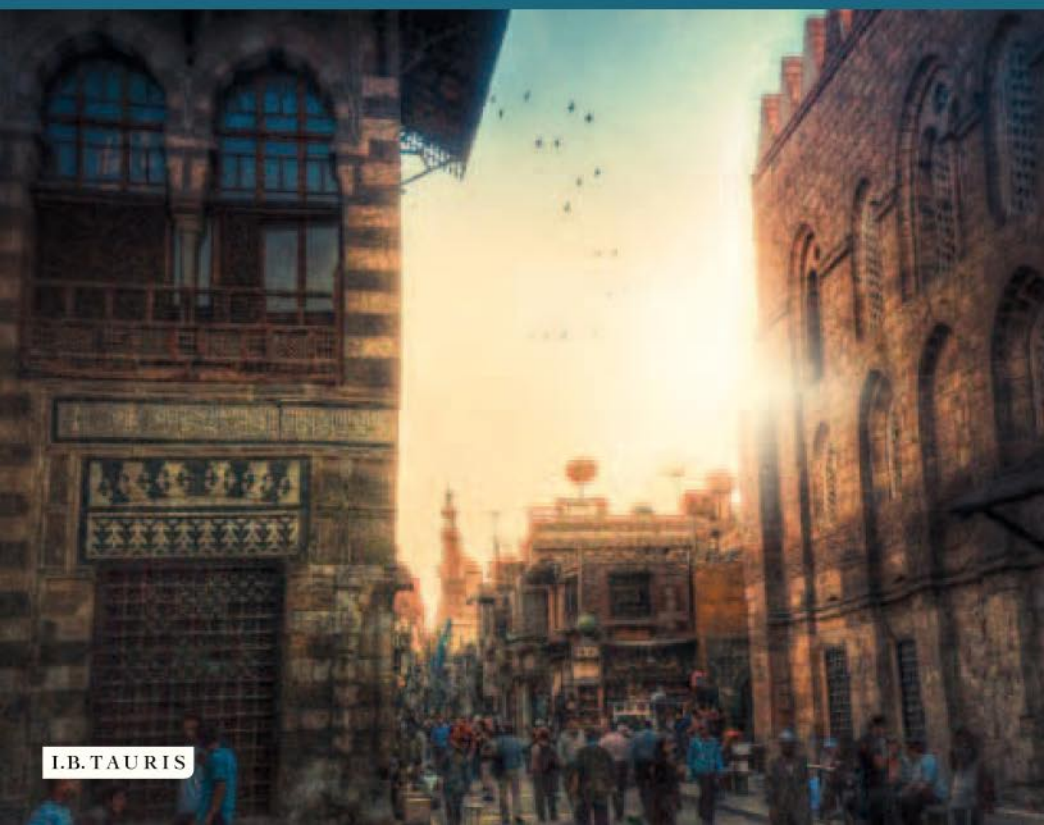


MUSLIM IDENTITIES AND MODERNITY

The Transformation of Egyptian Culture, Thought and Literature

MAHA F. HABIB



I.B. TAURIS

Maha F. Habib is currently Assistant Professor at Khalifa University and was previously Instructor at the University of Waterloo in Canada. She holds a PhD in Arab and Islamic Studies from the University of Exeter.

‘Most of the books written on the topic take for granted a positive modern influence on this literature, and review tradition, Islam and history as regressive forces. Maha very delicately in her book attempts another approach by which Western influence was not always progressive and, more importantly, shows that the linearity that is suggested by most historians, namely that literature became more Westernized and hence modern with time, neglected the very important debates in that literature that represented both sides, and maybe even a third side, of the argument.’

Professor Ilan Pappé, Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies,
University of Exeter

‘At a time when Egypt is once more facing questions regarding its identity, perhaps in a more radical way than at any time during the last half century, with society violently polarised not just between secularisation and religion, but also democracy and authoritarianism, conflicting binaries that have afflicted the country since its first encounter with modernity through Napoleon’s invasion – at such a time there cannot be a more opportune moment for a study that digs at the cultural and intellectual roots of today’s crisis of identity.’

