bridge between Europe and the Islamic world, and a participant in a Persianate high culture that it shared with the Safavids and Mughals and even courts as far east as Aceh? In general, across the Indic and East Asian world combinatory and pluralist religious cultures continued to thrive.<sup>91</sup> In short there is a great deal here for scholars to argue about... but that is in the nature of global comparative conjecture.

---

2008); Madeline C. Zilfi, 'The Kadizadelis: Discordant Revivalism in Seventeenth Century Istanbul', *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, 45 (1986), pp. 251-269.

<sup>89</sup> Moin, *Millennial Sovereign*; Rosalind O'Hanlon, 'Cultural Pluralism, Empire and the State in Early Modern South Asia', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 44 (2007).

<sup>90</sup> Which Shepard also sees [ ]. See too Pamela Kyle Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror: History and Identity in Qing Imperial Ideology* (Berkeley, 1999); Lisa Balabanlilar, *Imperial Identity in the Mughal Empire: Memory and Dynastic Politics in Early Modern South and Central Asia* (London, 2012).

<sup>91</sup> For combinatory religion, see Lucia Dolce 'The Practice of Religion in Japan: An Exploration of the State of the Field.' in Dolce (ed.), *Japanese Religions, vol. 1* (London, 2010).

#### 4. Conclusion

Thus we finish – predictably – with another evocation of early modern interconnection. But, it is more important to emphasize that global history ought not to be conflated with connectivity – as indeed the chapters in this volume implicitly show – and that connectivity should not be seen as an inherently positive attribute which all epochs and regions must now be expected to exhibit. If the purpose of this chapter was to show what the beginnings a dialogue between globalizing historians of the middle ages with those of early modernity might look like, I will finish by reiterating only two potential flash-points. Medievalists might be cautioned against rolling together globalization, modernisation, and the advance of capitalism with western agency and western empire-building as some generic amalgam of the post-1500 world. The field of Global Early Modernity has derived much of its energy from disaggregating these themes. Early Modernists, for their part, will now need to watch their backs: having enjoyed pointing out precursors and precedents for phenomena brandished by historians of later modernity, they may find a medievalist tapping on their shoulder to indicate even earlier foundations, and be forced to think much harder about the starting and end points of their own period. It may be, in fact, that for certain purposes, both the Global Middle Ages and Global Early Modernity find themselves swallowed up by a concept of much older and less fashionable lineage: pre-modernity.<sup>92</sup>

---

<sup>92</sup> This might take its cue from Jack Goldstone's argument ('New Patterns') that all societies before 1800 are really all forms of what E. A. Wrigley called organic societies. However, from our discussions, medievalists, did not seem any more predisposed to recognize modernity either. There is no doubt however, there is much opportunity to subject claims of some characteristics of the early modern world to much greater chronological scrutiny, e.g. the phenomenon of millenarianism.