with it are many, but the consistent and satisfactory responses to these calls are few.

Another phenomenon apparent in these debates is the tendency to focus on the cultural rather than the political aspects of the malaise, despite the recurring calls for democracy. Moreover, the cultural is often approached in an idealist, intellectualist manner that isolates it from its historical, colonial, and socioeconomical conditions. All of these tendencies constitute some of the major challenges to the historicizing, demystifying, and deconstructive work of critique. Finally, the traumatic effect of the 1967 defeat and its aftermath is recognized as the significant context within which this work is carried out. Chapters 4 and 5 examine the critical efforts made in both the religious, theological sphere and the secular sphere in spite of these challenges.

Four
Critique
in
Islamic
Theology

Already during the Nahda, as we have seen so far, Islamic theology was a pivotal domain of reform and modernization under the leadership of clerics such as Muhammad Abduh, Ali Abdel Raziq, and Muhammad Ahmad Khalafallah. Their ideas were met with conservatism and traditionalism by the official religious establishment headed by al-Azhar as well as by leading Islamists such as Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Sayyid Qutb, its theoretician. But the calls for theological critique and modernization continued, for instance in the ideas of Muhammad Nuwaihi. Nuwaihi mentioned four ways in which religions in general have adapted to modernity: first, by distinguishing between religion and official speakers of religion; second, by recognizing the possible intellectual and moral flaws of these speakers; third, by developing the metaphorical interpretation of sacred texts; and finally, by historicizing revelation. Recalling Muslim authorities' and the public's

resistance to the fourth way, he pleaded for the expansion of the third way to renew Islam as a religion and a culture.

It is, however, the fourth way that some critical Islamic thinkers of the second half of the twentieth century adopted as a major project of theological and cultural reform. The most prominent among them are Mohammad Arkoun and Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd. For both, the opening of new ways of understanding Islam as a divine message and as a tradition and culture starts with the historicizing of revelation. This historicization implies the examination of the human context of revelation and transmission, including the historical, cultural, linguistic, and gender prisms through which they take place. A number of feminist critics analyze the gender aspect of theology. Moreover, religion in the Arab world, like elsewhere, has been mobilized to advocate for social, economic, and political justice: Islamic and Christian liberation theologies have been articulated to relate faith to the trying circumstances of Arab realities and to let the liberating message of the sacred texts be heard in the dark times of oppression and despair. In this chapter, I look at the strengths, weaknesses, and specificities of these theologies and consider their contribution to Arab cultural critique in general. Finally, I examine the critical function that traditional religious institutions may perform in the Arab Islamic context.

From the Unthought and the Unthinkable
to the Thinkable: Mohammad Arkoun

Mohammad Arkoun is an Algerian professor of Islamic studies at the Sorbonne in Paris, where he was also trained. Since the early 1960s, he has been writing on questions of theory and method in Islamic studies as well as on various topics of Islamic theology. His writings have been mainly in French, but some are in Arabic and lately in English as well. His main project has been to rethink Islam by using the recent findings in the humanities and the social sciences in order to shed new light on the sacred texts and traditions of Islam and by so doing to explore the historicity of revelation in Islam, as has been done in other monotheistic religions. Indeed, one of Arkoun's major concerns throughout his career has been to put Islam and its studies in a comparative perspective on religion, encompassing Judaism and Christianity. Finally, like many other thinkers of the second half of the twentieth century and beyond, he has been preoccupied with

the modes of thinking in modern and contemporary Arab thought, especially with the tension between ideology and critique.

In a number of texts, Arkoun makes a cogent presentation of the genesis and goal of his endeavor. I refer to two of these texts (both in English): the 1985–1986 Annual Distinguished Lecture in Arab Studies, which he gave at the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies of Georgetown University, published as *Rethinking Islam Today*, and his introduction to his book *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*.[1] In both texts, he explains how growing up in the midst of the anticolonial struggle in the 1950s in Algeria impacted and shaped his intellectual interests. In this struggle, he says, an Arab Muslim personality was opposed to a French colonial power that claimed to be the representative of universal modern civilization. He recalls the intellectual poverty with which Islam was taught at the University of Algiers in those days. It is this personal "existential experience," as he calls it, that pushed him to examine the French colonial authorities' claim and at the same time to search for a better understanding of Islam. The study of Islam needed to be fundamentally reconsidered not in yet another reform attempt, but in a thorough rethinking of its theoretical and epistemological premises. This reconsideration meant subjecting Islamic studies to a radical critique in a social and cultural space dominated by the militant ideologies of the anticolonial and the postcolonial struggles—a challenging but necessary undertaking, according to him. It had two ultimate goals: first, to develop a new epistemology for the understanding of religion as a universal dimension of human existence and, second, to articulate a theory for the comparative study of cultures, especially those with a tradition of revealed religions.

The elaboration of such an epistemology implies, for Arkoun, a number of tasks:

1. The deconstruction of the logocentrism of the traditional Islamic studies, whether produced by Western or Muslim scholars, and the rehabilitation of the mythical and prophetic dimensions of the phenomenon of religion.
2. The integration of the modern humanities and social sciences—such as linguistics, semiotics, anthropology, and history—into these studies, which are to be understood as an anthropology of the past rather than as a mere compilation of events, genealogies, and records and are to be undertaken for the purpose of understanding the historicity of revelation.

3. The widening of the scope of tradition to include orthodoxy as well as unorthodoxy and the examination of the elements of power and ideology that go into the definition of these categories.

4. The uncovering of the regimes of truth and the regimes of power that define what is thinkable and what is unthinkable in the study of religion—Islam in particular—in a given period of history.

Islamic studies, according to Arkoun, have been dominated from early on by the primacy of Logos over mythos, which has marginalized, if not eliminated, religion's existential, symbolic, and prophetic dimensions. The same can be said, he adds, about Judaism and Christianity, especially in the Middle Ages under the impact of Greek philosophy. The integration of the latter into the elaboration of the theologies and religious laws of these monotheistic religions led to the privileging of deductive reasoning over imagination, of defined categories and concepts over more fluid notions, and of the written over the oral. The stable essences and substances of classical metaphysics imposed strict boundaries within which religious phenomena can be explored. This logocentrism has produced a constraining "regime of truth": "In my attempt to identify a logocentrist attitude in classical Arab thought, I wanted to demonstrate that the axiomatic propositions, the postulates, the categories, the forms of demonstration used in Medieval thought expressed in the Syriac, Hebrew, Arabic, Persian, Greek, and Latin languages, were in fact shared and common to the Medieval mental space. And this strongly logocentrist frame of thinking imposed an epistemic *regime of truth* different from the other discursive frame represented by what I call the *prophetic discourse*."[2]

Here, the term *prophetic discourse* refers to the whole mythological dimension of religious practice and interpretation, not in the pejorative sense of myth as "primitive," but of myth as the realm of the imaginary, the symbolic, the metaphorical. The imagination and, in this connection, the collective imagination (which he calls the *imaginaire social*, borrowing from French thinker Manuel Castoriadis) draw on processes of meaning formation and layers of sedimented meaning that go beyond the strict limits of revealed religions and shape their interpretation and practice in significant ways. For Arkoun, any adequate theory of religion needs to account for the realm of the imaginary:

Traditional theological thought has not used the concept of social imaginaire *and the related notions of myth, symbol, sign, or metaphor*

in the new meanings already mentioned. It refers constantly to reason *as the faculty of true knowledge, differentiated from knowledge based on the representations of the imagination. The methodology elaborated and used by jurists-theologians shares with the Aristotelian tradition the same postulate of rationality as founding the true knowledge and excluding the constructions of the imagination. In fact, an analysis of the discourse produced by both trends of thinking—the theological and the philosophical—reveals a simultaneous use of reason and imagination. Beliefs and convictions are often used as "arguments" to "demonstrate" propositions of knowledge. In this stage of thinking, metaphor is understood and used as a rhetorical device to add an aesthetic emotion to the* real *content of the words: it was not perceived in its creative force as a semantic innovation or in its power to shift the discourse to a global metaphorical organization requiring the full participation of a coherent imagination.*[3]

This logocentrism continues in contemporary Western culture in what Arkoun calls the "tele-techno-scientific reason";[4] and postmodern critique, he adds, has remained largely Eurocentric. What is needed is the development of a critical epistemology that integrates both new disciplines that allow the exploration of that *imaginaire* and believers' religious experiences. He understands this enterprise to be in line with what previous theologians in the classical age had done, such as al-Ghazali in *Ihya' 'ulum al-din* and Shafi'i in *Risala*.[5] At the same time, he is certain that the modern version will be different from the classical because of the epistemic discontinuities between the two epochs. Thinkers of the early period shared certain conceptual and metaphysical assumptions even when they differed in their intellectual positions; these assumptions are no longer accepted today. He gives as examples the two major antithetical figures of the classical age, al-Ghazali and Averroes: in spite of their sharp theological and philosophical differences, they both mixed juridical reasoning with philosophical reasoning and mixed religious convictions and legal norms with philosophical representations and methodology; moreover, they both ignored historicity.

The disciplines Arkoun has in mind for his modern critical project are modern semiotics and linguistics (which are bound to be different from what they were the classical age) as well as anthropology. Through a critical Islamic study informed by these disciplines, the historicity of revelation can come to the fore. By "historicity of revelation," he means the unavoidably

human and worldly forms of God's revelation to humanity, which implies their embeddedness in history, culture, and language. Hence, acknowledging and understanding this embeddedness without discrediting the absolute character of the divine message become essential to any proper study of revelation. The mechanisms through which the worldly, the specific, the contingent, and the relative lead to the transcendental, the absolute, and the eternal in religious language deserve special attention. Such an approach denies the existence of a "perfect" time in which all truth was revealed and completed, a time that most reformist and revivalist movements call for a return to. This call to a "perfect" time in the past, Arkoun argues, misunderstands both the historicity of revelation and the historicity of the reception of the revealed message. The latter, however, for Arkoun, remains a topic to be explored in an interdisciplinary, cross-religious, and cross-cultural approach:

> All semiotic productions of a human being in the process of his social and cultural emergence are subject to historical change which I call historicity. As a semiotic articulation of meaning for social and cultural uses, the Qur'an is subject to historicity. This means that there is no access to the absolute outside the phenomenal world of our terrestrial, historical existence. The various expressions given to the ontology, the first being the truth and the transcendence by theological and metaphysical reason, have neglected historicity as a dimension of the truth. Changing tools, concepts, definitions, and postulates are used to shape the truth.[6]

Both the uncreated status of the Qur'an and its final compiled form are examples of beliefs that were produced by certain regimes of truth combined with a certain regime of power:

> Islam is presented and lived as a definite system of beliefs and nonbeliefs which cannot be submitted to any critical inquiry. Thus, it divides the space of thinking into two parts: the unthinkable and the thinkable. Both concepts are historical and not, at first, philosophical. The respective domain of each of them changes through history and varies from one social group to another. Before the systemization by Shafi'i of the concept of sunna and the usuli use of it, many aspects of Islamic thought were still thinkable. They became unthinkable after the triumph of Shafi'i theory and also the elaboration of authentic

> "collections," as mentioned earlier. Similarly, the problems related to the historical process of collecting the Qur'an in an official mushaf became more and more unthinkable under the official pressure of the caliphate because the Qur'an has been used since the beginning of the Islamic state to legitimize political power and to unify the umma.[7]

Hence, for Arkoun, both epistemological systems and power systems play a crucial role in drawing the boundaries around what he calls a given "logosphere"—a horizon of givens constituted by a language and a culture. These systems present preferences as necessary truths and use power to impose ideological limits to the activity of thought, producing a whole realm of the unthought. Changing the unthinkable into a thinkable is the task of critique:

> When the field of the unthinkable is expanded and maintained for centuries in a particular tradition of thought, the intellectual horizons of reason are diminished and its critical functions narrowed and weakened because the sphere of the unthought becomes more determinate and there is little space left for the thinkable. The unthought is made up of the accumulated issues declared unthinkable in a given logosphere. A logosphere is the linguistic mental space shared by all those who use the same language with which to articulate their thoughts, their representations, their collective memory, and their knowledge according to the fundamental principles and values claimed as a unifying weltanschaaung. I use this concept to introduce the important dimension of the linguistic constraints of each language on the activities of thought.[8]

