

## Chapter 1

### THE CONTEXT: MODERN ARAB INTELLECTUAL HISTORY, THEMES, AND QUESTIONS

Few subjects can be as subtle and elusive as intellectual history. In studying the main features of modern Arab and Muslim thought, one stands before a colossal tradition of methodology that needs to be sifted and incorporated in a meaningful study. On the one hand, one must be adequately acquainted with the different theories of Islamic knowledge and their historical and social background. On the other, one must be abreast of recent developments in Western critical theory, sociology, philosophy, history, and the humanities in general. In other words, a scholar must be versed in several languages and disciplines in order to fulfill the task of a comprehensive and serious study of this important topic. It is, no doubt, pivotal to present critically and afresh the major themes and suppositions—not only of modern Arab thought, but also of the Islamist discourse—as a distinct historical, philosophical, ideological, and, sometimes, dominant mode of thought in the modern Arab world.

We should be careful lest we reduce the multivariant domain of modern Arab intellectual history to one religious essence or secular

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tendency. Instead, one could easily argue that it is more comprehensive than that. As shall be amply illustrated in the following chapters, the Islamist discourse, in its different manifestations, histories, conditions, and ideological pronouncements, is a distinctive intellectual formation that must be located within the larger context of Arab intellectual history that has been weltering with all sorts of discourses, both secular and religious. In one important sense, we must be far from assuming, as many commentators on “political Islam” often do, that the Islamist discourse is essentialist, purist, homogeneous, one-dimensional, antimodernist, and irrationally anti-Western.<sup>1</sup> Although some Islamist activists, out of ignorance, speak of the Islamist discourse in essentialist terms (that is, Islam is the solution), this does not reflect in any real measure the religious, intellectual, social, and political burdens under which serious Islamist thinkers have labored.<sup>2</sup>

One may argue, in retrospect, that it is somewhat simple to discern the underlying epistemological principles of Islamic intellectual history during its formative phase (eighth to thirteenth century), when Islam was distinguished by a high level of urbanism and intellectual maturity, as represented by its literati class (*‘ulamā’*) and heterogeneous nature of its religious, intellectual, and cultural production.<sup>3</sup> The picture of the intellectual domain in the modern Arab world, however, might not be as easy to discern or comprehend. This is due to several factors, which may be summarized as follows: (1) the breakdown of the totalistic vision of Islam which considered Islam and the state to be one; (2) the rise of different intellectual currents, especially in the nineteenth century, that challenged the long-established authority of the *‘ulamā’*; and (3) the political division and subdivision of the Arab world in the wake of colonialism.

These developments came about as a result of the confluence of internal and external factors that helped to diminish the role of Islam as the main political, social, and even cultural system of the modern Arabs. Although some leading historians and political economists prefer to speak in terms of one Arab nation, it is doubtful that one can speak of a homogeneous Arab culture, let alone a unified Islamic culture.<sup>4</sup> What that means in terms of Arab intellectual history is that it is hazardous to assume that there is some objective intellectual reality that might be brought to the fore merely by discussing it. In fact, the issue is far more complicated. Hence, one of the major goals of this chapter is to lay out the central issues of modern Arab thought as seen by a variety of Arab thinkers and scholars who belong to different intellectual traditions and who seem to propose a number of different solutions to the issues facing them. My discussion, especially

in this chapter, focuses on the intellectual (and religious or antireligious) outlook of a selected number of Arab thinkers, some of whom (such as Muhammad Aziz Lahbabi and Malek Bennabi) were steeped in the colonial moment. Others (such as Hichem Djait, Muḥammad al-Bahiy, and Muḥammad 'Ābid al-Jābirī) were products of a different era that can roughly be termed the *nationalist* one (from 1952 to the present).

Besides dealing with the common concerns of modern Arab thought, my purpose in this work is to discuss, in a systematic manner, the intellectual history of Islamic resurgence, as a specific but multifarious trend in the modern Arab world, and I shall do so by examining in depth the major issues, questions, and problems tackled by the leaders of that movement. Such an approach will undoubtedly shed light on the influence which organized religious thought might have had on social, political, and cultural life in Arab societies. To contextualize Islamic resurgence in modern Arab thought, I will highlight a number of key terms, concepts, and issues which have been pivotal to the intellectual development of the Arab world in the last one hundred years or so. Such concepts as Islamic tradition (*turāth*), decline, renaissance (*nahḍah*), Westernization/modernity/modernization, authority, knowledge, reconstruction, and critique have definitely gone through important metamorphoses in the minds of modern Arab thinkers. In that sense, one must bear in mind that these conceptual formations do not exist in a historical or social vacuum. They influence—and are influenced by—all sorts of subjective and objective factors. In other words,

Intellectual history cannot claim to be the true or only history. . . . It exists only in connection with, and in relation to, the surrounding political, economic, and social forces. The investigation of subjects of intellectual history leads beyond the purely intellectual world, and intellectual history per se does not exist.<sup>5</sup>

Intellectual history does not follow a specific method of analysis. That is to say, “Intellectual history is not a whole. It has no governing problématique.”<sup>6</sup> In the same vein, modern Arab intellectual history, far from being reduced to one problematic, is distinguished at the core by a variety of conceptual issues with varying degrees of intensity and interrelationship. To be more precise, the bare outlines of modern Arab thought, just as with any other collective human thought, may consist of the following:

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the history of ideas (the study of systematic thought, usually in philosophical treatises), intellectual history proper (the study of informal thought, climates of opinion, and literary movements), the social history of ideas (the study of ideologies and idea diffusion), and cultural history (the study of culture in the anthropological sense, including world views and collective *mentalités*).<sup>7</sup>

Tackling the central issues and questions that have preoccupied thinkers in the modern Arab world, whether religious or secular, is a formidable task. A cursory reading of this chapter and other studies in the field presents us with a major problem. Specifically, the problem is the dearth of committed and articulate interpretations of modern Arab thought as compared, let us say, to modern British to French thought. The issue becomes even more confounding in relation to the intellectual foundation of Arab Islamic resurgence. Most existing studies in Arabic and European languages are primarily confined to the analysis of a single salient feature, falling under the general rubric of “political Islam.” As a consequence, there is an appalling failure to treat systematically the main issues at hand, both conceptually and theoretically.

The accepted method for comprehending the nature and flow of modern Arab intellectual history has been to speak in terms of certain binary opposites, such as tradition/modernity, renaissance/decline, decadence/renewal, stagnation/revival, and elite/popular cultures.<sup>8</sup> We must not take these distinctions at face value, nor as rigid and mutually exclusive classifications of thought. One example could serve to illustrate the dilemma. Many scholars have viewed the intellectual leaders of Islamic resurgence (such as Ḥasan al-Bannā and Sayyid Quṭb) as popular leaders, on the supposition that, to a certain extent, their ideas reflect the conditions and needs of the masses. But what prevents us from considering them as “elite intellectuals”? Although it is correct to assume that these figures expressed popular ideas, they also had access to—and were in dialogue/confrontation with—the elite culture of their age, be it the religious culture of the *‘ulamā’*, or the secular culture of Egypt at the time.