Professor Rasheed El-Enany, Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies,
University of Exeter

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*To my father and mother for their love, dedication and support.
To my family for encouraging me in difficult times. And, most importantly, to
The One, without whom nothing would be possible.
Forever grateful and in debt.*

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INTRODUCTION

The Question of Muslim Identity

The question of Islam and Muslim identity has become all too important and difficult to ignore in an age of engaging, and at times worrying, politics with regard to Islam, Muslims, and their representation and positionality in the world. Islam's existence or lack thereof on an official level has been a topic of controversy, and its existence or lack thereof on a popular level has been the source of important study. The current atmosphere begs questions that surpass the far too simplistic and unconcerned questioning of what Islam is; it begs questions to do with the current Muslim condition. An attempt to understand Islam ultimately leads to an interest in understanding Islam in the life of Muslims in the modern period. This type of inquisition, this search for answers, leads to even more defining questions: where and how does Islam exist in relation to modernity, how and in what ways does it function to move and shape the nations and identities of the Arab East, and to what extent?

Among the many perplexing representations of and observations on Muslims in the Arab East is that beyond the manifestations of religiosity within the social scene, one finds disturbance, imbalance, contradiction and a sense of chaos and crisis. This sense of chaos and crisis can be observed and attested within the Muslim Egyptian reality and experience. Muslim Egyptian social reality can be characterized by a crisis of narratives that has manifested in a crisis of civilization, of society and of identities. This crisis is amply covered, portrayed and discussed

by cultural critics, intellectuals, religious figures and artistic writers in Egypt. It has been equally noted by international authors and thinkers. A crisis of this magnitude and of this importance thus requires a delineation of sources, reasons and remedies.

Egyptian history within the modern period has been unquestionably entangled with the politics of the contact with the West, colonial and 'postcolonial'. This contact has had an unrelenting impact on Muslim Egyptian culture, society and subjectivity; one that is deeply embedded. The avenues towards social, cultural and identity-based change, progress and modernization of various forms are intimately connected to and implicated by such a history, and such a historical progression/cultural regression. The Muslim Egyptian crisis, thus, can be sourced to mistaken cultural development. As such, the intention here is to build a cultural critique that highlights mistaken cultural aims that are entangled with and implicated by a history of uneven cultural contact. The critique is one of mistaken routes to progress, a critique of accepting and applying Western ideologies and notions of modernization (secularism, and modernity as a realization of Western conceptions of social organization and thought, culture and identity), without a due consideration for the place of indigenous and nativist forms of knowledge, without consideration for the religious, as a means to progress. The intention is to draw out the complexities that this mistaken approach has engendered, mainly in relation to the development of a secure or balanced sense of Muslim identity. In the process an enlightened and informed understanding of the tension between Islam and modernity, and a detailed discovery of the predicament of Muslim identity and the subsequent effects on religiosity, is to be achieved. This investigation will essentially locate and situate Islam within modern Egypt for Muslims, and in relation to or amidst various other frameworks or ideologies.

Central to this research are questions leading to deepened understandings of the general Muslim condition. What have the discourses of modernity and secularization meant for a Muslim conception of change and articulations of religion, culture and society? What have these conceptions engendered in terms of alterations to the Islamic worldview, Islamic discourse, and Muslim self-perception and understanding of religious meaning? How and in what ways are identity and individual religiosity problematized by the forces of change: colonialism, modernization and globalization? How do Muslims assess religion and

religiosity given the muddled discourse on representation? What complexities in the realization of religiosity, and what ambiguities in understanding and applying religious meaning arise? How do Muslims respond to and attempt to construct religious meaning and religious identity given a conflated ideological terrain and a complex modern reality within Egypt? Finally, is reconciliation possible, without a forfeiting of religious identity and of religiosity?

The Means of Charting Muslim Identity

1. Mapping Muslim Identity in Egypt

The importance of this endeavour can be charted throughout the Arab Middle East for the purpose of mapping postcolonial/modern experiences in connection with Muslim identity and religiosity. However, this task, thus defined, would be ineffectual and daunting. The Arab world cannot be seen holistically, as it can be segmented and differentiated in terms of the postcolonial historical experience. Neither can Muslim identity be defined using such an expansive scope. The development of religious ideology and the history of religion-based response to the West have taken different forms.