The elaboration of a new critical epistemology[9] that would take into account the historicity of both revelation and religious traditions, that would make room for myth and the imaginary, that would pay attention to language and meaning systems, that would include the unorthodox, the oral, and the minority, and that would reject logocentrism and Eurocentrism is the task of a critique of Islamic reason, which is also the title of a book Arkoun published in 1984, the same year that Muhammad al-Jabiri published the first volume of his critique of Arab reason.[10] Whereas Arkoun intends to rehabilitate the imaginary and the prophetic in view of acknowledging the human creation and interpretation of meaning in what is believed to be a divine message, al-Jabiri intends to reestablish the primacy

of demonstrative reasoning in view of rehabilitating what he believes to be the rationalist trend in the Islamic tradition. Given the rhetorical, demagogical, sentimentalist, manipulative, and apologetic abuses of beliefs in public debates in the Arab world, especially in those pertaining to sensitive issues such as religion, tradition, and identity, it is understandable that many contemporary critical thinkers insist on upholding rationality and demonstrative reasoning. On the one hand, this insistence often unfortunately leads to an exclusive valorization of this kind of reasoning and to the marginalization of all other forms of thinking and experiencing. On the other hand, the negative perception of mysticism as a trend that encourages irrationalism and hence at least partly responsible for the Arab decline in the arts and sciences has bred a certain suspicion toward the prophetic and spiritual dimensions of Islam. Again, this suspicion has been to the detriment of the experiential aspect of faith. Arkoun stands out as a critic who tries to reincorporate these dimensions in his new theology. In any case, compared to al-Jabiri, he remains more consistent in his historicist view of tradition and shows no proclivity to an essentialist conception of the "reason" in question. Furthermore, for Arkoun, the critique of Orientalism does not in and of itself create such a critical epistemology. The latter is to be undertaken in addition to the critique of Orientalism, a critique to which he contributed in 1964 with a sharp analysis of the articles of Gustav von Grunebaum. In a polite but firm attack, Arkoun criticizes von Grunebaum's essentialist, sweeping judgments.[11] He quotes a passage from von Grunebaum that is worth reproducing here in connection with the main focus of our study—namely, the issue of reflection and critique in modern Arab thought:

It is essential to realize that Muslim civilization is a cultural entity that does not share our primary aspirations. It is not vitally interested in analytical self-understanding, and it is even less interested in the structural study of other cultures, either as an end in itself or as a means toward clearer understanding of its own character and history. If this observation were to be valid merely for contemporary Islam, one might be inclined to connect it with the profoundly disturbed state of Islam, which does not permit to look beyond itself unless forced to do so. But as it is valid for the past as well, one may perhaps seek to connect it with the basic antihumanism of this civilization, that is, the determined refusal to accept man to any extent whatever as the arbiter or the measure of things, and the tendency to be satisfied with

truth as the description of mental structures, or, in other words, with psychological truth.[12]

As Arkoun shows in his critical review, he is aware of the great difficulty of being critical in a situation of struggle, internal or external. He ends his Georgetown lecture with the following statement: "I learned through the Algerian war of liberation how all revolutionary movements need to be backed by a struggle for meaning, and I discovered how meaning is manipulated by forces devoted to the conquest of power. The conflict between meaning and power has been, is, and will be the permanent condition through which man tries to emerge as a thinking being."[13] Arkoun's Egyptian counterpart, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, to whose work I turn in the next section, was to pay a high price for denouncing this link between power interests and hermeneutic preferences.

In his classic overview of Arab thought, *La pensée arabe*, published in Paris in 1975,[14] Arkoun reflects on the particularly difficult task for Arab thinkers to create empowering structures of meaning, caught as they are between the need for critical thinking and the pressure of ideological struggles. After the Nahda intellectual movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the post-1950 era, according to him, came to be known as the period of the *thawra*, revolution, under the impact of the Algerian anticolonial revolution, the Egyptian Free Officers revolution, and the Palestinian revolution led by the Palestine Liberation Organization. The voluntaristic, one-party rule that characterized the postcolonial epoch rested on ideological struggles and established authoritarian states. The struggle against continuing Western imperialistic intervention mobilized socialist ideas and, at a later stage, Islamist ideologies of resistance. Crises in socioeconomic developmental offered fertile ground for protest ideologies. None of these factors and ideologies, says Arkoun, favored the development of serious critical work for overcoming the intelligibility limits of the prevailing intellectual traditions and articulating a critical analysis of the formal Western humanism that accompanied imperialism. Repression, self-censorship, and pressures toward conformism on the part of state regimes and revolutionary groups damaged severely the growth of critical thinking. The unthought and the unthinkable remained unchallenged and kept growing, especially with regard to anything pertaining to theology, sexuality, and women. Religious institutions put under state control were transformed into institutions of charity and conservative social mores, and they ceased to produce innovative work. Religious movements

stopped being interested in theological, spiritual issues even though they have been and are for him liberation and protest movements based on religious ideologies. Negative aggressive attacks against these movements, such as al-Azm's in the 1970s, are not helpful reactions to them, he argues.

Arkoun often complains in his writings about the poor reception of his ideas. They are little known to Arab intellectuals, perhaps because he writes in French and is based in Paris—although he has been publishing in Arabic quite regularly since the late 1970s—or they are rejected as inadequate, if not blasphemous, to Islam. In his introduction to *The Unthought in Contemporary Islamic Thought*, he writes:

> When I try to explain the methodological necessity to suspend—not to ignore totally—all theological interference with a linguistic analysis of the Qur'anic discourse, Muslims—ordinary believers as well as cultivated "intellectuals"—would ask immediately "how can you carry on a linguistic discourse analysis on a divine word expressed in Arabic which is itself elected as a divine language?" Or "what you consider as a text is actually an indivisible part of the uncreated Qur'an collected in the Mushaf." Not only do these questions reveal the intellectual impossibility of grasping a very simple methodological rule, but they stop the proposed exercise with naive so-called theological objections betraying a total ignorance of the rich theoretical debates generated in classical theology on the issue of God's created speech. This is clearly what I call the unthinkable and the unthought in contemporary Islamic thought.[15]

Indeed, this is the kind of reaction his ideas received when he presented them at the 1984 Cairo conference (discussed in chapter 3). Abu Zayd reports the very same reactions to his own work, which in important respects is similar to Arkoun's.[16] But if Arkoun's ideas have not draw much attention from the Arab intellectual scene, his Egyptian colleague's did in an excessive and negative way. By developing a similar critical theology, Abu Zayd attracted the wrath of Egyptian Islamists for theological and political reasons. He had to flee his country and find refuge in the Netherlands. The two thinkers seem to have developed their ideas independently of one another. More recently, they have started to interact in meetings and writings. In April 2004, they met, along with a number of other Arab intellectuals from different countries, at a conference to launch the Arab Institute for the Modernizing of Thought.[17] It was legally founded in 2002 in Geneva,

initiated and funded by Libyan businessman Mohammed Abdel Muttalib al-Hawni, and aimed at supporting translations, studies, and publications in the various fields of the social sciences, humanities, media, and education in the Arab world. Its overall purpose was to revive the Nahda project by providing financial and institutional support to free and enlightened intellectual debates that would contribute to critical Arab self-reflection. The launching event included a press conference and a scholarly conference, "Modernity and Arab Modernity," which gathered a number of prominent Arab thinkers, such as Sadeq Jalal al-Azm, Aziz al-Azmeh, Kamal Abdel Latif, Fahmy Jedaane, and the Saudi woman writer Raja' bin Salameh. The conference proceedings, a statement of the institute's goals, and a list of its founding members were published in Beirut in 2005.[18] By the time the volume came out, however, the institute had unfortunately already ceased to exist. The head of its council, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, and its secretary, Georges Tarabichi, declared that it was dissolved due to a lack of funds: although registered in Geneva and thus considered a European institution, it could not benefit from European funds because its realm of action fell outside the boundaries of Europe. And Arab potential donors, they said, were suspicious of its critical, modernizing, and secular goals. All it could present in the thirty months of its existence were seven original monographs and eight translations.

The Historicity of Revelation and the Struggle for Thought in the Time of Anathema: Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd

In 1993, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd was denied promotion at Cairo University and then accused of apostasy. A religious court asked him to divorce his wife, Ebtehal Yunes, an associate professor of French civilization in the same faculty, under the pretext that as an infidel he could no longer remain married to a Muslim woman. He tried to challenge the verdict through the Egyptian civil courts, but in 1994 the religious courts confirmed the verdict of his apostasy, and his marriage was annulled. Under the pressure of death threats, he left Egypt in 1995 with his wife for the Netherlands, where he was offered the chair of Islamic studies at Leiden. The death threats were to be taken seriously because in 1992 Islamists had gunned down a secularist thinker, Farag Fowda, in broad day light in Cairo, and the assassins were never brought to trial.

Abu Zayd had studied Arabic literature at Cairo University and become an assistant teacher in the Arabic department in 1972. The department and the faculty had pressured him to do his graduate work in Islamic studies in order to fill the chair of Islamic studies that had remained vacant since 1954. Abu Zayd was reluctant at first to comply with the department's recommendation, knowing how the chair had become vacant and what had happened to the previous student who had ventured into the field. Indeed some two decades earlier Muhammad Ahmad Khalafallah had submitted a thesis, "Al-Fann al-Qasasi fi al-Qur'an al-Karim" (The Art of Narration in the Qur'an), written under the direction of Amin al-Khuli, then chair of Islamic studies. It was devoted to the study of the Qur'an with a critical-literary methodology.[19] The thesis was rejected, Khalafallah was transferred to a nonteaching position in the Ministry of Education, and al-Khuli was forbidden to teach or direct Islamic studies and was forced into retirement by the Free Officers' government.

Abu Zayd eventually agreed to go into Islamic studies and wrote his master's thesis on the different methods of interpretation applied historically to the Qur'an. His doctoral dissertation was on the hermeneutics of the Qur'an from a Sufi point of view; it was devoted to the work of the great Andalusian Sufi Ibn Arabi. After completing these two theses, Abu Zayd published the main findings of his research in *Mafhum al-Nass: Dirasah fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an* (The Concept of the Text: A Study in the Sciences of the Qur'an) in Cairo in 1990.[20] Among his main findings was the ubiquitous influence of sociopolitical factors in the politics of interpreting the sacred text. He had himself witnessed this influence in his own time, when the Qur'an was presented in the 1960s as supporting socialist and anti-Zionist orientations and then in the 1970s as advocating liberalism and private property. More recently, Islamist militant groups and their religious discourse had magnified this phenomenon, which pushed him to write *Naqd al-Khitab al-Dini* (The Critique of Religious Discourse), published in Cairo in 1992.[21] In the introduction to this book, Abu Zayd denounced the hypocrisy and corruption of some Islamist activities, such as Islamic investment companies that had abused the people's trust and embezzled their investments. It so happened, however, that one of the members of his promotion committee was involved with one of these banks.[22] Once again, a nexus of religious, political, and economic factors weighed in on the course of an academic career and an intellectual debate. In this book, Abu Zayd described what he calls the five "mechanisms and postulates of the Islamist discourse":[23]

1.   *The conflation of religion with religious thought—that is, the sacred text with the various theological, exegetical, and legal traditions dealing with it.* The Islamists, he says, speak in the name of God and pretend to know His intentions and His will. They claim to be the only ones, like ulemas and men of religion, to hold this truth. But they also pride themselves on the absence of a clerical institution in Islam and declare secularism to be an imminent danger. By making these claims, they confuse their own reading and understanding of the sacred text with the supposed truth of the text itself. They reduce the Islamic religious tradition to a monolithic, ahistorical corpus of absolute and homogeneous truths that are to govern Muslims' lives in detail. They attribute to religion a totalistic function of ruling life, even though from the very beginning of Islam a distinction was made between the domains of application of the religious text and the domains of reason and human experience. Here, Abu Zayd recalls the Prophet's oft-quoted statement that his Companions and people in general were more knowledgeable than himself in matters of the world. Islamists deny this distinction.