Undoubtedly, it is an academic imperative to identify the main features of modern Arab thought, and the role that Islamist discourse might play in this thought. On the whole, Hamilton Gibb’s observation of 1947—especially when applied to a systematic treatment of the intellectual history of Islamic resurgence—remains, more or less, true in the 1990s. “One looks in vain for any systematic analysis of new currents of thought in the Muslim world.”<sup>9</sup> To grasp the intellectual formation of Islamic resurgence as a relatively new current of thought

is to shed new light on the interaction between society and religion, elite and popular cultures, and the role of religious intelligentsia in the modern or secular nation/state. Also, one must raise a number of questions concerning the historical nature and specificity of the Islamist discourse. It is taken for granted that thought—including the most speculative, abstract, and metaphysical ones—never arises in a vacuum, but is organically connected to and conditioned by a set of conceptual, social, and historical precedents and processes.

What type of intellectual history is to be written? I do not purport to write an elite intellectual history in the traditional Islamic sense. That is, I am not interested in writing about the theological formulations and philosophical theses of the *'ulamā'* in the modern Arab world.<sup>10</sup> Neither does space allow me to tackle popular culture in depth. In this context, my aim is to write an explicit intellectual history of what has proven, to a certain extent, to be a popular religious movement, a movement that was founded by lay Muslim intellectuals who, very often, did not belong to the traditional religious elite in their countries.<sup>11</sup> One may describe these leaders as religiously-oriented intelligentsia who, sprouting from various intellectual and social backgrounds, aimed at tackling some of the most perplexing religious, social, and intellectual issues in the modern Arab world. Although, on the whole, the various attempts by Islamists to seize power and establish an Islamic political system have ended in failure,<sup>12</sup> they have exerted, nonetheless, a strong and enduring religious, social, and intellectual influence on a significant portion of Arab society.

Finally, what about the question of continuity and discontinuity in modern Arab thought? Michel Foucault raises this question in a theoretical way in several of his works, and especially in *The Archeology of Knowledge*,<sup>13</sup> in which he speaks of epistemological acts and thresholds, of the displacements and transformations of concepts, and of the problem being “no longer one of tradition, of tracing a line, but one of division, of limits; it is no longer one of lasting foundations, but one of transformations that serve as new foundations, the rebuilding of foundations.”<sup>14</sup> In other words, Foucault argues—and dangerously so—that the historian of thought is in no position to write a total and general history of ideas, let alone be comfortable to trace the same concept to the past. Discontinuity, epistemic ruptures, and continuous shifts in conceptual boundaries are what define the space of ideas, be they modern or classical.<sup>15</sup>

While it is feasible to speak of conceptual ruptures in the modern Arab world—for example, liberalism is not as dominant a discourse in contemporary Arab thought as it was in the 1930s—one is justified,

nevertheless, in speaking of continuities. These continuities, however, should be understood against the background of historical change. One still hears in contemporary Arab society similar cries to those of the nineteenth century on the necessity of reforming education, of facing up to the challenges of Westernization, of adaptation to modern realities and norms. One might interpret the contemporary calls all over the Arab world for the return to Islam as a reflection of a crisis, a rupture, and as a response to social and cultural displacements and transformations. However, these calls could also be interpreted as an affirmation of the inner continuity of the Islamic discourse—or discourses—and as rebuilding on old foundations. In sum, the notion of continuity and discontinuity is very useful in describing the recurring themes and discourses of modern Arab thought. An epistemic rupture might well be the other side of the conceptual formation.

#### NAHḌAH AS A PROBLEM IN MODERN ARAB THOUGHT

The gestation of modern Arab intellectual history must be understood against the backdrop of the Arab *nahḍah* (rebirth or renaissance)<sup>16</sup> of the nineteenth century. *Nahḍah* is

a vast political and cultural movement that dominate[d] the period of 1850 to 1914. Originating in Syria and flowering in Egypt, the *nahḍah* sought through translation and vulgarization to assimilate the great achievements of modern European civilization, while reviving the classical Arab culture that antedates the centuries of decadence and foreign domination.<sup>17</sup>

Besides favoring Western achievements, the *nahḍah* movement, especially in its Muslim part, stood against the degeneration of Islamic thought which, according to Gibb, “stayed put—that is it remained fixed in the molds created for it by the scholars, jurists, doctors, and mystics of the formative centuries and, if anything, decayed rather than progressed.”<sup>18</sup> Muslim *nahḍah* thinkers—most notably Rifā‘ah R. al-Ṭaḥṭāwī,<sup>19</sup> Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī,<sup>20</sup> and Muḥammad ‘Abduh<sup>21</sup>—basically postulated that a regeneration of Islam and an acceptance of the “positive” features of the West were not at all incompatible. This is perhaps what justifies a scholar such as Hisham Sharabi to postulate that the *nahḍah* “did not constitute a general cultural break in the sense the European Renaissance did; for on the one hand, it did not achieve a genuine transcendence of inherited structures of thought . . . ,

and on the other, if failed to grasp the true nature of modernity.”<sup>22</sup> The feelings of the Muslim *naḥḍah* thinkers and their ambivalence toward European challenges and scientific progress are best illustrated by the nineteenth-century Moroccan *‘ālim* and traveller Muḥammad al-Saffār, who was baffled by the cleanliness of the French, their industrious nature, the advance of their technology, and the strength of their army.

So it went until all had passed, leaving our hearts consumed with fire from what we had seen of their overwhelming power and mastery, their preparations and good training, their putting everything in its proper place. In comparison with the weakness of Islam, the dissipation of its strength, and the disrupted condition of its people, how confident they are, how impressive their state of readiness, how competent they are in matters of state, how firm their laws, how capable in wars and successful in vanquishing their enemies—not because of their courage, bravery, or religious zeal, but because of their marvelous organization, their uncanny mastery over affairs, and their strict adherence to the law.<sup>23</sup>

It is true, one can argue, that a man like al-Saffār, who was firmly rooted in the Islamic culture of his urban literati class, would be concerned with power and how to restore the dignity of Islam that was being severely challenged by a new mode of European hegemony. However, it is equally true that his reflections on the West were a sign of religious and intellectual crisis, an indication that a mutation in lives and goals was about to take place, and a telling manifestation of a deep ambivalence about an inherited mental space that does not seem to match the space of modern life. In the words of Albert Hourani, the generation of the *‘ulamā’*, to which al-Saffār belonged, was in no position to be complacent about the past any longer. It was a generation of religious, social, and cultural crisis.

At another level, we can notice in this period a deep disturbance in the lives of educated men, not only those trained in the new schools but those formed in the traditional ways of thought; not only do their careers take different paths, but the ways in which they see their own lives begin to change.<sup>24</sup>

With the onslaught of colonialism and the gradual dissemination of Westernization as a cultural phenomenon in the traditional milieu of

Islam, Muslim thinkers were alerted to a multitude of ruptures in their societies that were political, social, economic, and even linguistic. This is what justifies a scholar such as W. C. Smith theorizing that the modern period of Islamic history “begins with decadence within, intrusion and menace from without; and the worldly glory that reputedly went with obedience to God’s law [was] only a distant memory of a happier past.”<sup>25</sup> At about this time, “Western civilization was launching forth on the greatest upsurge of expansive energy and power vastly accumulated. With them, the West was presently reshaping its own life and soon the life of all the world.”<sup>26</sup> The *nahḍah* intelligentsia, therefore, reacted to decline in the Muslim world as they understood it and theorized on the options for renaissance, while not neglecting Western possibilities for such a renaissance.