Egypt was selected for several reasons:

- (1) It was a centre of gravity for intellectual thought for the Arab world during the nineteenth century.
- (2) Egypt has been since the nineteenth century a cultural ferment of both nationalist and religious discourse.
- (3) Egypt has been a relatively open society to intercultural exchange.

The focus of this research is the modern period; texts written by Muslim Egyptians within the modern period, from the nineteenth century to the present, are analysed. The question of whether Egypt is experiencing a modern epoch or a postmodern epoch is a crucial one. However, it is difficult to designate a modern versus a postmodern moment or time frame for Egypt; these definitions in cultural terms, and therefore in time frames, are nebulous. A postmodern moment for Egypt cannot be verified in historical or cultural terms, and remains in the making; Egypt remains engaged with the complexities of modernity and of postcoloniality, and the difficulties such experiences have presented. The inability to engage in

a constructive forward-moving and indigenously cultivated progress and modernization has stalled a realization of a postmodern moment in social, cultural and historical terms.

II. Sample Selection

Thus, primary material for analysis from the modern period has been selected after a search and review of writing produced within the Arab world. Certain texts were approached for the understanding of the breadth within Egypt and for thematic concerns; the texts of Rasheed El-Enany, of Roger Allen, of M. Badawi, of Jasem al-Musawi, of Sabry Hafez and of Issa Boullata. With a focus on religion and religious concerns a list of texts was constructed. Theoretical categories on the basis of religious themes were then constructed, and a list of primary sources was selected from different time frames to ensure a historical continuity in coverage and in delineating causes and manifestations of the predicament of religious identity. The selection reflects a historical continuity in coverage and analysis, whilst showcasing continuity in the thematic concern through the analysis of a range of writers and figures: the religious, the academic, the cultural critic, the artistic and the politically inclined.

From the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, key intellectual figures were selected from the Islamic and secular trends to showcase and analyse the contestation over integral issues in defining self and nation, and to delineate causes leading to a contemporary predicament in identity. Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani (1838–1897), Muhammad 'Abduh (1849–1905), and Qasim Amin (1863–1908) as representatives of the Islamic trend, and Ahmed Lutfi al-Sayyid (1872–1963), Muhammad Husayn Hayakl (1888–1956) and Taha Hussein (1889–1973) as representatives of the secular trend. From the early twentieth century to the mid-twentieth century, texts of key authors were selected to reflect once again the two intellectual trends and their articulations of identity, modernization and means to progress: Muhammad Husayn Haykal's *Zaynab* (1914), Tawfik al-Hakim's (1898–1987) *Return of the Spirit* (1933), Taha Hussein's *The Future of Culture in Egypt* (1938), Ahmad Amin's (1872–1954) *'Asharq wa al-Gharb* (1955) and a series of al-'Aqqād's (1889–1964) works (1946–1962).

From the mid-twentieth century to the present, literary texts were selected that reflect current concerns, the shifting place of the sacred and

the resulting predicament of religious identity and religiosity. These are: Yahya Hakki's (1905–92) *The Lamp of Umm Hashim* (1944); Tawfīk al-Ḥakīm's *'Arinī Allah* (1953); Naguib Mahfouz's (1911–2006) *The Cairo Trilogy* (1956–57), *Adrift on the Nile* (1966), *Midaq Alley* (1966) and *Ibn Fattouma* (1983); Latifa al-Zayyat's (1923–96) *The Open Door* (1960); Abdel Hakim Qassim's (1934–90) *The Seven Days of Man* (1969) and *Good News from the Afterlife* (1984); Salwā Bakr's *The Golden Chariot* (1990); Baha Tahir's *Love in Exile* (1995); and, finally, al-Aswany's *The Yacoubian Building* (2002).