2.   *The reduction of all phenomena to a single cause, a unique principle, namely God the Creator, in such a way as to negate the world and human agency.* Turath is also used as a sole authority, produced independently of human efforts. This mode of thinking, according to Abu Zayd, leads to viewing things from within a global determinism that offers a convenient ideological cover for social and political despotism.

3.   *The opportunistic use of both Islamic tradition and European tradition.* The first is reduced to a number of schools of thought, eclectically selected according to preferences and needs that are then presented and imposed as the authentic tradition. The second is either totally rejected or partially accepted, especially in its scientific achievements, which Islamists see as the fruition of the Islamic *génie*, transmitted to Europe in the Middle Ages and during the European Renaissance. Like Saadallah Wannous, Mahdi Amil, and others, Abu Zayd believes that this distinction between European science and technology, on the one hand, and European liberal values, on the other, reinforces the situation of dependency and weakness that Islamists wish to overcome.

4.   *The imposition of a culture of certitudes, starting from the certitude of faith and spreading to certainties across all domains of life.*

5.   *Finally, ignoring history, on the one hand, and praising the realism and pragmatism of Islam, on the other, that distinguish Islam from other monotheistic religions and make it superior to them.*[24]

According to Abu Zayd, these misleading forms of reasoning in the Islamist discourse cannot but lead to mistaken conclusions. Because these conclusions and arguments are made in the name of God, however, anyone who opposes or challenges them is constantly threatened with accusations of apostasy, blasphemy, and with excommunication. Conflict and disagreement between people is thus transformed into a conflict between people and God, and these mechanisms of thought are made into formidable weapons of intellectual terrorism. Although they are sometimes used in good faith in the search for solid ground in the struggle for dignity, meaning, and justice, adds Abu Zayd, they are most often used to control people and to seize social and political power.

In addition to these mechanisms of thought, the Islamist discourse assumes two closely related postulates: sovereignty (*hakimiyya*) and the text (*nass*). The principle of *hakimiyya* is that of taking God's word in God's book as the sole arbiter in human affairs. It is the principle of relying on the sovereign judgment of God and in this sense the principle of applying the rule of God as the only legitimate rule over people. The notion of *hakimiyya* refers to the battle of Siffin, which took place in 657 between two claimants to the leadership of Muslims after the Prophet's death—his son-in-law, Ali bin Abi Taleb, designated by the Companions as the fourth legitimate successor of the Prophet at the head of the community, and Mu'awiya, his cousin. It is the latter who in the middle of the battle called on his troops to brandish the holy book on their swords as a call to let the word of God arbitrate the conflict. Many, including historians of the classical age, such as Tabari, have seen this act as a trick to win the battle. Indeed, Mu'awiya was victorious, and Ali bin Abi Taleb and his grandsons were killed, provoking the first and most important schism in the Muslim community, the Sunni/Shi'i divide.

According to Abu Zayd, the recourse to the book of God assumes that its content is clear and evident to all, an assumption that is untenable given the numerous controversies and debates that started shortly after the compilation of the sacred text and the recording of the Prophet's sayings and acts (the hadith). The hadith is regarded as the main source of inspiration for the Muslim to reach an understanding of the Qur'an and apply its commandments; it is also referred to as the sunna, or the right path. The complexities, ambiguities, and sometimes contradictions of these texts have given rise to heated discussions and a whole corpus of scholarly disciplines aimed at establishing criteria and rules according to which the issues raised can and should be settled. Arkoun, Abu Zayd, and many others

believe that the dominant sociopolitical classes more or less imposed the "right" understanding, the "valid" interpretations, and the "orthodox" rules; in other words, there always was a politics of interpretation. Even within traditionally established schools of thought, the notion of "text," strictly speaking, was used to refer to those passages in the sacred book that were unambiguous. The Islamists, according to Abu Zayd, misuse this notion by stretching it to the totality of the text. It is important to recall, he adds, that the discussion as to which passages should be regarded as absolutely clear (*muhkam*) and which as ambiguous (*mutashabih*) remains unresolved. Moreover, the discussion about the need and legitimacy of a metaphorical versus a literal reading of the sacred text has been an important and integral part of the classical theological and exegetical tradition in Islam.

Abu Zayd contends that by falsely assuming a plain and completed clarity of meaning in the text, the principle of *hakimiyya* opens the way for an absolute authoritarianism of the text. It transforms social and political issues into textual issues. If the idea was to prevent the rule by people over people by letting the word of God rule, the principle ends up justifying a totalitarianism of the text, exercised by people who claim to be its sole spokesmen. The principle of the absolute sovereignty of God is perverted into the subjugation and servitude of people to a group ruling in the name of God. The principle also divides people between those who know the will of God and understand its wisdom and those who do not. Thus, the ground is laid for the disenfranchisement of people. Those who dare to oppose are obviously guilty of impiety and blasphemy. In the recent history of Egypt, recalls Abu Zayd, the Muslim Brotherhood used the notion of *hakimiyya* against the Free Officers, who fiercely repressed them as well as other opposing groups. After the death of Abdel Nasser, Anouar el-Sadat gave his rule an Islamic face in order to pass unpopular, neoliberal, socioeconomic policies and ultimately an unpopular peace agreement with Israel.[25] At the beginning of his administration, he encouraged the Islamists to fight and intimidate the Nasserites, socialists, and Communists. The Islamists benefited from these measures until they turned against his foreign policy regarding Israel and assassinated him in 1979. In this process, the state covered up both its lack of popular legitimacy and the Islamist challenge to the authenticity of its Islamic character with an Islamization of public life and discourse through its media.[26] In the 1980s and 1990s, a distinction was created between an "extremist" and a "moderate" form of Islamism; the first designation was used to label militant and opposing groups, and the

second one to characterize the state and the official religious establishment headed by the Azhar, which was under state control. Abu Zayd strongly rejects this distinction and insists on the commonalities between the two camps in the basic modes of thinking, describing their differences as differences in degree and tactic only. For him, their discourses, whether designated "extremist" or "moderate," belong to the same "religious discourse," which is characterized by the mechanisms and postulates described earlier. Both employ religious ideology to disenfranchise people and control power, and both distort traditional theological concepts to serve their interests.

Fundamental to the concept of *hakimiyya* is the concept of text, which the Islamists understand to be the statement of God's will and judgment—hence, the centrality of this concept in Abu Zayd's refutation of such religious discourse and in his stand against the ideological manipulation of religious texts. In *Mafhum al-Nass* (The Concept of the Text), he says that Islam is a civilization of the text, but built upon an ongoing dialogue with the text. All attempts at detaching the text and its readings from their sociohistorical and cultural background distort the nature of the sacred text as God's message to humans. The divine origin of the text does not prevent a cultural reading of it; on the contrary, it is through its cultural, historical, and human components—which are bound to be relative, contingent, and specific—that this message can be communicated to and received by humans. These contingent elements open the text to human preoccupations in the course of history. Without them, the sacred text would be an abstract metaphysical thing, at best a divine soliloquy that would miss the whole purpose of revelation—to communicate a message from the Enunciator to the receiver. After all, in the Prophet's mind the message takes on the human characteristics of language, understood in its broad cultural embeddedness. Abu Zayd draws here on Ferdinand de Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole*, with *langue* defined strictly as a sign system and *parole* defined as the living use of this system by humans in a specific culture with various psychological and meaningful associations and connotations. Abstracted from its human formulation and reading, the sacred text becomes a fetish, an object of idolatry. The loss of the human dimension in the phenomenon of revelation and its transmission allows the dominant groups to occult that dimension and to present themselves as the spokesmen of the absolute and the divine. "Religious or profane, texts are governed by unchanging rules," Abu Zayd points out in *Naqd al-Khitab al-Dini* (The Critique of Religious Discourse). "The fact

that they are revealed does not change anything to the matter, since as soon as they get inscribed in language and in history, and address humans in a given historical context, they become human texts. They are governed by the dialectic of the immutable and the changing: immutable in their materiality, and changing in their meaning." Moreover, "[t]he Qur'an is a religious text immutable in its wording. Approached by human reason, it loses this immutable character and becomes a dynamic concept with multiple meanings. The immutability is one of the attributes of the absolute and the sacred, while the human is relative and changing. The Qur'an as a sacred text in its wording, becomes comprehensible thanks to what is relative and changing—that is to say, the human—becoming thus a 'human' or a 'humanized' text."[27]

People, says Abu Zayd, mistake the contextualization of statements with the limitedness of their meanings to specific contexts; in other words, they confuse historicity (*tarikhiyya*) with temporality (*zamaniyya*). In this connection, he introduces the notion of "witness values," values or meanings that belong to a specific context and that through their specific belonging convey meanings that go beyond the context. Only such a contextualization and historicization of the sacred text can allow the sacred text to speak to people and have a renewed significance for them, away from the manipulation of pressure groups. Moreover, he insists that the historicization he is proposing is different from the traditional Qur'anic sciences of the circumstances of revelation and the circumstances of abrogation: the first one refers to the whole Qur'anic discipline that examines the context within which specific verses were revealed in order to better capture their meaning, keeping in mind that the revelation of the Qur'an stretched over a period of twenty years; and the second refers to the circumstances in which the Prophet abrogated certain verses after they were revealed, verses that were generally imputed to the malicious work of the devil.

Abu Zayd wants to examine the Qur'an as a cultural, linguistic product. He is of course not the first one to undertake such an endeavor: Amin al-Khuli, Ahmad Khalafallah, and Taha Husayn had elaborated similar approaches before him. All were condemned by the religious establishment. According to Abu Zayd, the suppression of this approach to the sacred book is one of the main reasons for the Nahda's failure. This failure is usually and rightly attributed to the fragility of the middle class, to its lack of socioeconomic autonomy, and so to its political dependency, but, for him, it was also due to the fact that the partisans of enlightenment did not break the traditional epistemological horizons of religious studies and

kept within the boundaries drawn by the traditionalists, refraining from opening wide the linguistic, cultural, and historicist approaches to religious texts. The ahistorical view of the sacred text as well as of the whole religious tradition prevented the Nahda thinkers from forming a real enlightenment movement. Muhammad Abduh himself, the most important Nahda reformist, gave up on his historicizing approach under pressure from the conservatives. The objection against this approach—whether in the case of Abduh, Husayn, Khalafallah, or al-Khuli—is based on the idea that the sacred text of God cannot be reduced to a cultural, historical text. And yet, he says, it is the great figures of the interpretive school of the classical age, the likes of Jurjani and Zamakhshari, who through their linguistic and critical study of the sacred text showed the wonders of the Qur'an. Those who object to this approach misunderstand the nature of revelation as a communication to humans in a human language in a historical context.

The question then is, What is the sacred book's status? This question, as is well known, was the object of a theological controversy in the ninth and tenth centuries, involving linguistic and exegetical theories, and opposing the Mu'tazilites to the conservative Ahl al-Hadith. The former held that the word of God was an act and not an attribute of God, and that as an act it bore characteristics common to God and the world; hence, for them, the Qur'an was created, eternity being an attribute of the essence of God, not of His acts. The latter believed that the Qur'an and its language (Arabic) were, as attributes of God, uncreated and eternal. The theological controversy was associated, as is often the case, with political struggles between the adherents of the two schools of thought. At first, the Mu'tazilite view was supported by Caliph Ma'mun (813–833 AD). After him, Caliph Mutawakkil (847–861 AD) settled the controversy by imposing the conservative view, claiming that the Qur'an had two aspects: an uncreated, essentially divine aspect and another more worldly aspect that is an imitation of the first one. By political fiat, therefore, this view was transformed into a creed, a dogma. Although Abu Zayd sees the importance of remembering the history of this debate, he believes that what is needed is not a return to the Mu'tazilite views, but their further development with the use of modern textual sciences that pay attention to the unsaid and the implicit in texts. Without such a new epistemological break, religious discourse will remain confined to the regurgitation of a frozen heritage, incapable of giving birth to a lively heritage that is capable of transformation and adaptation. It will lead to the unfruitful project of Islamicizing the present age instead of

modernizing Islam. The latter project, according to Abu Zayd, requires not only intellectual innovation and courage, but also vigilance vis-à-vis an extended and massive legacy that can always present ready and familiar answers.