One can easily argue that the *nahḍah* phenomenon is based on a complex epistemological structure which has both Islamic and Western components. As such, the *nahḍah* was translated by the Arab intellectual pioneers of the nineteenth century into a historical and social movement, and has, consequently, revived a significant number of issues and debates revolving around the Islamic heritage and the challenges of the present—namely, Islam and the question of Arab cultural identity, Islam and the West, the question of women, and the issue of freedom of expression.

According to Mohammed Arkoun, the encounter between the Arab world and the West created new conditions to which Arab and Muslim thought responded by creating new expressions.<sup>27</sup> These expressions represented the new philosophical, sociocultural, psychological, and linguistic orientations of the modern Arab world. In order to understand the background of these new expressions, one must take into account the concomitant cultural side of colonialism, which is Western modernity, its nature and contents, and the impact it could have had on modern Arabic and Muslim thought.<sup>28</sup> “The historian of thought,” in Arkoun’s words, “is bound to go deeper and analyze the relations between material and intellectual modernity.”<sup>29</sup>

Arkoun sets forth to explore the impact of modernity on Arab thought and philosophy. He maintains that the Arab world accepted Western modernity and its educational and cultural underpinnings only “slowly and reluctantly.” One of the main consequences of the interaction between Arab and Western thought is a new philosophical thinking characterized by criticism, innovation, and a futuristic orientation. Arkoun does not reflect much on the present condition of Muslim critical thinking in the Arab world, although he calls, nonetheless, for a critique of Islamic reasoning as a means of reviving contemporary Arab thought.<sup>30</sup>



The *nahḍah* thinkers—as the product of the new age of crisis and mutation—were confronted with the problem of how to interpret the vast Islamic tradition of the Qur’ān, *Hadīth*, law, and philosophy in a sociopolitical and scientific environment which was foreign to them because it was dominated by the West. It is somewhat true that these thinkers “lived and acted in an Islamic community that was intellectually still relatively coherent and united,”<sup>31</sup> but it might be equally true that the preindustrial and precapitalist notions and concepts of Muslim thought were inadequate to meet the challenges perpetuated by an aggressive Western world-view. The essential question posed by the *nahḍah* thinkers was how Muslims can be authentic and modern at the same time. They saw the need for a total revitalization of Islam in the face of an encroaching Western culture because “the attack of the West on the Arab world, aside from its political effects, was also a direct attack against Islam as a religion.”<sup>32</sup>

The *nahḍah* intellectuals attempted to salvage “Islamic Reason” from many centuries of slumber and decadence.<sup>33</sup> They argued for the viability of Islamic reasoning in the modern age because they believed that Islam was inherently rational.<sup>34</sup> Arming themselves with what they considered to be authentic Islamic criteria for thinking and discourse, they sought to improve both the internal Muslim situation and fight external Western cultural and political encroachment.<sup>35</sup> Thus, historical continuity with the Islamic tradition—what Arkoun calls epistemic continuity—was hailed as an answer to historical, cultural, and religious rigidity and stagnation. This continuity, furthermore, paved the way toward forging a new and important synthesis that reflected, on the one hand, the maturity of Muslim thinkers, and, on the other, the deep sense of crisis facing Muslim society.

Generally speaking, three main concepts can sum up the progression of Arab thought from the early nineteenth century until the present: (1) *nahḍah* (renaissance), (2) *thawrah* (revolution), and (3) *’awdah* (return to the foundations). These three concepts imply the following: (1) reviving Muslim thought from within by affirming continuity with the past, and from without by borrowing from western sources; (2) emergence of the nation state in the wake of resisting the political and economic domination of the west, and (3) translating Islam as an ideology of combat which indicates, besides the nonfeasibility of nationalism as an alternative to the current state of affairs, a deep confrontation between the status quo upheld by a basically secular and military state and all sorts of Islamist movements carrying the banner of *’awdah* (return) to what they hold to be the “true religion.”

At a more conceptual level, modern Arab thought has positioned itself to deal with the *nahḍah* problematic through three different

modes of discourse: (1) doctrinal, (2) philosophical, and (3) historical/political discourse. To begin with, doctrinal discourse concerns the purification of the fundamentals of religion. As Laoust aptly puts it, "No doctrinal reform is possible without return to an original source."<sup>36</sup> Reform or *iṣlāḥ* can be defined as the return to the just form of religion, and the affirmation of transcendent truth in a modern setting. The reformist program has dominated Arab intellectual activity up to the present time, and it revolves around the affirmation of "a traditionalist method and language" in a modern setting. Therefore, contemporary Muslim philosophers and intellectuals find themselves face-to-face with a set of social and historical questions that await theological answers. It is clear that many a Muslim intellectual remains faithful to his or her vision of past Muslim history, a vision based on the significant role which revelation plays in the process of history. However, as a result of the rise of political secularization in the Arab world in the wake of Western colonization, "the reign of the *faqīhs* (jurists and theologians) was substituted, for better or worse, by that of the [technical] experts and the leaders of the masses. This new situation necessitated a new mental attitude and new criteria."<sup>37</sup>

The objective of philosophical discourse, as it appears in the early writings of the noted Egyptian philosopher, Shaykh Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Rāziq<sup>38</sup> (d. 1947), is to prove the authenticity of traditional Islamic philosophical discourse, and its relevance to the needs of modern Muslim societies. 'Abd al-Rāziq played a major role in focusing the attention of Arab thinkers on the importance of philosophy as a medium of intellectual discourse. In his major work, *Tamhīd li tārikh al-falsafah al-Islāmiyah (Prolegomena to the History of Islamic Philosophy)*, 'Abd al-Rāziq proposes the following: (1) the Qur'ān, as the sacred book for Muslims, encourages free rational speculation (*nazar 'aqlī ḥurr*); (2) a literalist interpretation of the Qur'ān is inadequate to portray its rationalistic depth and attitude; (3) Islamic rationalism, which is intrinsic to the Islamic revelation, should not be confused with the Greek logic and philosophy that Muslim thinkers adopted and modified; and (4) the Arab race is as capable of philosophy and comprehensive thought as any other people.<sup>39</sup> In this, 'Abd al-Rāziq goes against the grain of nineteenth-century orientalist thought, whose best representative, Ernest Renan, argued that

We can not demand philosophical insights from the Semitic race. It is only by a strange coincidence of fate that this race instilled a fine character of power in its religious creations, [for] it never produced any philosophical treatise of its own. Semitic philosophy

is a cheap borrowing and imitation of Greek philosophy. This should be, in fact, said about Medieval philosophy in general.<sup>40</sup>

Reacting to the preceding thesis, 'Abd al-Rāziq attempts to prove the originality and authenticity of Islamic philosophy by elaborating on the inner theoretical dynamics of Islamic culture and by stressing the strong bond between philosophy, on the one hand, and sufism, *kalām*, jurisprudence, and the *Shari'āh*, on the other.<sup>41</sup> His final aim, however, is to prove the compatibility of traditional Islamic philosophy with the rationalism of modern thought.