These texts were mainly read in translation, subject to availability. In the cases where the texts were unavailable in translation, an Arabic copy was used. These constituted the texts written by the authors selected for the early-twentieth century to mid-twentieth century period, the only exception being Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm's *Return of the Spirit*. All texts from the mid-twentieth century to the present were read in English translation, with the exception of Tawfīk al-Ḥakīm's *'Arinī Allah*. In transliteration, the *International Journal of Middle East Studies* (IJMES) transliteration system was used. Works read in Arabic were transliterated and were followed by an English translation of the title. The names of the authors of these works are also transliterated, while works read in translation are not. Some Arabic words and names are also transliterated.

III. Cultural and Literary Mapping: Egyptian Intellectual Thought and Cultural Progress

It is clear from the selections made that Islam, and Islamic or Muslim identity, with all that it entails, is a thread that runs through Egyptian writing reflecting the dilemmas of their 'modern' world. These writings are textual attempts at dealing with the presented dichotomies of religion/secularism and tradition/modernity. Existential issues are at the centre of such discussions, or narrations as struggles for certainty and for self-representation with regard to issues of concern. Thus, the purpose is to trace religious significations within this writing. Tracing the religious entails the following:

- (1) to trace the ways in which cultural production was constructed in an attempt to understand the 'self': the articulation of the self, and a criticism of it;

- (2) to trace the ways in which the 'self' is reinvented: the construction of new ideologies, and the dynamics of such ideologies;
- (3) finally, to trace the ways in which the 'self' is presented: the dissemination and presentation of certain opinions or beliefs, in desperate attempts to conjoin or deal with the 'modern'.

Tracing the sacred within modern Egyptian writing presents deep insights into the struggle for individualism and representation. These narratives act as sites of expression of cultural contestation, and the struggle for self-definition, mirroring one that is pre-existing in Egyptian society. These texts as sites of expression and contestation are evidence of:

- (1) social and cultural self-awareness;
- (2) an engagement with and a response to 'other' narratives;
- (3) an attempt to search for an 'authentic' self-sufficient discourse;
- (4) an attempt to conjure up viable options for sustainability.

In looking at Egyptian literature particularly one can trace the sacred through a reflection on and analysis of the place it occupies in writing. Scott in his introduction to *Mapping the Sacred* theorizes that the tracing or mapping of the sacred can be understood as the tracing or mapping of human geography. Human geographies in this sense can be seen as landscapes of existence: spaces concerned with existential predicaments as they are expressed in various places. Scott clarifies three approaches that have been used to map the sacred, to map human geography, one of which is of crucial importance to the analysis of Egyptian texts. It is an approach that permits an analysis of the place of religion within human geographies and its effect upon the existential presence of these geographies; it permits an analysis of religion within the human environment.

This view prompts an understanding of Islam and Islamic culture, manifested in religiosity, within human geographies as one of a 'deterministic, almost self-existent, ontological status'.¹ Islam and Islamic culture can be understood to occupy an ontological status in the lives of Muslims. It expresses itself in their lives, it determines their social and cultural practices, and informs their view of the world. The

Qur'an and the Islamic tradition are pivotal social and cultural standards by which Muslims are informed, and by which they measure their actions. Essentially this is textual content that can be mapped.

Mapping is further defined as 'charting the ways in which contemporary writers represent [...] "sacred space" – a phrase capturing the sense of spiritual significance associated with those concrete locations in which adherents to different religious traditions, past and present, maintain a ritual sense of the sanctity of life and its cycles'.² The mapping of the sacred, then, includes a conception and a concern for issues of space and place in the reading of contemporary literature. If the sacred is a conception of the transcendent and its symbolic or concrete presence in the lives of adherents, then one can map the representation and expression of meaning associated with spaces, places, with experience, events, with thought and actions, with life itself as they play the defining role in identity construction and constitution, and in the constitution of individual lives.

For the sake of specificity, one can map the sacred as a 'place where, a higher reality has been manifested or grasped, especially a higher reality that has significantly affected [...] identity and life'.³ As the sacred constitutes its sacredness through its connection to the transcendental, sacred spaces achieve and constitute their sacredness through both the connection with the concept of the sacred and with the connection to human history, belief, and social and cultural ritual and practice. A Hajj pilgrimage can be read as a journey towards self-realization, self-salvation; it is a closeness with the transcendental, in a state of powerlessness, in an attempt to salvage and heal the human spirit. How Muslims articulate and re-articulate this religious requirement and this journey is a subject for analysis.