The all too human input is obvious in texts recorded centuries after the death of the Prophet, relating the life, statements, and deeds of the Prophet and his Companions—the hadith. These texts, says Abu Zayd, were inevitably shaped by their writers' epistemological, cognitive, and social conditions as well as by the intellectual and sociohistorical givens of the scholars who later developed a huge corpus of disciplines to examine the authentic and the inauthentic in the reported stories about the Prophet and his Companions. Only the recognition of the human side in the composition of the hadith can make them dynamic texts that speak to present readers, and this recognition can come only from a free and critical examination of them.

Obviously, in the climate that has prevailed in the Arab world and in Abu Zayd's home country Egypt since the 1950s, freedom and critique have been severely challenged. Abu Zayd's life and intellectual career have born the brunt of these challenges, and much of his work has been devoted to analyzing and confronting them. The phrase "thinking in the time of anathema," from the title of his 1995 book, captures the gist of his journey. The challenges to critical thinking, as most critical thinkers of this period have noted, are epistemological, psychological, and political. On the one hand, this period has been dominated by voluntaristic and authoritarian governments more concerned with staying in power than with ensuring popular legitimacy, accepting accountability, respecting opposition, and tolerating dissent. These governments have sometimes had to compensate for the lack of internal legitimacy with foreign support, thus reinforcing dependency and serving foreign-interest priorities. Consecutive governments have practiced various forms of intimidation, imprisonment, torture, and killing; instrumentalized religion whenever expedient; and co-opted mainstream religious establishments to cover governmental policies and outbid Islamist opposition claims. This opposition, in turn, has ironically not been less intolerant and authoritarian in its own methods and proposals, which it presents as an alternative to the current governments' unjust and impious rule. It too has not hesitated to use intimidation and violence. Together, governments and militant Islamists have silenced the secular and democratic forces.[28] The marginalization of these forces has left people with a choice between unjust, repressive government and religious

authoritarian rule: under such circumstances, it is difficult to believe in democracy as a viable alternative, especially with the fears that it might bring to power the only organized oppositional force left on the ground, the Islamists. In the midst of the accusation campaign against him in 1993, Abu Zayd affirmed in an interview his commitment to democracy, but not without somber resignation:

All of us defend democracy, but we place an implicit condition: that it not increase the power of anyone else. A lot has been said about the blood that might flow if the Islamists were to come to power, and therefore we should get rid of democracy before the Islamists do. That's part of the structure of closed thinking—that "we" know the truth and give ourselves the authority to predict and preempt the future. There was no democracy in Algeria, and Algeria has paid in blood for its absence. If the mechanisms of the political system bring one's opponent to victory, one does not stop resisting. Conceding victory doesn't mean surrendering. We are mixing two issues here: what it means to concede to others their rights, and what it means to surrender. The struggle for advancement won't ever be decided in the Arab world until it tries Islam—the Islam which the Islamists have in mind. Of course I'm scared. If they come to power, I'll be left out in the cold. No doubt about it. But my fears about my own personal safety should not outweigh my fears about the future of the umma [Islamic community]. Defending our opponents, the Islamists, as intellectuals is like defending ourselves as individuals. I don't mean to defend their interests, but I can't support freedom and say "except the Islamists." Some will tell you that when the Islamists talk about freedom, they mean freedom only for themselves. That's true. But that doesn't mean we should make the same mistake.[29]

Whether this scenario is the only one left for the Arab world and whether it is the only way to defend democracy and freedom in this context are difficult and decisive questions for Arabs today. The fact remains that the predicament described by Abu Zayd reflects the exacerbation of the crisis of freedom in Arab societies in the postindependence era.

To these stern political challenges are added the psychological problems caused by the decades of developmental failures, economic crises, and military defeats in a highly volatile region. Like most Arab intellectuals,

Abu Zayd notes the impact of the 1967 defeat on everyone, theorists and nontheorists alike. Anger, humiliation, and helplessness have pushed them to take refuge in a glorious past, in an authentic specificity that no vicissitude of history can alter, and of course in religion as a last resort of strength, hope, and sense of self. His book *Dawa'ir al-Khawf: Qira'a fi Khitab al-Mar'a* (The Circles of Fear: A Reading in the Discourse on Women), published in 2000, addresses the consequences of this frustration, manifested in increased intolerance and aggression toward the most vulnerable in society—primarily free thinkers, women, and minorities.[30] He notes how in the mid-1970s, at the time of the neoliberal policies (and the Camp David Agreement), attacks on Egyptian Christian Copts coincided with legislation sending working women back home, supposedly for their own good, for the good of their (and the nation's) children, and for the sake of solving the growing unemployment problem, caused in part by those policies. He reports how governmental media ridiculed women's professional ambitions and played on society's entrenched patriarchal reflexes, exposing women and their hard-won social rights to public disrespect, and how the media ultimately referred to the sacred book for justification—all this, of course, in tune with Islamists' reactionary positions regarding women. Women working outside the home were blamed for the thwarted development and the failed economic policies. Social problems, says Abu Zayd, were once again covered up with religious issues, and religious issues were reduced to textual certainties. Both critics and defenders of Islam soon fell into the trap of arguing with textual references disconnected from their contexts and historicity: for the critics, all ills are caused by Islam, and for the defenders, all solutions are found in Islam, and in both cases Islam is perceived ahistorically. Associated with gender essentialism and biological determinism, this textualism was and continues to be used to repress women, without coming in any way closer to solving socioeconomic and political problems. Not only is it risky to denounce these injustices and distortions in an atmosphere of intolerance and intellectual terror that can reach the level of physical aggression and elimination, it is also extremely delicate given the sensitivity of each issue, be it religion, women, or the nation. Like most critical thinkers discussed in this book, Abu Zayd finds himself torn between his solidarity with a people in pain, wounded in their dignity and identity, and his commitment to the sober analysis of the wounds that is necessary to any solution. Time and again he expresses both his outrage at obscurantist groups' manipulation of this despair and

his irritation at having to prove good faith and good will with every critical statement. But to what extent is critique possible in this position between solidarity and critique? He raises this question about himself and about Arkoun in an article on the debate ensuing from the latter's analysis of the "wonderful" in his book *Lectures du Coran* (Readings of the Qu'ran).[31]

Abu Zayd salutes Arkoun's courage and freedom in tackling questions related to the reading of the sacred texts. He also appreciates Arkoun's position of solidarity, which Abu Zayd distinguishes from the Orientalists' pseudo-neutral position and the Islamist militants' opportunistic manipulative position. But Abu Zayd wonders to what extent this position of solidarity imposes on Arkoun's work certain concessions with regard to his critical project. This project, according to Abu Zayd, consists in reading the sacred texts independently from a theological commitment— that is, by suspending faith and theological creed. Yet the approach that Arkoun wants to adopt at the same time is that of a global reading that brings to the text the whole set of ritual and spiritual experiences of the text in the community of believers. To what extent can this approach be consistent with the historicization that Arkoun wants to conduct? Arkoun also aims at developing a linguistics that captures the mechanisms that transform the specific and the relative into the transcendental and the absolute, and through which religious language opens the reader to the experience of the spiritual, the "wonderful." Doesn't this approach amount to tying linguistics again to theology? asks Abu Zayd. In the article on Arkoun, he notes Arkoun's awareness that no reading can be innocent; he recognizes the latter's openness to self-critique if ideological elements are to be found in his own analysis of the sacred text. But Abu Zayd wonders to what extent his own thought might be inflected in turn by his position and his commitment. Some of this inflection is perceptible in his introduction to *The Circles of Fear*. In it, he reiterates the statement he made at the eve of the verdict that condemned him as an apostate and annulled his marriage: "I think, therefore I am Muslim."[32] He, like many liberal Muslim thinkers, recalls that the hadith promises a reward for efforts deployed to understanding the word of God, even those with a wrong result, and a double reward for efforts leading to a right result. He reaffirms the importance the Qur'an gives to the use of reason and asserts that an Islam sure of itself can and should afford free discussions and open debates. The problem is that Islam in this politically, militarily, economically, and culturally tormented Arab region is far from being sure and comfortable with itself.

Feminist Historicization of Religious Traditions: Nazira Zain al-Din, Fatima Mernissi, and Leila Ahmed

Feminists have also undertaken the historicization of traditional religious references to expose the sexist biases that have produced the established understanding of Islam. This task involves the contextualization of the development of these references, the identification of the social groups and power structures that have influenced their formation, the uncovering of alternative developments that took place over the course of history but were marginalized, if not suppressed, and finally the recognition of the possibility of developing alternative religious interpretations.

Among the early-twentieth-century feminist pioneers was the Lebanese scholar Nazira Zain al-Din (1908–1976), who contested the validity of the arguments presented in support of veiling, secluding, and discriminating against women. She presented her views in 1928 in *Al-Sufur wa al-Hijab* (Unveiling and Veiling). She was barely twenty years old. The book raised a heated discussion in the press among clerics and intellectuals. Zain al-Din collected their reactions and addressed them the following year in *Al-Fatat wa al-Shuyukh* (The Girl and the Sheikhs).[33] Trained in foreign schools in Lebanon, she was also familiar with Islamic religious sciences thanks to her father, who supported and encouraged her intellectual endeavors. He was the first president of the High Court of Appeals in Lebanon and a scholar in Islamic religion and jurisprudence. In his house, she met learned men, including religious scholars, with whom she debated with remarkable audacity and intelligence. The first book was prompted when Muslim clerics successfully pressured the Syrian government in 1927 to forbid women to circulate unveiled. She disputed the clerics' right to intervene in civil law and asked political authorities to legislate and apply laws that protected the freedom of individuals. She viewed the nation as an areligious community, composed of Christians and Muslims. She could not understand how a nation that demanded liberation from colonialism could oppress a sector of its own society.

Through her writings, Zain al-Din contested the authenticity of misogynistic hadith sayings, such as the one stating that women are inferior in reason and faith. She reclaimed for herself the right accorded to her by Islam to read religious texts, using her own free mind and independent will. She criticized those traditional clerics who accepted the misogynistic hadith stories without questioning and doubted those stories that valorized

women. She attacked traditionalism in general and emphasized the importance of reason and individual judgment, both of which Islam encourages. According to her, judgment ought to be used in discerning the right from the wrong in the legacy handed down to us by the ancients. She recontextualized those verses of the Qur'an that lent themselves to a misogynistic reading and explained the lack of total egalitarianism in the holy book by saying that there must have been a limit to how much the new religion could challenge the mores of the time. As to religious legislation, she said that its sexist bias was due to the fact that exclusively men had produced it, whereas women would have been (and should be) more competent to legislate those aspects pertaining specifically to themselves. Faith, piety, chastity, and honor, she believed, could not be reduced to external appearances and certainly not to a piece of cloth such as a veil. The holy book, she thought, did not command veiling, nor did it stipulate the segregation of sexes. Veiling was not only an insult to women, but also to men because it portrayed men as being invariably traitors, aggressors, and violators of honor. She denounced the fact that men measured piety by the veiling of women even while disregarding their own immoral behavior. The failures and weaknesses of men and of clerics in particular, she concluded, distorted the liberating and empowering message of Islam. The discrimination against women was an aspect of those failures and weaknesses. Addressing her male critics, she wrote: "You have not developed with time. Time has folded your flags and you have squandered your ancestors' heritage. Do you want, now, to unfurl your flags over your women's faces, taking your women as a substitute kingdom for the kingdoms you have lost?"[34]