The historical/political discourse of the *nahḍah* describes the religion/state relationship. This relationship has undergone many transformations since the nineteenth century. In the first phase of the *nahḍah*, Islam assumed a nationalistic meaning, the purpose of which was to build a strong state that would be able to compete with the West. In the second phase, Islam was expressed by Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghāni, Muḥammad 'Abduh, and Rashīd Riḍā in pan-Islamic terms. The goal was to reinstitute the Muslim *ummah* (community of believers) in the image of the Ottoman Empire. Furthermore, Islamic resurgence rose in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood movement. Ḥasan al-Bannā, the founder, opted to create an Islamic state. His program attempted to assert the sacred law in all walks of life. Politics, as a result, dominated philosophy and theology. A rupture between the '*ulamā*' (the custodians and defenders of the classical Sunni tradition) and the Ikhwan (as a mass-based movement) was inevitable. The Ikhwan viewed the '*ulamā*' with great distrust. In the Ikhwan's view, the '*ulamā*' were upholders of the same status quo that the Ikhwan were attempting to abolish. As the following chapters show, one must not presuppose that the Ikhwan—or Islamic resurgence in general—is a mere political phenomenon. Resurgence must be treated in philosophical terms as well, and it should be placed in the larger category of modern Arab intellectual history. The Ikhwan discourse was born in reaction to relatively modern historical and political crises affecting the modern Arab world, and, as a result, it has always attempted to provide solutions on the basis of a new—and sometimes aggressive—understanding of the colossal Islamic tradition.

To conclude, *nahḍah* provides an essential conceptual tool for the analysis of the evolution of modern Arab thought, and it describes the way in which Arab thinkers—both secular and religious—have wrestled with issues of heritage and present demands. Far from being monolithic, the concept of *nahḍah* has been interpreted variously in the intellectual domain of the Arab world. Two essential components

of the *nahḍah* remain the same, however. They are Westernization and the Islamic tradition.

## ORIENTALIST RECONSTRUCTION OF MODERN ARAB INTELLECTUAL HISTORY: DECLINE AND WESTERNIZATION

It is known that, aside from its political and sometimes religious motivation, orientalism has contributed widely to the revival of many Islamic fields of study that are now considered to be classical. What is less known, perhaps, is the orientalist position on modern Arab thought and philosophy. Serious orientalists—people such as Hamilton Gibb, von Grunebaum, Louis Gardet, and Robert Brunschvig—discussed thematically what they considered as the decline of the Arab world, and came up with a unanimous method and alternative to this supposed problematic, namely “Westernization” as a response to the intellectual, religious, and cultural decline of the world of Arabs and Islam. To paraphrase many an orientalist attitude, “Westernization should be the intellectual problem of modern Islam.”

One can distill a general orientalist position on decline and renaissance which is distinguishable, in some ways, from the “Arab position” on the same issue. In this section, I discuss the formulations of Gibb, Smith, and von Grunebaum on modern Arab thought, and the position which the theme of renaissance/decline occupies in them. This discussion will be more revealing when compared to that of the next section that sums up the attitudes of a representative number of contemporary Arab thinkers on the same phenomenon.

Gibb claims that, around the turn of this century, and under the powerful impact of technical Westernization—that is, modernization, Islam started to disintegrate as an organic theological and social system. Although “the vital forces of Islam, as a creed, as a rule of life, and as an ethical system remain unimpaired”<sup>42</sup> in the modern Arab world, argues Hamilton Gibb, “Islam as the arbiter of social life is being dethroned.”<sup>43</sup> This is a remarkable development in view of the fact that, for centuries, Islam had not lost its grip on either the Muslim elite or the masses. Gibb, as well as many modern orientalists, understands Westernization in three interdependent ways: (1) it is the adoption of Western military apparatus and technique—that is to say, it is an external and concrete scientific tool of progress; (2) Westernization is a worldview—or it is a process of rationalization; and (3) Westernization is a philosophical and educational outlook. A mere cumulative technological dimension of life can not be judged to be

advanced if it is unaccompanied by a rational mentality, which can be cultivated only through education.<sup>44</sup> To Gibb's mind, "The main—indeed, if the word is taken in a wide enough sense, the only—sound agent of Westernization is education, and it is by the criterion of its education in Western thought, principles, and methods that the extent of Westernization in the Muslim world is to be judged."<sup>45</sup> Put differently, in order to guarantee the success of Westernization in the Arab world, its elite culture has to change enormously, from that of the traditional Islamic understanding of life to a Western outlook. A necessary component of this shift in intellect and spirit is a new type of intelligentsia.<sup>46</sup> Gibb, of course, does not think of the leftist intelligentsia as an option because he prefers a secular, procapitalist one.

To Gibb, the proliferation of a new Westernized mind-set in the Arab world has not been completely successful. In a later study, Gibb turns his attention to the reasons that inhibit the "Arab mind" from achieving full progress. These reasons, he feels, are quite obvious. The "Arab mind,"<sup>47</sup> shaped by the long Islamic centuries, is resistant to accepting Western notions of progress. Put differently, Arabs and Muslims display internal or essentialistic obstacles to progress along Western lines. The structure of the "Arab mind" is not solid enough to affect and grasp recent Western scientific achievements and discoveries. The Arab mind lacks comprehensive vision and outlook.

The student of Arabic civilization is constantly brought up against the striking contrast between the imaginative power displayed . . . in certain branches of Arabic literature and the literalism, the pedantry, displayed in reasoning and exposition, even when it is devoted to these same productions. It is true that there have been great philosophers among the Muslim peoples and that some of them were Arabs, but they were rare exceptions. The Arab mind, whether in relation to the outer world or in relation to the processes of thought, cannot throw off its intense feeling for the separateness and individuality of the concrete events.<sup>48</sup>

This, according to Gibb, explains the aversion of Muslims to the thought-processes of rationalism. The real cause of decline, according to Gibb, is the inability of the "atomistic" Muslim mind to catch up with the rationalist modes of Western thought. "The rejection of rationalistic modes of thought and of the utilitarian ethic which is inseparable from them has its roots, therefore, not in the so-called 'obscurantism' of the Muslim theologians but in the atomism and discreetness of the Arab imagination."<sup>49</sup> According to Pruett, the

assumption that Islam is an unchanging “religion” and a fixed abstraction against which all modern developments—such as liberalism, nationalism, and modernism—are to be judged, permeates Gibb’s *Modern Trends in Islam*. Gibb sees his task as that of “explaining what he sees as the clearly anomalous and disintegrated character of the religion of Islam.”<sup>50</sup>

Gibb contends that Islam faces the same fundamental problems as in the past because it is still

confronted with searching questions as to the validity of its metaphysics, its ideal constructions abstracted from the material world, and of the resulting frames of reference within which its doctrines are formulated and expounded. The problem which Islam must face is that its traditional formulations necessarily include certain elements of reasoning which are based on intellectual concepts no longer accepted, and that it must be continually adapting its apologetic to more acceptable concepts.<sup>51</sup>

To achieve progress, the “Arab and Muslim mind” should emancipate itself from the categories of the Qur’anic revelation—those same categories that have made Islam “a classical example of an entirely self-sufficient, self-enclosed, and inbred culture.”<sup>52</sup> As a supposedly rigid and closed epistemological system which shuns outside influences, Islam does not meet modernity, not even half way. The problem becomes even more grave if viewed from a historical perspective.