Egyptian writing is thus approached with an awareness of the various levels of meaning it expresses. In the process, the analysis is conscious of and focused on the individual attempts to express a sensibility that is of spiritual, intellectual and cultural form and nature in a desire for wholeness, for clarity, and for a sense of certainty.⁴ Egyptian writing expresses, and can be mapped for, a series of concerns that articulate these attempts. The first concern is the ontological claims to meaning and truth associated with religious traditions in the face of the process of secularization. The second concern is its implication, interrogation and dramatization of 'ambiguities and tensions' of religious symbols,

narratives, ritual practices and ethical codes, and 'doctrinal systems' of religious traditions.⁵ The third concern is the presentation of alternative visions of reality that may permeate this writing. Finally, the fourth concern is with the expression of 'geographies of resistance'⁶ to 'traditional' or Western thought systems and practices.

While it is inaccurate to suggest that Islam or Islamic culture is a monolith, one feels the necessity of a sense of accuracy and definition in approaching analysis to do with Islamic issues. The realization of religiosity requires a sense of concrete understandings, definite responses to questions, concerns and challenges, and certainly it requires definite referential points; this is no less true in assessments and analyses of the presentation of Islamic issues or of religiosity. Furthermore, an indication and consideration of the Islamic discourse of paramouncy in Egypt is also crucial. In defining a reference point, and in consideration of the Islamic discourse paramount in Egypt, the perspective of orthodox and mainstream Sunni Islam is used in articulating Islamic issues within the book. Furthermore, in assessment, discussion and analysis of these various issues, concerns and meanings, one felt a need for a delineation of a conception of Muslim identity, particularly a conception of Islamism, within the context of a discussion of Muslims who abide to the fundamentals of their faith. An awareness of the dual nature and meaning of this term is necessary. The term 'Islamist' in contemporary usage is one that expresses both extremism and terror in identity and action. The question of what an abiding, faithful Muslim who adheres in a fundamental, theoretical and practical sense to the precepts of Islam and actively seeks the realization of their religiosity can be termed becomes, therefore, a challenge. The term 'Islamist', given the current political atmosphere, would be and is highly problematic in usage. However, in meaning 'Islamist' may reflect an identity of one who is committed to their faith and its precepts in thought and action; the factors of extremism and terror are not necessarily crucial to this identity thus defined. These two meanings are reflected in the research and in analysis and articulation of the predicament of religious identity and religiosity in Egypt; however, they are not used interchangeably.

IV. Theoretical Framework

The book utilizes various approaches to locating, analysing and articulating the predicament of religious identity and religiosity. The

boundaries of the work cut across various theoretical and disciplinary lines: political science, sociology, cultural studies, religious studies, contemporary philosophy and literary criticism. To provide a comprehensive analysis of the predicament of religiosity, I had to appeal to various theoretical and disciplinary frameworks. In analysing the predicament the book revisits: the development of secular thought through the discussion of various political theorists; the development of national thought and Easternist thought in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries through the analysis of key Arab/Muslim intellectuals and through a review of seminal historical works; the discussion of key issues and debates in relation to Islam and modernity through a consideration of key works of cultural critique and analysis. It also reviews the development of an identity crisis through the use of social theory and detraditionalization theories.