In the late 1980s, well-known Moroccan sociologist Fatima Mernissi published *Le harem politique* (translated as *The Veil and the Male Elite*), in which she examines the sayings attributed to the Prophet as well as the verses of the Qur'an used to justify misogynistic positions in Islam.[35] Like her predecessor, Mernissi claims the right as a Muslim to read and examine the tradition that has been transmitted to her as "the" authentic Islam on the basis of a whole corpus of sciences established in the few centuries following the Prophet's death: the *tafsir*, or commentaries on the Qur'an; the *asbab al-nuzul*, or the treatises on the situational causes of the revelations; the *nasikh* and the *mansukh*, or the treatises on the Qur'anic verses that, according to some experts, were nullified by later contradictory revelations; the hadith, or stories reported about the Prophet and his Companions; the *sira*, or biographies of the Prophet and the Companions, including

the prominent women who were part of his life; and the legal schools of thought based on these explanations and interpretations—indeed, a voluminous body of scholarly work elaborated by generations of remarkable men of science and competence. Since then, this corpus has served as the firm foundation for the practice and understanding of Islam, but it is also a well-guarded tradition, says Mernissi, that has been used to exercise moral and political power: "It is not just the present that the imams and politicians want to manage to assure our well-being as Muslims, but above all the past that is being strictly supervised and completely managed for all of us, men and women. What is being supervised and managed, in fact, is memory and history. But up until now no one has ever really succeeded in banning access to memory and recollection." Further she adds: "Let us lift the veils with which our contemporaries disguise the past in order to dim our present."[36]

Given the significance of religion to Muslims' social and political life since the early times of Islam, this body of knowledge, according to her, has often been manipulated to serve the sexual and political interests of those in power—that is, the male elite—to such an extent that even at the earliest moment a way of distinguishing false from authentic stories about the Prophet had to be established using a wide range of knowledge concerning the chain of transmission, hence the sciences of *isnad* (attribution) and hadith. The men who developed these sciences were doubtless men of great intellectual and moral integrity who mastered an amazing range of encyclopedic knowledge. The most famous among them, such as Tabari and Bukhari, refused to yield to political or financial pressures, admits Mernissi: "If at the time of al-Bukhari—that is, less than two centuries after the death of the Prophet—there were already 596,725 false Hadith in circulation . . . it is easy to imagine how many there are today. The most astonishing thing is that the skepticism that guided the work of the founders of religious scholarship has disappeared today."[37] Hence, there is a need to reread and reassess this scholarship. Such a rereading shows, according to Mernissi, that even those solid scholars could not be infallible. Even they could make mistakes, and even they had their own personal, social, and historical biases. In *Le harem politique*, she undertakes the task of checking some of the misogynistic hadiths validated by reference to a serious source, such as Bukhari. One states that "those who entrust their affairs to a woman will never know prosperity," thus disenfranchising women in the political sphere; according to a second one, "the Prophet said that the dog, the ass, and woman interrupt prayer if they pass in front of the believer,

interposing themselves between him and the *qibla*,"[38] thus affirming women's religious impurity and inferiority. She also analyzes verse 33 of sura 33 in the Qur'an, which is used to justify the veiling and seclusion of women. Finally, she discusses the issues of physical violence against women as well as slavery. Following the methods of the religious sciences, she refutes the validity of these sayings and exegetic interpretations, examining the chain of transmission and drawing on the circumstances of the ten years of the *hijra* in Medina,[39] where the Prophet was under great military and social pressure both from his enemies and from some of his followers. Her main conclusion is that the Prophet was far more respectful and loving toward women than were the later leaders of the community, such as Umar ibn al-Khattab.[40] Evaluating her findings and conclusions lies outside the scope of this study, but her critical historicizing and contextualizing of the established religious sciences are relevant for my purposes here. According to this approach, empirical cases of the Prophet's epoch need to be hermeneutically transposed to our times. In Abu Zayd's terminology, one would say they have to be used as "witness instances" instead of being taken literally, as has often been the case, especially in issues regarding women: "The imams," states Mernissi, "by remaining at the level of empirical cases, did not help Islam to develop a theory of the individual, of the sovereign, inviolable, changeless will that would not disappear in certain circumstances."[41]

It is interesting to note that Sudanese unorthodox reformer Mahmoud Mohamed Taha also takes up the distinction between the messages of Mecca and those of Medina as the basis for a new understanding of Islam.[42] According to him, the Meccan message was partly abrogated and partly modified by the Messenger in Medina to fit the circumstances of the time in view of coming back to it in the future, when people would become more susceptible to receiving it. He calls this Meccan message the Second Message of Islam, characterized by an egalitarian, democratic, socialist, and pacifist ethos. It is to become the basis for a new shari'a that will express true Islam, an Islam opposed to jihad as a violent means of propagating Islam as well as to slavery, capitalism, gender discrimination, discrimination against non-Muslims, polygamy, divorce, veiling, and the segregation of women from men. Again here I cannot discuss the tenability of Taha's hermeneutics, but I can add it to those attempts at reformulating Islam on the basis of an egalitarian and humane ethics.

In *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate,* the U.S.-based Egyptian feminist Leila Ahmed puts Islamic gender issues in a comparative perspective, encompassing the cultures of Mesopotamia

and the Mediterranean Middle East in order to dispel the exceptionalist approach so often taken in the field.[43] She then traces the development of gender views and practices under the influence of Islam in the course of history, from the rise and fall of the medieval Islamic Empire to the modern, colonial, and then independent Mediterranean states. Ahmed perceives in Islam two somewhat contradictory messages: a patriarchal hierarchy of the sexes, on the one hand, and an egalitarian ethics, on the other. The former, she says, has obviously found more resonance in the succeeding societies of Islamic history, especially among the rulers; like Mernissi, she thinks that the time of the Prophet was less misogynistic than the later periods—for instance, the time of Umar ibn al-Khattab—and far less misogynistic than the Abbasid period. This period witnessed the impressive growth of the Islamic Empire both in power and in wealth. The numerous conquests brought into the Islamic centers unprecedented riches, including slaves and concubines. Ahmed contends that this wealth led to the commodification and weakening of women in general. It accentuated the oppressive patriarchal way of life, and it is under such androcentric conditions that the foundational Islamic sciences were formulated, codified, and presented as the orthodox Islam. The interests of the powerful male elite that had shaped the Qur'anic sciences and the religious legislation were occulted. Even the compilation of the holy book itself, she thinks, could not have escaped the influence of those interests:

The role of interpretation in the preservation and inscription of the Quran is, however, suppressed in orthodox doctrine, and the belief that the text is precisely as Muhammad recited it is itself a tenet of orthodox faith. Similarly, to question whether the body of consecrated Islamic law does in fact represent the only possible legal interpretation of the Islamic vision is surrounded with awesome interdictions. That its central texts do embody acts of interpretation is precisely what orthodoxy is most concerned to conceal and erase from the consciousness of Muslims. This is understandable, because the authority and power of orthodox religion, whose interests were closely bound up in the Abbasid period with those of the ruling elite, and the state, depended on its claiming a monopoly of truth and on its declaring its versions of Islam to be absolute and all other interpretations heresies.[44]

And yet alternative interpretations of the Qur'anic message did emerge, says Ahmed, among Kharijites, Sufis, and Qarmatians. Even in the orthodox

legal schools, some divergences concerning marriage contracts and divorce laws indicate for her the possibility of other forms of religious laws. This margin of difference in the orthodox legislation "suggests that a reading by a less androcentric and less misogynist society, one that gave greater ear to the ethical voice of the Quran, could have resulted in—could someday result in—the elaboration of laws that dealt equitably with women."[45]

In the shedding of light on the interpretive and historical nature of the established religious tradition Ahmed sees the possibility of opening the horizon of religious understanding to new, more egalitarian, and more progressive versions of Islam:

> Both the more radical forms of Sufism and the Qarmatian movement diverged in their interpretation of Islam from orthodoxy in particular in that they emphasized the ethical, spiritual, and social teachings of Islam as its essential message and viewed the practices of Muhammad and the regulations that he put into effect as ephemeral aspects of Islam relevant primarily to a particular society at a certain stage in its history. Again, therefore, the issue is difference of interpretation, not in the sense of different understandings of particular words or passages but in a more radical, pretextual or supratextual sense of how to "read" Muhammad's acts and words and how to construe their relation to history. Was the import of the Islamic moment a specific set of ordinances or that it initiated an impulse toward a juster and more charitable society?[46]

An Islamic Theology of Liberation: The "Islamic Left" of Hassan Hanafi

That Islamic impulse toward a more charitable and just society is what Egyptian philosopher Hassan Hanafi, trained in phenomenology at the Sorbonne, wants to capture in his "Islamic Left" project. His aim is to mobilize the revolutionary forces of the Islamic heritage, sedimented in the hearts and minds of the masses, in order to fight local oppression and foreign hegemony and to struggle against the unjust distribution of wealth within the Islamic nation (the umma). The purpose of this Islamic Left is to fight the external dangers of Western imperialism and Zionist aggression and to confront the internal dangers of despotism, backwardness, and fanaticism. In combining leftist

with Islamic orientations, Hanafi has opted for an uncomfortable position: the Islamists have suspected him of being a covert Marxist, and the secularists have suspected him of being in reality an Islamist. At least until 1989, he was forbidden entry to some Persian Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia, on the ground that he might be there to instigate an Islamic revolution. He was recently accused of blasphemy in Egypt.

In his early youth, Hanafi started as a member of the Muslim Brotherhood and moved toward a more leftist form of Islamism in the late 1970s. In 1967, he started a teaching career in Islamic and European philosophy at the University of Cairo. He translated Spinoza, Lessing, and Sartre, and devoted many studies to classical figures of Islamic thought. By 1981, he had completed the eight-volume work Al-Din wa al-Thawra fi Misr (1952–1981) (Religion and Revolution in Egypt [1952–1981]).[47] In the same year, he launched a periodical called The Islamic Left, which he devoted to his project. In its first issue, he explained the purposes, modalities, and motivations of such a project. He justified the need for it by the failure of the various projects of change in the Muslim world (of which the Arab world, according to him, was only a part, but a foundational part): the Islamic forces that came to power used Islam as a superficial cover for their alliance with the Western governments, local feudalism, and capitalism; many of the oppositional Islamic forces were dominated by fanaticism and Salafi orientations and were interested only in coming to power; the liberal movements were restricted to the upper classes and had adopted Western culture; westernized Marxist movements remained alien to the masses, found themselves caught in the power struggle of the foreign governments with which they were allied, and were increasingly concerned with their own survival; and finally, many of the revolutionary forces turned counterrevolutionary, and the rising middle classes started to be more interested in preserving the status quo than in revolutionary movements. The distinctive character of the Islamic Left, according to Hanafi, is on the one hand its connection to the culture of the masses, shaped to a great extent by an effective Islamic legacy, and on the other hand its serious commitment to opposing the current state of injustice and oppression—hence, the term left. He situates his project in continuity with those of Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh and sees his periodical as the heir of theirs, al-ʿUrwa al-Wuthqa and al-Manar, respectively. He explains that instead of choosing what he calls a secular slogan—such as "Muslims of the world, unite!"—he adopted a Qurʾanic verse, thinking that it would

resonate better with the masses: "And we desired to show favor unto those who were oppressed in the earth, and to make them examples and to make them the inheritors" (28:5). This is how he describes the association of religion with revolution: "The task of *The Islamic Left* is to uncover the revolutionary elements inherent in religion, or, if you wish, to show the common grounds of one and the other; that is, interpret religion as revolution. Religion is the gift of our heritage and revolution is the acquisition of this age. . . . This is not an external and forced reconciliation, for religion is in essence a revolution, and prophets were reformers, innovators and revolutionaries. . . . The historical record of prophethood in the Qur'an depicts it as a revolution against social and moral decay."[48]

Some Islamists, Hanafi adds, might say that in Islam there is no Left and Right. Yes, perhaps in principle it is so, he says, but in reality there are among Muslims the ruled and the rulers, the exploited and the exploiters. He often speaks of his work as a contribution toward a revolutionary theology similar to the Latin American theology of liberation. He is among the rare Arab thinkers, if not the only one, to show interest in this theology. In the collection of essays he published in 1976, *Fi Fikrina al-Mu'assir* (On Our Contemporary Thought),[49] he includes his long article "Religion and Revolution in Latin America: Camilio Torres, the Rebel Saint," in which he praises the courage and commitment of the militant priest Camilio Torres. However, his presentation does not offer reflections on the similarities and differences between this Latin American theology of liberation and his own Arab Muslim theology of revolution. Such a comparison would surely be a research project worth undertaking.