After the thirteenth century or so, it is assumed that, from a religious angle, Islam stayed put—that it remained fixed in the molds created for it by the scholars, jurists, doctors, and mystics of the formative centuries and, if anything, decayed rather than progressed. In some respects, this view is apparently justified, and it is, indeed, held by a number of modern Muslim scholars themselves.<sup>53</sup>

Although Edward Said suggests that Gibb prefers the *‘ulamā’* to the modernists,<sup>54</sup> it is clear from the above discussion that Gibb sees hope for Muslims only if they transcend—and not modify or synthesize—their “ancient categories of thinking” and follow, more or less, a reformist program that subscribes to the relativist demands of modern life and that is not afraid to make concessions to science.

Von Grunebaum shares Gibb’s basic contention that the founda-

tions of the “Arab mind” need to be radically reoriented toward Western rationalism. He also argues that cultural Westernization is the only viable cultural system in modern times that is capable of giving a sense of direction and meaning to the Third World, including the Muslim world. Westernization seeped into the upper stratum of Muslim societies because of power differentials and Muslim dependency on the West. However, to ensure a complete transformation of the Arab world, it is insufficient to allow “Western technology or natural science or military art to be grafted onto the traditional intellectual structure. New content would not be enough, nor would new methods. The change ha[s] to be admitted down to the very roots, that is, the vantage point of the civilization and its objective.”<sup>55</sup> As Western culture is the most productive of all world cultures, it is but natural that there should be a cultural flow between the center (Europe) and the periphery (the world of Islam).

Von Grunebaum discusses the necessity of transforming the “antiquated culture” of Islam, and of cultural borrowing from the West under the auspices of colonialism. He does not discuss the impact of European colonialism on all aspects of modern Arab society and life. He limits his discussion to the “religious and epistemological contents” of the “Arab mind.” His major concern is to clear any impediment or obstacle between the source—namely, Westernization—and the receiving culture so as to ensure an uninterrupted flow of Western cultural influence and directives. As a psychological goal, Westernization can be achieved only if one knows who the enemy is, or the real causes of decline. Von Grunebaum sums up the basic characteristics of progress and those of decline in the following terms:

When contacts were first made, the basic concepts of both worlds were absolutely incompatible. Whereas, in the East, the individual was incorporated into and subordinated to family, clan, tribe, and ethnic-religious unity, with the state providing, as it were, only a modicum of outside coordination, the West represented the primacy of the human being and his integration at the same time into the “organic” state. The formal restraint of thought, in which the preservation of the known was at stake, collided with the West’s passionate devotion to scientific progress, to domination of nature, to knowledge as an unending process. To the cult of the inherited, the West opposed active interference in social conditions and problems. Loyalty to persons was opposed by loyalty to an impersonal whole, to institutions. Whereas the Arab was prepared to satisfy himself with a suprar-

tional interpretation of the real, the European insisted upon rationalistic criticism. As a corollary, the Arab was (and still is) inclined toward “personalization of problems”; he feels enemies, humiliations, and triumphs where the Occidental makes allowances for material, objective, and, in any event, impersonal difficulties.<sup>56</sup>

Von Grunebaum goes a step beyond Gibb by advocating the creation of an Arab or Muslim occidentalist, as a counterpart to the Western orientalist. To him, Arab occidentalism must carry the double task of liberating the modern “Arab mind” from past influences and spreading the seeds of Westernization so that the masses may master basic Western notions and principles.

Westernization is the worldview par excellence that the modern-day occidentalist must adopt and nurture as part of his cultural space. Colonialism has acted as a catalyst in freeing the “Muslim mind” from supposedly moral and intellectual paralysis and stagnation. Did not the great Ibn Khaldūn postulate that the conquered always adopt the mannerism and culture of the conquerors? To von Grunebaum, the answer is very clear—Muslims felt the urge to be colonized.

Colonialism is not a political whim but a historical necessity. One succumbs to colonization only when one is colonizable. And one does not cease to be colonized before one ceases to be colonizable. Does not the Qur’ān (*sūrah* 13:12) state that God changes the status of a nation only when it has changed its spiritual bearing?<sup>57</sup>

It is interesting that von Grunebaum, in his analysis of colonialism, borrows in toto the main ideas of the Algerian thinker Malek Bennabi as outlined in his painstaking study, *Vocation de l’Islam*.<sup>58</sup> Bennabi, writing under the influence of French culture and colonialism, is deeply perturbed by what he perceives as the moral and social chaos of modern Islam. Colonialism has not been that menacing. “The man of Europe unknowingly played the role of the dynamite that explodes in a camp of silence and contemplation.”<sup>59</sup> But colonialism, one must remember, led to the creation of a novel type of sophisticated hegemony which has not escaped the attention of every serious secular and religious intellectual in the Arab world. On the Islamist side, colonialism has been used as a reason to free Arab and Muslim lands from Western hegemony.

Louis Gardet, unlike both Gibb and von Grunebaum, explains Muslim decline in purely religious terms. He traces decline to pre-



modern Europe, to the thirteenth century that saw the destruction of the 'Abbasid caliphate. Political disintegration was preceded by "fixation in the religious sciences."<sup>60</sup> Fixation, stagnation, rigidity, and obscurantism were central features of the traditional Islamic sciences, such as theology, exegesis, mysticism, and *Hadīth* studies. In Gardet's view, the "ossification" of Muslim religious sciences was a necessary outcome of "the absence of a living and a doctrinal authority,"<sup>61</sup> similar to that of Catholicism. The real cause of decline is not military nor political. It lies in the inner structure of the Islamic religion and its inability to adapt to external changes and exigencies. Gardet agrees with another French scholar, R. Brunschwig, that the real problem facing modern Islamic thought is that modern-day Muslims still situate their historical ideal in the past, and that is why "a resolute rejection of innovation marks modern Islamic thought."<sup>62</sup> As a result, *taqlīd* (blind imitation) has replaced *ijihād* (rational exertion) as the basis of thought.

In making a clear distinction between Islam, as both method and praxis, and Westernization, as technique and process, modern orientalist state, with sufficient clarity, their preference for Westernization as the only viable intellectual option to modern Arabs and Muslims. Orientalists in general—and this is shared by some Islamist thinkers—downplay the rich dynamics of Arab and Muslim history in the Ottoman period. They prefer to speak in the general terms of stagnation and decline. They all seem to share the conclusion that a real *nahḍah* cannot take a proper course unless it renounces "Islamic dogmatism," obscurantism, atomism, mythology, and ancient beliefs.

#### THE PROBLEM OF WESTERNIZATION AND TRADITION AS VIEWED BY THE MODERN ARAB INTELLIGENTSIA

Strangely enough, a good number of Muslim (even Islamist) authors agree with the basic orientalist premise that decline had been pervasive in the house of Islam up until the European intervention in the nineteenth century. A large number of Muslim-oriented thinkers assume that true Islam developed against the tumultuous background of the first few centuries, and that a general theological and subsequent social and political decline set in from the thirteenth century.<sup>63</sup> In spite of agreeing with orientalism on this particular thesis of decline, the solutions the majority of the Arab and Islamist intelligentsia offer are at variance with those of orientalism. To preserve the religious integrity of Islam, and to promote Muslim consciousness in all fields of life,

these thinkers propose that it is the urgent task of modern Muslims to revive and practice the old solid foundations of Islam. This basic concern—the revival of Islam—is commonly shared by conservative and modernist Muslims alike. This is the bridge connecting people such as Abū al-Ḥasan al-Nadwī and Ḥasan al-Bannā with Malek Bennabi and Muḥammad al-Bahiy.

