It is a privilege to respond to Professor Asad, whose work has had tremendous influence in the understanding of the crystallisation of the concept of ‘religion’. In his plenary address at the IAHR World Congress in Tokyo and the revised paper for this volume, Professor Asad focuses on the issue of religious revival and argues that social deprivation and instability may be simplistic explanations for the situation pertaining to Egypt. His critique of these explanations challenges the assumption of a secularist teleology assumed by many scholarly works. What we have here is an important voice weighing in on the much debated notions of religious revivalism and secularism.

Professor Asad’s persuasive arguments are located in specific socio-political contexts in Egypt. It is possible for us, however, to see the relevance of some of these questions in other contexts in those parts of the world where questions of religion, ethics, and meaning are discussed by the media. In his plenary address in Tokyo, Professor Asad reported that among the intellectuals whom he talks with in Egypt, many who have direct understanding of Euro-American societies and their cultures raise questions such as: Can a society be at once modern and free in a densely interconnected and rapidly changing world? If religion is to be redefined in such a world, can the idea of liberty remain unaffected? How far do the individual’s moral and political responsibilities extend in today’s world? What resources may one, or should one, draw from to address the contradictions between one’s values? Even as Professor Asad was presenting his paper at the Congress in Tokyo, halfway around the world, philosophers, ethicists, politicians, and families were discussing these questions in the context of the Terri Schiavo case in Florida.¹ The questions debated by the American media focused on whether the state and judiciary could grant permission and order a family and the hospital not to force-feed someone who was considered to be brain dead.

¹ See also Part Two of the present volume.
Echoing some of the concerns that Professor Asad’s friends articulated in a very different context, the public discussions in the media in the United States focused on issues of religion, God, freedom, as well as individual and collective moral and political responsibilities. All this in an industrialised nation and a society that has hitherto taken pride as being in the forefront of modernity.

‘Islamism’, indeed all traditional religion, is frequently portrayed as an obstacle in the path of modernity. Even scholars assume that modernity is—of course—what every tradition wants to be at when it grows up. It is taken for granted that violence and chaos are part of the teething pains, that problems arise from the turbulent and liminal spaces where there is a confluence of modernity and tradition. Liberal Protestantism tends to think of religion as orderly and private and holds individual faith and conscience as central to religion. No doubt political processes in Europe helped this formulation, and as Spinner-Halev succinctly says, ‘the rise of Protestantism and the assertion of state power over the church readily helped transform Christianity into a private affair, a matter of individual conscience, as opposed to a public matter’.²

Professor Asad rejects the facile assumption made by the media that dire economic reasons and religious restlessness are connected. Disruptions in many of the countries in the Middle East, he claims, are not so much the result of Arab culture or Islam, but of American aid and the sizeable remittances sent by migrant workers. Drawing from his field work, conversations, as well as his sophisticated interpretation of sacred text and law, Professor Asad makes us re-examine the essentialisation of Islamic culture seen in scholarly and public forums. Such representations, he argues, are not nuanced and attribute to both Islamic culture and economic deprivation the causes for the lack of progress in countries such as Egypt.

Professor Asad rejects several commonly held reasons for the increase in religious revivalism in Egypt. He discusses the multiple reasons for this phenomenon and then argues that in the Egyptian case it springs from the context of the Islamic tradition of renewal (tajdid). He rejects the idea that this is because of economic reasons that are perceived to be endemic in Arab culture; instead he lays the blame elsewhere. Yes, there is political-economic discontent and certainly, the United States