For Hanafi, the focus on the revolutionary elements of Islam is inspired by the many successful revolutions in recent and ancient history conducted in the name of Islam, such as the Iranian and Algerian revolutions and the much earlier one led against the Crusaders. As he explains in the first issue of *The Islamic Left*, he understands his Islamic revolution to be primarily civilizational rather than political:

The Islamic *Left* is not a political thesis, as may be inferred from the term "left," but a civilizational one as denoted by the term "Islam." The Islamic Left *intends to highlight the points of advance in our heritage such as rationalism, naturalism, freedom and democracy which are what we need in this century. It uncovers two dimensions which we overlooked in our tradition and which caused the crisis ailing our modern awareness: Man and history. We wrapped Man and isolated*

him into a personified being or doctrinal law, and, as a result, we lived at the margin of our world and lost ourselves and our lives.

The civilizational revolution of the Islamic Left is to be directed against two fronts: the external front of Western imperialism and the internal front of local despotism. On the first front, the task is to denounce the fake "purity" and universalism of European civilization by showing its many foreign components, the Islamic in the first place, and by pushing it back to its own geographical and historical boundaries. It is to launch, as mentioned earlier, an "Occidentalism" in the sense of a science of the West that makes Western civilization an object of study, while avoiding the biases and distortions with which Westerners produced Orientalism. "*The Islamic Left* takes upon itself the task of pushing Western civilization back to its natural boundaries and demonstrating its provinciality and growth according to its specific circumstances, its particular history, its religion and the character of its peoples. This will enable us to break the siege under which non-European nations are placed, to show the specificities of these nations and assert their identities. Thus, the civilizational models will multiply and the ways of progress will diversify."[50] As indicated earlier, instead of a future plural world of civilizations, Hanafi thinks in terms of an Islam-centered and Islam-led world civilization to replace Eurocentrism. His science of the Occident fails to fulfill its promise.

The civilizational revolution is also to be directed against the internal problems of oppression, poverty, and backwardness, for the "best nation of the earth" is not only defeated and humiliated by foreigners, but also impoverished and repressed by its own rulers:

No nation on earth is suffering from repression, oppression and tyranny more than Muslim nations are. Thus, our life confirms what the West said about us and called it "The autocracy of the East," wherein only one individual, the president, is free and does as he wishes, and everyone else, in Hegelian terms, is disempowered, oppressed and has no freedom, as Hegel says. We have become the example of the lack of democracy and public freedom, and the supremacy of customary and extraordinary laws. Human rights committees are sent to us to investigate the conditions of our detainees, unions are dissolved, elections are subjected to fraud, military coups are staged, one opinion dominates, one party rules, and we kill each other. Those in power are patriots, and those outside of it are traitors. After a coup d'état, however,

yesterday's hero becomes today's traitor and the traitor of today the hero of tomorrow. The criteria of patriotism and freedom have vanished, and he who holds power has become the exclusive patriot. The state controls everything and steers national awareness through the mass media so much that Muslim peoples are no longer able to express the other view, and opposition is erased and, whenever it emerged despite tyranny and oppression, is charged with treason, collaboration, heresy and atheism.

And to complete the picture of the wretched situation, he enumerates the people's three main concerns or obsessions, echoing the majority of critical Arab thinkers: "Backwardness is also evident in the retreat of reason in the face of the divinely prohibited and the sacred (taboos) we fear to come close to: Allah, the government and sex, even though we think of them night and day and experience them in our imagination to make up for our deprivation."

Moreover, the civilizational revolution is not to be a textual one. It is to be based on the realities of the Muslim world, on facts and statistics, as he says, raising questions about the distribution of wealth and issues of injustice rather than centered on detached preaching or rhetorical manipulation. And yet, despite a strongly articulated antitextual position, Hanafi himself focuses his work on the renewal of heritage by using elaborate studies of textual references. Instead of asking "Who owns what?" as he advocates, what he does in his actual work is to raise again the standard question: What went wrong in our culture, more particularly in our religious sciences? He seeks no social scientific, economic, geographical, historical, or legal data, but once more simply revisits and analyzes religious disciplines. Just before publishing *The Islamic Left*, he had presented his project of heritage renewal in *Al-Turath wa al-Tajdid* (Heritage and Renewal) in 1980, and in 1988 the entire project was published in five volumes under the title *Min al-'Aqida ila al-Thawra: Muhawala fi I'adat Bina' 'Ilm Usul al-Din* (From Doctrine to Revolution: An Attempt at Rebuilding Fundamental Theology).[51] His justification for such an endeavor in the context of an Islamic Left is that in order to change reality, one needs to change the forms of awareness of reality, and Muslims' awareness is to a great extent shaped by the accumulated body of beliefs and worldviews in the transmitted legacy. This psychological reservoir (*al-makhzun al-nafsi*) of beliefs and thoughts needs to be addressed and reformed by revisiting the four religious disciplines that constitute the core of the Islamic legacy: theology,

philosophy, jurisprudence, and Sufism. The reconstruction of this legacy should consist in (once again) recuperating the rational elements and discarding the nonrational ones. It is the loss of the rational elements that, according to him, has caused the decline of Islamic culture. Here, we are back to the culturalist-idealist approach to the crisis, despite all the intentions to draw attention to economic and political issues. The reconstruction project aims at highlighting the secular nature of Islam and at transforming the religious sciences into human sciences: theology and philosophy into a cultural anthropology, the doctrine of the imamate into political science, the debate about reason and tradition into an epistemology and methodology, the questions of free will into psychology, the old natural sciences into the modern ones, and metaphysics into social psychology or sociology of knowledge; the disciplines of jurisprudence are to be transformed into modern disciplines of law, politics, and economics; and finally, mysticism is to be transformed into psychology and ethics. Anke Von Kügelgen and Abu Zayd agree that this reconstruction sacrifices analytic accuracy, historical precision, and scholarly rigor for a preset ideological agenda.[52]

Indeed, Abu Zayd devotes a long chapter of his book *Naqd al-Khitab al-Dini* (The Critique of Religious Discourse) to Hassan Hanafi's Islamic Left. Contrary to the Salafi discourse, he says, Hanafi's project does not want to shape the present after the past. It shows an awareness of the historicity of transmitted legacies and in this sense offers better chances for an effective renewal. However, it does not draw the rigorous consequences of this historicity. It seems to understand history as a chain of events rather than as sets of economic and political power structures. It fails to examine carefully the sedimentation process through which tradition becomes a lived awareness, a "psychological reservoir," a *makhzun nafsi*, a process that involves complex forces and circumstances of selection and activation. Moreover, Abu Zayd points out, even with a certain historicist understanding of tradition, the past in Hanafi's thought remains omnipresent, and the focus on tradition remains its common point with the Salafi approach, despite their differences on other points. Both the Islamic Left and the Salafi conservative Islamism hold on to the centrality of tradition; it is for them the storehouse of problems and solutions: for the latter, Islam is the solution, and for the former, the renewal of *turath* is the solution. Furthermore, Hanafi presents his project as a conciliation between the two antagonistic movements of the nation, the secularist and the Salafist, although in reality they are not as opposed as he claims they are. Both use

turath—the former as a support to its claims, and the latter as a frame of reference; their disagreement is on the use of *turath*. Hanafi's project suffers, according to Abu Zayd, from the tensions of this conciliatory position not only between secularism and conservatism, but also between the old and the new, and more so since it does not thoroughly examine the intricate elements of their dialectics. Finally, the Islamic Left fails to reach its goal: it does not account for the complexities of the dialectical tensions; it freezes the present in the past; its reconstruction of heritage amounts to an ideological coloring rather than an epistemological rebuilding; it does not consider seriously the consequences of the historicity of tradition; and it remains an idealist approach to culture and tradition. Yet despite these important weaknesses, Hanafi's project remains for Abu Zayd a more promising endeavor than the conservative Salafism.

Mahmud Amin al-Alim criticizes Hanafi along similar lines.[53] To want to revolutionize the present by revolutionizing tradition is, in al-Alim's opinion, anachronistic. It presupposes falsely that the present is shaped mainly by dominating concepts and that these concepts are the same as those of tradition, unaffected by the passage of time. Equally anachronistic is Hanafi's project of critiquing the old legacy from the viewpoint of today's needs and concerns. This legacy's questions and priorities are not ours. Hanafi's work, according to al-Alim, is a present-day engagement with tradition that does not become a renewal of that tradition. Rhetoric and polemics dominate this engagement. Heritage is reduced to the religious legacy, and the latter is reduced to the Islamic-Sunni tradition.

Egyptian secular critic Fouad Zakariyya, whose work I examine in the next chapter, offers a more condemning assessment of Hanafi's thoughts on religious mobilization and Islamic fundamentalism. In his 1988 collection of essays *Al-Haqiqa wa al-Khayal fi al-Haraka al-Islamiyya al-Mu'assira (Myth and Reality in the Contemporary Islamist Movement)*,[54] Zakariyya devotes three chapters to Hanafi's work. He finds him incapable of self-reflection and accuses him of subjectivism regarding the Islamists. Hanafi lets his thoughts be carried away by his emotional support for them and fails to recognize their dangerous disrespect for democracy, their fixation on ritual religiosity and gender discrimination, their reactionary stand in theological matters, and their disinterest in the people's political and economic struggles. Zakariyya thinks that Hanafi himself remains inconsistent on questions of exegesis, theological innovation, and modernization: at times he seems to be praising literalist jurists of the medieval past as defenders of Islamic authenticity, but at other times he seems to be advo-

cating change and progress. For Zakariyya, Hanafi's work suffers from lack of depth and critical rigor.

A Christian Arab Theology of Liberation: Naim Ateek and Mitri Raheb in Palestine-Israel

A different liberation theology comes from Palestine through the work of Arab Christian theologians. It aims at connecting the Christian Gospel to the lived experiences of the people there, whether in the occupied territories or inside the state of Israel. It stems from the need to reconcile the belief in a God of justice, peace, and love with the harsh realities of occupation, dispossession, and discrimination. It attempts at rereading the sacred texts after their appropriation by Zionist endeavors, both Jewish and Christian. I focus here on the works of Naim Stifan Ateek and Mitri Raheb.[55] The first is canon of the Anglican St. George's Cathedral in Jerusalem and pastor of its Arabic-speaking congregation, trained at the San Francisco Theological Seminary, and the second is the pastor of the Evangelical Lutheran Christmas Church in Bethlehem, trained at Marburg University in Germany.[56]

Both theologians see the need to liberate their faith and contextualize it—that is, to let the word of God speak to the people in their concrete situation—because they believe in the importance of facing theologically and ecclesiastically the challenges their situation poses for the Christian message. They find it imperative to work toward a liberation theology that can make their faith meaningful to their own particular context, which is different from the Western one and which is deeply marked by the existence of the state of Israel. Both men are strongly committed to a nonviolent resolution of the conflict. Both believe in a two-state solution to the problem, and both acknowledge the centrality of the Jewish Holocaust in the making of the Jewish state and worldview. However, they think that a post-Auschwitz Christian theology should not be blinded to the Palestinians' suffering. For them, peace cannot be achieved without recognizing the wrong done to both people.