## ARAB RELIGIOUS RESPONSE TO DECLINE AND WESTERNIZATION

Abū al-Ḥasan al-Nadwī, an Indian by birth, occupies a unique position in contemporary Arab Muslim thought, especially in the current history of revivalism. His, *What Has the World Lost as a Result of the Decline of Muslims?*,<sup>64</sup> translated into Arabic from the Urdu and introduced by Sayyid Quṭb just a few months before the latter joined the Ikhwan in 1951, sheds some light on the historical consciousness of many an Islamist thinker. Further, Nadwī's response to Muslim decline is the more interesting because of his own affiliation by birth and training to the 'ulamā' class in India, and because the solutions he offers are based on radical changes in every department of Muslim life at present.

Nadwī follows the orientalist method in tracing Muslim decline to the premodern era. In fact, he tells us, decline started in the wake of the reign of the four Rightly Guided caliphs, and its first symptoms were seen in the de facto separation between religion and state as practiced by the Umayyads and 'Abbasids. The religious establishment was unable to prevent this cleavage between state and religion, and some 'ulamā' were actually guilty of justifying and propagating secular activities and tendencies. Nadwī elaborates on the theme of 'ulamā' and power in modern Muslim societies, and accuses a great number of 'ulamā' of "intellectual prostitution." He argues that the intellectual core of Islam, as represented by its theological class, has disintegrated because of the willingness of that class to play into the hands of politicians. The 'ulamā', who are supposed to take the general welfare (*maṣlahah*) of the community into account, have neglected their traditional duties, and "are even open to purchase by the highest bidder. They have put themselves up for auction."<sup>65</sup>

The religion-state dichotomy has had far-reaching consequences on the morality, mental aptitude, and religious thinking of Muslims. Nadwī argues that, far from allowing moral degeneration to direct their lives, Muslims adopted Greek and foreign doctrines, methods,

and ways of thought that were incompatible with the intellectual and theological orientation of the Qur'ān and, as a result, revealed and man-made law became confused. "If the Divine Law becomes tainted by human intervention," Nadwī maintains, "it will cease to be what it should—a guarantee for success in this world and the next. Neither will the human intellect submit to it, nor will the mind of man be won over."<sup>66</sup>

In spite of certain attempts at renaissance and the rise of the Ottomans as a major world power in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the grandeur of Islam as practiced by the Rightly Guided caliphs was never recaptured. The Turks became guilty of the same malpractices of their predecessors and, worse yet, they allowed their minds to be static, and intellectual sterility became the accepted norm.<sup>67</sup> Nadwī bewails this lamentable state of affairs and says that

the fifteenth century was definitely the last to reveal any real intellectual life among the followers of Islam. It was during this century that Ibn Khaldūn wrote his *Prolegomena*. In the sixteenth century, the indolence of mind, slavish pedantry and blind imitation became complete. One does not find even one in a hundred among the ulama of the last four centuries who may, with justice, be called a genius, or who may have produced anything to set beside the bold and noble intellectual activities of the earlier centuries.<sup>68</sup>

In a sense, Nadwī maintains that Muslims would not have been colonized in the modern era had they not had the dispensation to be colonizable. He shares this sentiment, as has already been pointed out, with both von Grunebaum and Malek Bennabi.

Against this gloomy picture, it was but natural for the European powers, emerging fresh in the wake of the Reformation and Industrial Revolution, to compete successfully with Muslim power and affect the whole texture of Muslim life and thought. Moral, social, and mental degeneration leads naturally to borrowing from and imitation of the superior culture. Here Nadwī follows a Khaldūnian analysis and critique of Muslims in decline. "Dazzled by the power and progress of the western nations, Muslims began to imitate Western social and economic institutions regardless of the consequences. . . . The prestige of religion was diminished. The teachings of the Prophet were forgotten."<sup>69</sup> It is hard to believe that modern-day Muslims profess the same ideology as did their noble ancestors.

Nadwī seems to be uncertain about how to approach the whole question of technological modernity and Westernization. On the one

hand, he levels a critique at industrial society because, in his view, technological society has reduced man to a shallow being and robbed him of his pristine nature and moral loftiness. On the other, he compliments the West for its organizational and educational skills and the consciousness of its citizenry. He also considers the West to be further advanced in terms of its technology than any other nation or region in the world. Therefore, he advocates that Muslims learn from the technological superiority of the West, but only as long as they remain steeped in their own intellectual and moral traditions.<sup>70</sup>

Nadwī is, however, troubled by the philosophical spirit underlying the Western world. This world in his view is characterized by imperialism, capitalism, and communism—all of which are exported to the Third World. Looking deeper at the West, he postulates, one may notice the following: (1) religion has been pushed to the periphery. As a result, moral degeneration and spiritual malaise have been rampant; (2) aggressive nationalism is the norm, and has proven to be destructive to the Muslim *ummah*; and (3) religious ethics and secular power have been separated. Atheistic materialism, according to Nadwī, is the logical consequence of the conditions prevalent in Europe.

Exported to the Third World, materialism has had the pernicious effect of swaying Muslims from their faith, even to the point where one notices in modern Muslim societies a perplexing alliance between Muslims and Paganism. Nadwī asserts that, “The modern Muslim has totally given up the idea of leadership; he has lost faith in himself. His whole mental attitude is being molded by the undercurrents of Paganism. Muslim states exhibit the same materialistic tendencies which are the hallmark of the Western social system.”<sup>71</sup> Nadwī does not, at this stage, make any distinction between the ruling and intellectual elite and the masses in the Muslim world. He seems to suggest that the spirit of Westernization, in terms of materialism and paganism, has invaded every domain of Muslim life.

The solution to this state of degeneration requires radical intellectual revolution. “The Qur’ān and the *Sunnah*,” argues Nadwī, “can still revitalize the withered arteries of the Islamic world.”<sup>72</sup> It is necessary, therefore, to establish a highly conscious and pragmatic Muslim leadership that is aware of the menaces surrounding the Muslim *ummah* and which exhibits a strong sense of integrity in order to combat the multitude of evils that has crept into the inner Muslim reality. One of the first tasks of this leadership is to analyze the power structure in Muslim societies, and critique the power elite that does not hesitate for a minute “to mortgage the destiny of [its] people and walk away with it.”<sup>73</sup>

What Nadwī cannot admit, along with his contemporary disciples, is that the Islamic discourse, however it is defined, does not—and, indeed, cannot—constitute an autonomous discourse in modern Arab intellectual history. It is, indeed, true that the Islamic discourse, in its various contents and forms, is an impressive and diverse arena of thought, which must be understood against the multitude of, especially, secular currents of thought, some of which display open hostility to any religious interpretation or worldview.