I draw upon the writing of Western political philosophy to reveal the process of secularization, and to historical texts to locate the predicament. In discussing the process of secularization, one has to shed light on the decline of the sacred universe, and how a secularization and modernization discourse shaped and influenced the perspective of the 'other' on the Muslim self, and how in turn Muslim self-perception was altered. The study of key Islamic modernists and their struggle with colonial narratives is given against a backdrop of a theoretical analysis that highlights such influence. Edward Said's works, particularly *Orientalism* (1979), and Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (2002) were instrumental in providing this theoretical analysis. In locating the predicament historically I appeal to the works of Albert Hourani, J.P. Jankowski and I. Gershoni, Hesham al-Awadi, in addition to other historians. To mention a few: Hrair Dekmejian (1971; 1980), Saad Eddin Ibrahim (2002; 2005), R. Khalidi (1993), Ira M. Lapidus (1997), and 'Abd al-Rahmān' al-Rāfi'ī (1990). All of these works were instrumental in drawing out narratives, causes and directions within an Egyptian historical, political and intellectual scene. The works of Hourani (*Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age: 1798–1939* (1983) and *A History of the Arab Peoples* (1993)), and Gershoni and Jankowski (*Egypt, Islam, and the Arabs: The Search for Egyptian Nationhood 1900–1930* (1987) and *Redefining the Egyptian Nation, 1930–1945* (1995)) provided a comprehensive view of the time frames in question, a comprehensive view of the historical, social, political and cultural

constraints. Thus, they have proved to be excellent reference points for the charting of historical causes and historical developments leading to the present condition. The other works gave an extensive and detailed view into the contentions and constraints of certain time frames, and assisted in drawing out the complexities of the issues of the time frames in question. The work of al-Awadi, for instance, is an extensive look at state–Brotherhood dynamics, particularly within the Mubarak era, and therefore was integral in shedding light on state politics with regard to the presentation of Islam in certain spheres, and with regard to alternatives.

In situating the historical, cultural and political within the thematic concerns of the book, the discussion had to bring to light key issues and debates to do with Islam and modernity. These issues and debates provided a view of how the relationship of Islam to modernity is articulated. Furthermore, they brought to light the ways in which religious identity and religiosity are complicated by the tensions that arise between the respective discourses of Islam and modernity. In doing so various authors were appealed to. Anthony Giddens' *Modernity and Self-Identity* (1991), Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age* (2007) and David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Inquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (1989) give a philosophical and sociological view into the effects of modernization on social structures, religious formations and religious identity in relation to contexts of change. They elucidate the interventions and transformations that modernization imposes on individual psychology, belief and engagement in relation to traditional social structures and religious formations (theoretical and practical). These became crucial in understanding the negative effects of modernization on self and society: the deconstruction of the sacred universe, fragmentation of social and religious structures, the disembeddedness and disenchantment of the individual, and the resulting individual loss, uncertainty and anxiety with regard to religion.

To situate these understandings within the context of an Egyptian experience, and more importantly, a Muslim experience, one appealed to various writers who shed light on issues particular to Islam and modernity; those include Talal Asad, John Esposito, Azzam Tamimi, Munir Shafiq and Ahmet Davutoglu. Talal Asad's *Formations of the Secular* (2003) in particular offers an anthropological assessment of secularism in relation to political doctrine within Egypt. Pertinent to his analysis is

how secular ideology became reflected in changes to law, Shari'ah and ethics within Egypt enabling a progress towards a form of modernity not on a par with Islam or the psychological and cultural life and awareness of the peoples of Egypt. The neglect of the possibility of alternative modernities is further elucidated and verified through the theoretical and cultural analyses provided in an anthology edited by John Esposito and Azzam Tamimi, *Islam and Secularism in the Middle East* (2000), and is also discussed by Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt in *Multiple Modernities* (2005), Ibrahim Abu-Rabi' in *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History* (2004), Aziz al-Azmeh in *Islam and Modernities* (1996), Hisham Sharabi in *Neopatriarchy: A Theory of Distorted Change in Arab Society* (1992), Akbar Ahmed in *Postmodernism and Islam* (1992) and Galal Amin in *The Illusion of Progress in the Arab World* (2006) and *Whatever Happened to the Egyptians?* (2000). The theoretical and practical realities of social and individual discontent, disorder and displacement, thus, became apparent.

Finally, I draw upon social theory and detraditionalization theories to reveal the effects of the detraditionalization of Islamic society on religious identity, and on religiosity. Seminal and contemporary works within religious and sociological studies were instrumental in the analysis of primary texts studied. Of particular importance was an anthology edited by Paul Heelas, Scott Lash and Paul Morris titled *Detraditionalization* (1996). This anthology provided the framework for understanding, in a microcosmic manner, the shape and form of the changes imposed on individual psychology. These are: consequences of individualization; the changes in morality; the contingency of identity, morality and religion; the lucid, and socially and culturally ambiguous understanding of the religious and cultural universe; and the burdens and anxieties that are experienced as a result.