Interestingly, Ateek and Raheb begin their respective books, *Justice and Only Justice: A Palestinian Theology of Liberation* and *I Am a Palestinian Christian*, by presenting their complex identities as Arabs, Palestinians, and Christians of different denominations. Moreover, they have different relationships with Israel: Ateek is an Israeli citizen living in Jerusalem, and Raheb is a Palestinian resident from Bethlehem and so an inhabitant of the

occupied territories.[57] The two authors obviously see the need to inform their readers about the ill-known realities of the Christians of the Holy Land—ill known especially in the West, where people often automatically equate "Arab" with "Muslim" and do not realize that the oldest churches and the first Christian communities were in the Middle East. These communities did become minorities with time, after the rise of Islam, the establishment of the consecutive Islamic states in the region, and the socio-economic difficulties facing their communities as a result of the Israeli occupation of the West Bank. Raheb explains briefly the present realities and challenges of these minority communities in Palestine-Israel and describes the implications that they have for the emergence of a liberation theology and policy in their churches.[58] Ateek starts with an overview of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and shows how it continues to affect the Christian communities. For him, the challenge of a liberation theology is, among other things, to transmogrify this marginalized minority condition into one of dynamic witness.[59] However, the two men remain ecumenical in their Christian outlook, in their solidarity with their Muslim compatriots, and in their search of a peaceful understanding with the Israeli state. Both search for ways of remaining true to the Christian call to love one's enemy in the midst of protracted repression, violence, and injustice.

The call on the church as an institution to stand with the poor and the weak against injustice and oppression and to cease its alignment with the rich and powerful is common to all liberation theologies, whether in North America (among the African Americans), Latin America, or South Africa.[60] Equally common to them is the need for a new theology that is responsive to the lived realities of the people in the different contexts. It is no surprise that they have been met with some resistance from the established traditional ecclesiastical institutions, especially from the older and more centralized churches, which would perhaps not wish to politicize the message of the Bible. What distinguishes the Palestinian problem from the problems on other continents is that it is burdened with the existence of a "biblical" state, justified on the basis of a biblical text. It inevitably puts the sacred text, its message, and its inspirer in a particular light. Raheb expresses this dilemma in the following way:

The Joshua and David so familiar to me suddenly became politicized, somehow no longer seen in continuity with Jesus, as they used to be. They were instead placed into a kinship with Menachem Begin and

Yitzhak Shamir. Their conquests were no longer for spiritual values but for land—my land in particular.

My Bible now showed an aspect previously unseen by me. The Bible I had heretofore considered to be "for us" had suddenly become "against us." It was no longer a consoling and encouraging message to me but a frightening word. My salvation and that of the world were not the issue in the Bible any longer. The issue was my land, which God had promised to Israel and in which I no longer had a right to live unless I was as a "stranger." The God I had known since my childhood as love had suddenly become a God who confiscated land, waged "holy wars," and destroyed whole peoples. I began to doubt this God. I started to hate this God and quietly became "indignant at God, if not with blasphemy at least with great grumbling."[61]

In a similar vein, Ateek writes:

Before the creation of the State, the Old Testament was considered to be an essential part of Christian Scripture, pointing and witnessing to Jesus. Since the creation of the State, some Jewish and Christian interpreters have read the Old Testament largely as a Zionist text to such an extent that it has become almost repugnant to Palestinian Christians. As a result, the Old Testament has generally fallen into disuse among both clergy and laity, and the Church has been unable to come to terms with its ambiguities, questions, and paradoxes—especially with its direct application to the twentieth-century events in Palestine. . . . What has been seriously questioned is the nature and character of God. What is God really like? What is God's relation to the new State of Israel? Is God partial only to the Jews? Is this a God of justice and peace? . . . The answer lies largely in the doing of theology.[62]

For Ateek, "the doing of theology" necessitates reclaiming the Bible in a spirit of love and peace. It requires de-Zionizing and demythologizing the sacred text through a hermeneutics that allows its reconciliatory and liberational message to be heard. Within the Jewish tradition, he recognizes three approaches to the Scriptures: a nationalist approach based on an exclusively ethnic relatedness to God; a Torah-oriented approach focused on the legal aspect of the religion; and a prophetic approach that emphasizes the ethical-universalist dimension of Judaism. According to him, the

creation of the state of Israel empowered the Jewish people materially, but impoverished it spiritually by narrowing its scope to the exclusively ethnic horizon and by damaging its ethical integrity. Among the Jewish thinkers who critically reflect on this "empowerment versus ethics" problematic is Marc Ellis, with whom Ateek has been in dialogue for many years. The two men and Raheb refer to each other's work.[63] Ellis deplores the ethical prejudice that empowerment has brought to the Jews with the state of Israel. For him, genuine Jewish liberation can happen only through the serious pursuit of justice and peace, especially with the Palestinians, who became the first victims of their empowerment. True liberation, he argues, should preserve the memory of slavery and oppression lest it lead to forgetfulness and consequently to renewed oppression, this time at the hands of the former victims. However, perpetuating a constant sense of victimhood can itself lead to an unhealthy attitude. The challenge is to find a healthy balance between remembrance and forgetfulness.

Raheb, too, believes that some of the basic biblical notions—such as election, the promised land, and the exodus—need to be revisited. Election, he says, should be understood as a statement of faith, a promise, a call to service rather than as a claim, a privilege, or an ideology. The promise of the land, he feels, is meant by God as a call to obedience to His will and to justice. The exodus is also to be understood as a universal promise of liberation from oppression to a life of righteousness and not as an exclusive license given to the Jewish people to dispose of land and property.

Both Ateek and Raheb believe that the minority status of the Arab Christian communities has spared their churches the temptations of power, unlike the Jewish and Muslim communities and unlike the Western churches. Ateek says: "In contrast to both Judaism and Islam, Christianity in Israel-Palestine exists as a minority. Christians live their lives in a pre-Constantinian context. The object of much persecution, they have endured faithfully throughout the centuries, sustaining their faith tenaciously against great odds. Even now, when many Muslims and Jews are living in a spirit of militant triumphalism, the Church continues to live in the shadow of the cross."[64] And Raheb writes: "Arab Christians were sometimes made forcefully aware that their Western co-religionists cultivated a Christianity strange to them. Arab Christian existence was strongly linked to the sign of the cross from the very beginning. To them, the cross was the reality of a suffering church rather than the inheritance of a triumphant church. Western churches, on the other hand, related the sign of the cross to power, vested interests, and expansion."[65]

What is this theology of the cross that these Palestinian theologians are advocating? It is certainly not that of helpless victimhood, nor is it that of apocalyptic chastisement. It is rather a theology that calls for enduring suffering in the hope of redemption in peace and is sought through resisting injustice and working for reconciliation. Raheb reflects on the meaning of loving one's enemy in the Israeli-Palestinian context: "To love one's enemy means neither to cover up the conflict nor to downplay its seriousness, but rather to endure the tension inherent in that conflict without succumbing to hatred. One should love the persons but not the unjust acts they commit. To love one's enemy means, therefore, that despite the conflict one recognizes the enemy as a creature of God who has a right to live, to be forgiven, and to love—but not the right to commit an unjust act."[66] Ateek elaborates on the challenges of this endurance:

> It took me all these years to accept the unacceptable: a Jewish state on part of "our" Palestine. As a boy, remembering my family's harsh exile from Beisan, and later, as a person of faith and a clergyman, my own struggles with hate, anger, and humiliation were not easy. But these feelings had to be challenged continuously by the demands of love and forgiveness. At the same time, I knew without a doubt that injustice is sinful and evil; that it is an outrage against God; and that it is my duty to cry out against it. It has taken me years to accept the establishment of the State of Israel and its need—although not its right—to exist. I now feel that I want it to stay, because I believe that the elimination of Israel would mean greater injustice to millions of innocent people who know no home except Israel. . . .
>
> In other words, any proposed solution involving Israel should be an offer I would accept for my people, the Palestinians. Every proposal should be weighed carefully so that each side can recognize it as good and just to both. Otherwise, the proposal would have no credibility.[67]

These challenges are indeed trying, and the temptation to channel all this hate, anger, humiliation, and suffering into various forms of triumphalism is all too human. None of the three religions in question is immune to this temptation, especially when it can refer to a powerful state in the present, such as Israel, or to a mighty state of the past, such as the Islamic Empire. But these triumphalist reactions to pain inhibit the deeper and more constructive exploration of an ethical reaction that calls for the

moral radicalization of the search for justice and peace. The challenges facing the Arab Muslim communities in the region are formidable, and the levels of anger and humiliation ever higher. Nevertheless, a Muslim prophetic liberation theology that can overcome the shortcomings of Hanafi's Islamic Left would be a valuable contribution to a more life-affirming orientation in the culture of the region.[68]

In these Christian and Muslim Arab communities, there is a sense of revolt against political and economic injustice, expressed, among other ways, in religious mobilization. In both communities, there is a search for means of empowerment in the face of so much oppression and helplessness—hence, the centrality of this notion of empowerment and the importance of reflecting on it critically. It may be the disguised blessing for Arab Christians to have a minority status that enhances their sensitivity to the prophetic vocation of their faith, especially when they manage to resist despair and emigration—knowing, of course, that even within this minority group, the prophetic voice would itself be a minority voice. Such a prophetic theology would be *une pensée autre*, a "different thought," to use a formulation coined by the Moroccan thinker Abdelkebir al-Khatibi, to whose work I turn in the next chapter. This "different thought," born of the margins, would be protected from the lethal temptation toward a monistic and totalizing self-sufficiency. But what are the chances that this prophetic voice will be heard in such a tense conflictual setting? What are the chances of Muslim and Jewish (and Arab Jewish) prophetic-liberational voices being heard in the region?

Egyptian feminist Leila Ahmed deplores the absence of the ethical and spiritual dimensions in the mobilization of Islam called to the cause of Islamist feminism and nationalism. Commenting on the autobiographical narrative of the Islamist feminist Zeinab al-Ghazali, she writes:

> As the testament of a religious revolutionary, al-Ghazali's account is striking in a number of ways. First, it is remarkable that a spiritual commitment to Islam seems to be absent. Islam figures as a path to empowerment, to glory, to a properly regulated society—but not as a spiritual path. Similarly, the qualities of a reflective consciousness, of an acuity of moral perception, which might be expected in someone with a religious mission, again seem to be absent. . . .

> Al-Ghazali's account is striking in the second place for the openness with which it links the need to restore Islam with the need to restore a

> nation suffering from the humiliations of imperialism and for the openness with which it preaches that Islam is the path to power and glory. The call to Islam is not made to call souls to God or proclaim a fundamental truth but to restore to power and give "control [of] the whole world" to the nation of Islam.[69]

In the critical theology I reviewed in this chapter, I noted the search for a new hermeneutics: an effort to historicize sacred texts, whether the Qur'an or the Bible, without putting in question their divine character. Muslim theologians see the need to historicize the Qur'an against the absoluticization of allegedly atemporal readings and transmissions of it; and Christian theologians see the need to historicize the Bible against the Zionist readings of it, whether Christian or Jewish. Moreover, theologians of both Christian and Muslim Arab communities emphasize the importance of contextualizing their faiths—that is, of introducing in them the necessary changes that allow them to speak to the people in their present and local realities. In both cases, theology is to become more immanent, more lively, and more responsive, breaking the alleged fixity of religious traditions as well as adopting and initiating new modes of thinking and new modes of believing that cannot but have an impact on the culture in general.

On the Potential for Critique of Traditional Islam: Talal Asad's Analysis of the Public Criticism by Ulemas in Saudi Arabia

So far in this chapter, I have looked at attempts to open Islamic thought—that is, theology, exegesis, prophetic tradition, and jurisprudence—to new horizons of interpretation, by subjecting the texts these attempts produced in the course of time to a historicizing critique. By revealing the human context of the formation and transformations of this textual production, this critique has called for the elaboration of a new hermeneutic that responds to the needs and values of the present day. We also saw the attempt at mobilizing religion to fight economic and political injustice by transforming Islam into a theology of revolution. All these attempts have faced challenges and obstacles from the massive literary tradition, from the resistance to changing intellectual habits, from the concern with identity affirmation and defensiveness, as well as from state repression, patriarchal resistance, and intimidation, if not anathematization, by militant Islamists.