Although agreeing with some of Nadwī's basic theses about Islamic history, the Azharite thinker and former rector of the Azhar university, Muḥammad al-Bahiy, tackles the whole issue of decline and Westernization from a totally different angle than does Nadwī and, indeed, from the majority of Muslim Arab writers in the twentieth century. In his ground-breaking, *Modern Islamic Thought and its Relation to Western Colonialism*,<sup>74</sup> al-Bahiy places the “Muslim problematic” squarely within the context of modern colonialism and its cultural tool, simply understood as orientalism. His method brings home a host of contemporary issues without going back to the distant past, as do Nadwī and others.<sup>75</sup>

Colonialism is an integral part of the modern Muslim consciousness, in spite of the fact that it is not of the making of Muslims. In other words, al-Bahiy begins with the thesis that the “colonial fact” must be the basis of any discussion about modern Islamic thought. The primary goal of colonialism, he argues, is the weakening of Muslim doctrine, and consequently the weakening of Muslims themselves. Colonialism uses different tools to achieve its goals, but the most efficient is the way in which it spreads its intellectual hegemony in the Muslim world. To ensure its “control over and direction of Islamic thought in realizing this goal [that of intellectual hegemony],”<sup>76</sup> colonialism has launched a two-pronged attack:—first, encouraging indigenous Muslim thinkers, such as Sayyid Aḥmad Khān and Mirza Ghulām Aḥmad of India, to establish movements in the name of reforming Islam; and second, establishing educational training centers with the sole purpose of educating a sufficient number of missionaries and orientalists whose primary task has been, in recent history, to highlight the doctrinal differences and schisms among Muslims, assert political, economic, and geographical differences between the peoples that make up the Muslim *ummah*, and elevate the status of Christianity, Western civilization, and its political regimes at the expense of the principles of Islam.<sup>77</sup> In complete agreement with a number of Arab thinkers in the 1950s and 1960s, al-Bahiy links missionary—educational and religious—activities to colonialism.<sup>78</sup> He also considers orientalists

to be the modern heirs to the crusaders. He argues that, a priori, they distort the meaning and message of Islam. In this, he agrees with one of the main theses of Muḥammad Asad that, “As those orientalists are not a special race by themselves, but only exponents of their civilization and their social surroundings, we must necessarily come to the conclusion that the occidental mind, on the whole, is for some reason or another prejudiced against Islam as a religion and as a culture.”<sup>79</sup>

Al-Bahiy concludes by saying that orientalism is the cultural side of colonialism, and it, indeed, becomes a dangerous phenomenon when a number of prominent Muslim thinkers adhere to its basic premises and postulates. In short, it is a “cultural venom.”<sup>80</sup> Therefore, it comes as no surprise that pro-colonialist and pro-orientalist trends exist in modern Islamic thought, and that this matter must not be taken lightly.

On the other hand, anti-colonialist and anti-orientalist trends have been in the making since the nineteenth century through the efforts of Jamāl al-Dīn al-Afghānī, Muḥammad ‘Abduh, and Muḥammad Iqbāl. These eminent thinkers and their numerous disciples share their fight against the intellectual hegemony of the West by asserting the principles of Islam and their applicability in the modern world. However, after their deaths, another indigenous reform movement—represented in the main by Ṭāha Ḥusayn—“followed in the footsteps of European thought—in its direction, rules, and method of solving life’s problems. And the chosen place of this reform movement is the national Egyptian university, headed by free and independent scholars.”<sup>81</sup>

What solution does al-Bahiy then give to this state of affairs? Al-Bahiy stands for the reformation and reconstruction of modern Islamic thought, and advocates that it rids itself of the pro-colonialist current by bridging the gap between the way Islam is practiced as culture and the way that its ideal is perceived. He maintains that, as a result of colonialism, there has been an intense polarization in the modern Muslim identity. This polarization can be overcome only if the national liberation movements—such as Nasserism—that were suffering from the vacuum created by colonialism, were to practice Islam as a system of life. Instead, “the indigenous liberation movements, after becoming movements for political independence, have become movements of isolation (*‘azl*), cutting off the Muslim masses from real life, and permitting the materialist, atheist, and orientalist Western thought to infiltrate and consolidate both polarization and vacuum.”<sup>82</sup>

Al-Bahiy does not go too far in criticizing the Egyptian nation/state. After all, as a rector of the Azhar, he is a state functionary.

However, the final solution, as he sees it, is the reform of the Azhar. (His book was written several years before the actual reform of the Azhar in the late 1950s under Imām Maḥmūd Shaltūt.<sup>83</sup>) What is surprising is that he does not refer explicitly nor implicitly to the Muslim Brotherhood Movement and its intellectual leaders at the time, mainly Ḥasan al-Bannā and Sayyid Quṭb.

### SECULAR ARAB ANALYSIS OF DECLINE AND WESTERNIZATION: TRADITIONALISM OR HISTORICISM OR MARXISM?

The religious problematic has proven to be at the center of modern Arab intellectual debate. Although, on the whole, secular Arab thinkers pursue different premises and methodologies than those of religious-oriented thinkers, they nevertheless cannot escape dealing with the religious issue. Laroui's thinking on the matter represents the radical—or Marxist—critique of Arab society, culture, and its religious underpinnings.<sup>84</sup> "Criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism."<sup>85</sup> Thus declares Marx in his writing. Abdallah Laroui follows this maxim rather passionately and applies it to the intellectual history of the modern Arab world which, in his estimation, has not as yet transcended the "problem of religion." In order to place religion in its proper place and dilute its popular effectiveness, Laroui proposes a critical method based on philosophy. "Philosophy," he tells us, "is born, develops, and lives again in polemic. It is not by re-examining old problems with the old terminology that it can save itself from ever-threatening anachronism; it renews itself only by occupying itself with the questions that are the stuff of everyday social practice, and these first appear in the form of critical polemic."<sup>86</sup> Laroui deals with the religious question rather reluctantly. His own philosophy is guided by a secular, democratic, progressive, and even atheist vision that aims to transform Arab society from a state of "backward tradition and religion" to one that seeks a radical transformation and liberation of the Arab individual and the creation of a socialist society. To achieve this end, religion must be done away with. However, the obsession with the problem of religion, which permeates the entire work of Laroui, acts as a reminder of the centrality of religion in the modern Arab discourse, as pointed out earlier.

Laroui's *oeuvre* is illuminating, perhaps not for the answers it gives, but for the questions and issues which it raises. Throughout his work, he raises the following fundamental questions: (1) What is

colonialism? Is it economic and political hegemony or the consciousness of Western modernity? (2) What is revolution, and what role does the nation state play in it? (3) What are the reasons standing behind decline and stagnation in Arab society? and (4) What position does the religious question with its ever-present weapon, *turāth*, occupy in the modern context?<sup>87</sup>

These questions, in Laroui's view, summarize what he terms "*la problématique arabe*,"<sup>88</sup> as opposed to the Islamic problematic in al-Bahiy's view. Laroui's version of the problematic reflects the way in which modern Arabs deal with their transitional epochs and the challenges that they produce. It also contains four basic conceptual elements: authenticity, continuity, universality, and artistic expression. One must, however, investigate these elements historically in relation to three state-formations in the modern Arab world: the colonial state, the liberal state, and the national state.<sup>89</sup>

There are, Laroui proposes, three principal ideological currents that deal with the questions perturbing Arab society: (1) the religious current, best represented by the cleric or the shaykh; (2) the political, best represented by the liberal politician who, to varying degrees, sees in the West his only chance for intellectual and material survival; and (3) the technical, represented by scientists and technocrats who are concerned with the efficient introduction of science and technology into society.