However, critique has also been practiced by traditional clerics who explicitly distance themselves from the rebellious ambitions of militant Islamist groups. The U.S.-based British anthropologist Talal Asad analyzes a powerful instance of this type of critique, namely an open letter written and signed by several hundred Saudi ulemas and addressed to the king of Saudi Arabia as the "Servant of the two noble Sanctuaries [Mecca and Medina], may God prosper him," and hence as the leader of the Saudi religious community. The letter was published in May 1991 in the aftermath of the Gulf War, which resulted in the stationing of U.S. troops on Saudi soil. It came out in the form of a leaflet that was distributed throughout the kingdom, but not publicized in the private and state Saudi media. It formulated the following demands, as quoted and translated by Asad: "'The establishment of a consultative assembly to adjudicate on domestic and foreign affairs . . . with complete independence, . . . a just distribution of public wealth, . . . guarantee of the rights of the individual and of society,' and the removal of all infringements on the wishes and rights of people, including human dignity . . . , in accordance with legitimate . . . and recognized moral rules . . . as well as a complete and thorough review of all political, administrative, and economic organizations in the kingdom to ensure that they are run in accordance with the Islamic *shari'a*."[70] Interestingly, Asad reports that shortly after the publication of this letter, another one with a more deferential tone was sent to the king (addressed as "king" and hence as a political leader), this time signed by a number of Western-educated Saudis asking for modernizing reforms.

The ulemas' demands clearly indicate a serious failing in the performance of the king and head of the community of believers on such fundamental matters as human dignity, individual and social rights, and domestic and foreign affairs, including the economic, the administrative, and the political. The ulemas based their criticism on the central notion of *nasiha* (advice) in Islamic moral theology: the exhortation to do good and avoid evil that every Muslim owes to his fellow Muslim by offering arguments to convince the other person, without the use of violence and in proper ways that reassure him or her of the good faith behind the advice. This morally corrective criticism is the obligation of good Muslims—including rulers, especially if they are unjust—to their community. It is based on the most important (and well-known) sayings of the Prophet reported in the hadith: "Whosoever of you sees an evil action, let him change it with his hand; and if he is unable to do so, then with his tongue; and if he is not able to do so, then with his heart—and that is the weakest part of faith"; and "If some-

thing is done with kindness and gentleness it is thereby beautified, and if it is done with force and violence it is thereby rendered ugly." The ulemas' *nasiha* is further based on the notable precedent of public criticism directed at a head of state by thirteenth-century jurist Ibn Taymiyya, who went to jail for publicly admonishing the prince for not doing what he ought to do. The ulemas' public criticism belongs to an orthodox discourse that has, according to Asad, its own requirements. It does not build on sheer authoritarianism, as some may tend to think. It is to offer a persuasive argument on the basis of tradition-guided reasoning and within the boundaries of a discursive coherence. Although tradition-bound, the ulemas' discourse in this criticism addresses a current situation and a new social space formed by modern institutions (administrative, economic, ideological) and modern social classes (Western-educated citizens): in this sense, Asad thinks that it is thus part of modernity rather than a reaction to it, as is often held.

The answer to the letter came not from the king, but from his Council of Senior Ulemas, who deplored its public character. Asad reports two arguments that the critical ulemas formulated in support of making their advice public, however: first, a moral argument pertaining to the public nature of the matter, namely the *umma*'s (Islamic community's) public good, of which both the people and the ruler need to be aware; and second, a tactical argument saying that all advice given to the king privately had been so far ignored and that the criticism would have more chances to be heard in a public forum.

Asad's purpose in focusing on this open letter is to refute the widespread claim that the practice of public criticism is alien to Islam and that Islamic states do not have room for it because of their absolutist character. He considers the rise of public criticism in Western absolutist states, in particular that of Kant under Frederick the Great. This criticism, too, had been bound by certain limits, as shown in Kant's unpublished letter to the king promising him not to attack religion in public. The limits set by the political power are also seen in Kant's distinction between the private and the public use of reason: in the first case, reason is to give precedence to the obedience of established laws and authorities in the realm of official and professional duties; in the second case, reason is to exercise its full critical powers in the intellectual realm, the public of readers and writers. The first limit is a political one, and the second is a sociological one, the restriction to a small circle of intellectuals. As Asad notes, some see in Kant's invitation to legal and political obedience a justification for state authoritarianism, but others detect in Kant's public critical reason the development of

the liberating aspects of secular, bourgeois society. What Asad wants to draw attention to is the difference in the genealogies of these two types of public criticism, which are connected to different genealogies of state formation, instead of to the measurement of one type (the Islamic) according to the history of the other (the Western). In the Western case, the setting is that of the political authority of a strong state (eighteenth-century Prussia) in which religion is on the retreat and feared for its disrupting effect on social peace and stability. In the postindependence Islamic states, such as Saudi Arabia, religion in the context of a theocracy has the upper hand and shapes public criticism accordingly. Recalling the practice of criticism in traditional Islamic institutions also refutes those claims that hold religion and reason, and so religion and critique, to be natural opposites. Asad refers here to positions such as Sadeq Jalal al-Azm's.

This is not to say, adds Asad, that the ulemas' public criticism is not limited and limiting; he agrees here with many Saudis who think so. But the limitations are not due to religious thinkers' intrinsic incapacity to contemplate change or to the fundamental contradiction between religion and reason. They are rather due to the particular articulation of a discursive tradition at a certain point in time. For many, including numerous Saudis, the ulemas' criticism entails a system of divinely ordained norms as well as a controlled moral disciplining that may not be acceptable to all in a universal sense. Indeed, it assumes people to be members of a preestablished moral space rather than universal and autonomous individuals inhabiting the morally neutral, rational space of political liberalism. Here Asad contests the moral neutrality of modern political liberalism, which he sees as heavily shaped by secularized Christian values, and recalls the different conceptions of rationality that have prevailed in the course of Western intellectual history.[71] Further, he adds that secular ideologies have not been immune to tyranny, contending that what is decisive in matters of tyranny and freedom is not what justification is used to legitimize power, but rather the behavior that is adopted in this justification. For him, what makes Islamic public criticism seem so radically different is the fact that it is evaluated by a dominating Western discourse: "Finally: It is necessary to stress that I am not concerned with the truth or otherwise of Saudi religious beliefs but with the kind of critical reasoning involved in *nasiha*. I have tried to show that the Islamic tradition is the ground on which that reasoning takes place. And that is no more than may be said about political and moral reasoning within the modern liberal tradition—except that modern liberalism deploys powers that are immeasurably greater, including the flexible power to construct a 'universal,

progressive history,' which the other tradition does not possess. That today is the main condition that limits religious criticism in the contemporary Middle East."[72]

Asad's attack on Islam's exceptional and intrinsic incapacity to allow public criticism is well taken, as is his contextualization of the emergence of such criticism in the state genealogies of the West and the Middle East. But as we saw throughout this chapter, the limits on religious criticism are not set only by the Eurocentric hegemonic discourse. Moreover, granted that Western liberalism is reasoned on the ground of a specific cultural and religious tradition, one would still have to admit that a secular, liberal state provides a significantly larger margin of freedom than a theocracy, especially in terms of the liberties of worship, thought, and expression. This distinction, of course, does not preclude the existence of a religious voice of critique, as a voice among others, within a secular, liberal state. Indeed, the co-optation of the traditional religious institutions by postindependent Arab states did result in the loss of an important critical, potentially oppositional voice, especially in societies in which religion plays a significant role. This co-optation was part of a state policy aimed at repressing all oppositional and independent forces of civil society. Furthermore, as some have indicated, one can also imagine the development of some Islamist movements into religion-inspired political parties, like the Christian Democrat Party in Germany for instance.

Islamic Critique and the Cultural Malaise

Religious modernization was among the prime Nahda projects. Consecutive Nahda figures from al-Tahtawi to al-Afghani to Abduh called for modernizing the education of the ulemas, the Muslim clerics who bore, according to them, a great deal of responsibility for the backward state of Muslim societies. Al-Afghani and Abduh thought that a modernizing reformation was more natural to Islam than it was to Christianity because of Islam's inherent inclination toward rationality and because of the absence of a clerical body (at least theoretically) in it. A close analysis of their conception of the European Reformation and a comparison between their own reform projects and those of the Christian reformers of sixteenth-century Europe still need to be made. Religion was central in the Nahda movement for a number of reasons. On the one hand, most of the early Nahda figures were clerics themselves because, as in most traditional societies, clerics were the ones to

benefit from some form of education and thus to play the role of an intelligentsia. On the other hand, Arab societies were religious in general, the way traditional societies everywhere typically are, and so religion governed many sectors of social life, from education to law, morality, and social mores. Thus, any modernizing change in public life necessitated a change in religion, and the early Nahda figures were eager to introduce this change. Understandably, their calls and attempts were met with resistance on the part of the religious establishment, especially when they involved theological matters that touched on the sacred text and on the consecrated tradition. In the course of the twentieth century, however, the more Islam was mobilized to serve as a defensive identity ideology and the more it was politicized to face external and internal threats, the more difficult it became to approach it in critical and innovative ways.

Arkoun and Abu Zayd belong to this line of Nahda reformers; however, they come at a time when the mobilization and politicization of Islam is at its highest. But it is also a time when the work of critique is most needed in order to breathe new intellectual and even spiritual life into religion and to reclaim theology as a discipline of reflection that requires freedom of thought and freedom of expression and that necessitates a long-term commitment to genuine work free from the circumstantial manipulation of religious ideas. The emphasis on the human component in religious traditions—be it in the exegesis of religious texts, in the legislation of religious laws, or in the very constitution and transmission of tradition—is extremely important: it opens the way to an active and critical reappropriation of these traditions to those living today, and it breaks the rigid authoritarianism with which certain historical forms of understanding Islam have been imposed as "the" correct, objective, and unique way of understanding it. The historicity of revelation is in this respect one of the major issues of contemporary theological critique. Its proponents claim for themselves the critical spirit with which the early theologians of Islam operated. The humanization and historicization of Islamic theology obviously cannot but bear the fruits of critique on the wider cultural scene: hence the importance of sustaining such efforts in spite of violent rejection and marginalization. It is important here to appreciate the perseverance of these critical theologians, including the feminists among them, in the face of these reactions.

The inconsistencies of Hanafi's work, in contrast, show the challenges that surround this critical path and the ways in which critique can slide back into ideology, textualism, and revengeful claims of power—as indicated, for instance, in his wishful prediction that an Islam-centered world

will replace a West-centered world. His project of mobilizing the people's Islam in the struggle for economic and political justice is interesting, but it lacks rigor and depth. A more radically critical reflection on issues of faith, empowerment, and liberation may produce more promising Islamic theologies of liberation. But such a radicalization of critique is wanting not only in Islamic theology, but also in Christian and Jewish theologies as well. They all need to address the following questions: What does it mean to seek empowerment in religion? Is it to identify oneself with politically, economically, and even in some cases militarily powerful institutions associated with religion, like the historical Islamic state, the present Jewish state, or the various Christian states and institutions? The identification with such institutions may provide disempowered people with a sense of an affirming might, but at what price? Can it really render human liberation, ethical integrity, and moral force? Or does it necessarily create new forms of bondage, such as sectarianism, jingoism, and nationalistic forms of servitude in which ethical integrity is heavily compromised? Given the realities of the Christian minorities in the Arab world and in Israel-Palestine in particular, Palestinian Christian theologies of liberation seem more successful than Islamic ones in mobilizing faith for the ethical and spiritual capacities of liberation and justice. Their attempts are worth pondering.

Finally, by recalling the religious establishment's critique function, Asad reminds us of the loss of one of the critical voices among others that resulted from the co-optation of religious institutions by the postindependence Arab regimes. These regimes were not the only intolerant forces of the era, however. The Islamist organizations opposing them were equally intolerant. The first victims of the bitter struggle between them were the secularists, who found themselves the target of both the regime and the Islamists in a public life that became increasingly Islamicized as a result of the rivalry between a state that wanted to prove its religious legitimacy (having no other ground of legitimacy) and a mounting Islamist opposition that proposed Islam as "the" solution to all the ills plaguing Arab societies. But the secularists have persisted: threatened, vulnerable, and marginalized, they still stand their ground. It is to them that I turn in the next chapter.