In Laroui's view, the cleric, as the guardian of tradition, cannot rid himself of the ancient polarization and conflict between Islam and Christianity. He still thinks according to these defunct categories, Laroui claims. Thus, his religious consciousness does not allow him to grasp the fundamental changes taking place in the West since the Renaissance and their distinctive secular traits. Nonetheless, the religious consciousness of the cleric is marred by a duality. "The conscience of our cleric is religious when he analyzes society, but he becomes liberal when he critiques the West."<sup>90</sup>

The liberal politician, although not dismissing Islam in public, has borrowed all of his basic concepts about consultation and democracy from the West. However, he sometimes gives them an Islamic umbrella, as in his use of the terms *shūra* and *ijmā'*. He still appeals to the Islamic tradition as both a symbol of legitimation and an indicator of cultural authenticity.

The technocrat, on the other hand, pays lip service to both religion and politics. He sees the difference between the Arab world and the West, not in terms of religion or political organization, but in the way in which each has acquired applied science.<sup>91</sup> The technocrat



reminds others of the following maxim: "Today's civilization is entirely based on industry, and its culture is science and nothing but science, whereas the culture of agrarian societies is that of literature, religion, and philosophy." In addition, the technocrat—in the words of Laroui—has totally neglected the religious question and tradition. "The technocrat does not feel any need of interpreting the dogma or even changing its traditional meaning; he simply ignores doctrine totally."<sup>92</sup> Laroui is perhaps justified in drawing our attention to this latter idea mainly because the modern Arab technocrat grew up in the shadow of either colonialism or secular nationalism, both of which attempted to relegate religion to a peripheral status.

After outlining the main currents of "contemporary collective Arab ideology," Laroui discovers that the tenacious presence of tradition and the traditional mentality, far from being anachronistic and obsolete, still dominate contemporary Arab thinking. Laroui's relevance to our present endeavor is derived from his scathing critique of what he terms "Islamic traditionalism," and its pervasive presence in contemporary Islamic societies. Laroui struggles specifically with the notion of the Islamic tradition *per se*. Although he ends up dismissing the entire theological and philosophical heritage of Islam as obsolete, he maintains that traditional categories of thought still dominate the mental product of a large number of the Arab intelligentsia. "Arab intellectuals think according to two rationales. Most of them profess the traditionalist rationale [*salafī*]; the rest profess an eclecticism. Together, these tendencies succeed in abolishing the historical dimension."<sup>93</sup> According to Laroui, the real crisis of the traditionalist Arab intelligentsia is to be sought in the foundations that give birth to their thought. This mental dependency on and refuge in the past makes the chances of historical consciousness and progress quite remote. What is, therefore, the alternative? Laroui argues that the only means to do away with the traditionalist mode of thinking, "consists in strict submission to the discipline of historical thought and acceptance of all its assumptions."<sup>94</sup> Laroui is not quite clear about the real nature of this historical school. Yet, his challenge to the functioning categories of the modern Arab mind still awaits an answer. In the words of Hourani, Laroui calls for the adoption of historicism, "that is to say, a willingness to transcend the past, to take what was needed from it by a 'radical criticism of culture, language, and tradition,' and use it to create a new future."<sup>95</sup>

It is true that Laroui brings out a number of important terms that summarize his position on a number of crucial issues. Such terms as hegemony, tradition, historicism, and revolution cannot be valued in a

historical sense unless they are understood in the context of the power dynamics in modern Arab society, as well as the way in which this society produces knowledge and culture. One could argue, therefore, on the basis of Laroui's thinking that the real problem facing the modern Arab world is not Westernization, cultural alienation, nor historical alienation, but the preservation of rigid and traditional categories of thought which do not show inner readiness to combat and solve current problems.

Laroui's point of departure is similar to that of al-Bahiy's. Both share the same sentiment about colonialism and even orientalism, and they both display a common goal, which is to overcome cultural and intellectual backwardness in the Arab world. However, they display different approaches in treating the issue at hand. Laroui proposes to overcome the past by suggesting its total abolition from the existing memory or Arab society, whereas al-Bahiy does not see revival except within the context of the traditional Islamic formulations. In other words, al-Bahiy and many Islamist thinkers admit of the disintegration of Islam as doctrine, ethics, and community in the modern world, and argue for its restoration as religion, way of life, and state. Laroui takes the disintegration of Islam as an indicator of the incompatibility of its basic formulations with modernity. Here he shares, more or less, the orientalist thesis that "the traditional Islamic mentality includes elements of reasoning which are based on intellectual concepts no longer accepted." Laroui, however, goes further than the orientalists in suggesting Marxism, as a world-view, method, and ideology, is the only viable alternative to the crisis of traditionalism.<sup>96</sup>

### DECONSTRUCTION OF "ARAB AND MUSLIM REASON": AN ALTERNATIVE TO DECLINE?

In an illuminating piece on the difference between theology and philosophy, Paul Tillich argues that "epistemology, the knowledge of knowing, is a part of ontology, the knowledge of being, for knowing is an event within the totality of events. Every epistemological assertion is implicitly ontological. Therefore, it is more adequate to begin an analysis of existence with the question of being rather than with the problem of knowledge."<sup>97</sup> Muḥammad 'Ābid al-Jābirī does not take Tillich's advice, and prefers, instead, to interpret the present problems of Arab and Muslim existence by analyzing the cognitive components that have gone into making the Muslim mind since the inception of

Islam.<sup>98</sup> What are the benefits of an epistemological critique of the “Arab mind”—both classical and modern?

Al-Jābirī argues that a thorough deconstruction and critique of the structure of the Arab mind is a necessary step toward building a viable Arab future. In *al-Khiṭāb al-‘arabī al-mu‘āṣir* (*Contemporary Arab Discourse*), he maintains that the Arab *nahḍah* of the nineteenth century did not result in a major epistemological and philosophical breakthrough because of the failure of its representatives to critique the Arab mind itself. Al-Jābirī upholds the orientalist position that there was a deep decline in the Arab world on the eve of the European intervention.<sup>99</sup>

Al-Jābirī considers the question of decline (*inḥiṭāṭ*) to be one of the main problematics of modern Arab thought and philosophy. He declares that no intellectual trend has been immune from discussing the reasons and nature of this situation. He argues that Muslim thinkers, especially revivalist Muslim thinkers, have failed to present a viable alternative to the problem of decline.<sup>100</sup> He further argues that both “the Islamic tendency” and “the liberal Westernized tendency” have not succeeded in diagnosing the intellectual malaise of the Arab world. The former tendency locates the solution in the Islamic past, in the Golden Age, whereas the latter locates it in the European Renaissance, which was the antecedent of European colonialism. In other words, the liberal tendency, according to al-Jābirī, cannot seek Western philosophical answers to questions and issues arising in the context of the modern Arab world. Finally, al-Jābirī concludes that the *nahḍah* discourse in modern Arab thought—be it Islamic, liberal, nationalist, or Marxist—is a compromising and self-contradictory one, mainly because it offers ready-made solutions and theses.

Al-Jābirī, as with any modern Arab philosopher, is preoccupied with the correct method of investigating and interpreting the intellectual achievements of the Arab world in the last century or so. He contends that the various components that make up the *nahḍah* discourse—especially the political, Arab nationalist, liberal, and Islamic philosophical ones—have paid lip service to the real and fundamental issues and questions facing the Arab world. As a result, the “Arab mind has failed to build up a coherent discourse which could deal with any of the numerous issues and questions debated in the past one hundred years.”<sup>101</sup> Al-Jābirī reaches the grim conclusion that the conceptualizations of the *nahḍah* discourse were based on prefabricated models that do not necessarily reflect the current social and cultural conditions.