Through these various theoretical and disciplinary discoveries the wrenching question of how to consolidate religious identity and religiosity with modernity becomes a focus and culmination of the book.

Literature Review

Many intellectuals have attempted to describe and articulate the problem of Islam and modernity; however, few have been able to articulate the effect of a reality and a discourse of contestation on the Muslim self. There

is an abundance of literature on the subject of Islam and modernity approaching it from various angles. This literature can be classified based on focus: literature that locates and defines the problem for and in relation to the West and Western thought systems; literature that delineates the problem from an Islamic legal perspective; literature that describes the intellectual scene within the Middle East; and, literature that partakes in narrative analysis and/or criticism.

Most arguments are based on the premise that there is a perceived incongruity or tension and conflict between Islam and modernity; whether the reference is to political Islam or Islam in general, the premise remains the same. Most point to the tension and conflict experienced internally and externally within cultural and political frameworks: the need for religious reform and the need for a separation of religion and state are some of the issues tackled. Despite the varied focus of discussion within literature, the problem is most often phrased in terms of a civilizational predicament with national, international and global implications and a serious need for a solution. Modernity is also at times conceived more as a viable modernizing project, and increasingly so since the events of September 11; East and West relations have increased in tenuousness and Islam has received much more criticism and threat to its sustainability as a system of belief and as an identity marker.

The concern in this research is with the need for an approach to the subject that takes into account two important elements:

- (1) the postcolonial experience, and the postcoloniality of the Muslim subject;
- (2) Islam and (individual) religiosity.

Though this body of literature tackles the tension of Islam and modernity from varied perspectives, few attempt a detailed analysis of the shifting place of the sacred, and its consequential effect on the identity and religiosity of Muslims. Furthermore, while the element of postcoloniality of the Muslim subject is present within some of these analyses, the struggle for Muslim self-representation and the problematized sense of faith occupy a minimal space.

Within the first body of literature, the predicament of Islam with modernity is often viewed from a narrow perspective that locates the problem within Islamic doctrine, Islamic thought or Islamic cultural

and ethical practices, as specified by its legal system. Authors argue that modernity has at its foundations secular thought that is the culmination of social and political organization, and is not to be sourced to religious thought.⁷ As suggested, the Western tradition, and Western progress and civilization by implication, is predicated on democracy, freedom and civil liberties accommodating within its scope both plurality and personal autonomy. In an inaccurate and an unfair assessment, Islam and Muslim societies are seen to be incapable of realizing such progress, for the Islamic world has not realized secular states, nor is it capable of holding a neutral position with regard to religious ideologies.⁸

The tension between Islam and modernity is further conceptualized in terms of a civilizational predicament expressed in the binary of modern West and traditional East. Authors attempt to trace the problem historically, and define it politically by applying Huntington's thesis⁹ on the civilizational divide characterized by and manifested in the form of tension and conflict. This argument suggests that the two worlds, as binary opposites, are driven by a different set of convictions. Based on this faulty and dangerous characterization, both worlds are said to be driven by particularism and a different set of 'virtues' or ethics. Some of the various binaries and terms used to articulate this divide, such as *jihād* and 'McWorld', 'House of Islam' and 'House of war', attempt to further describe an Islamic ideological conception of 'self' and 'other', one that is most often said to be driven by a need to rehabilitate a sense of historical loss, and is a source of current Muslims' sense of inferiority and 'rage'.¹⁰

With this pretext in mind, the advance of these binaries and these conceptions is a construction of a discourse on Islam and Muslims, one that qualifies Muslim identity. This discourse designates and qualifies a set of labels, and a narrative on Islam and the problem of Islam based on this binary, a binary expressing a difference between the West and Islam, the democratic and the totalitarian, the secular and the religious, the modern and the medieval.¹¹ What is central to this discourse is the conception and articulation of 'Islamic terrorism' as a key notion within Islam, as a regulating force within Muslim lives, and a threat to the West and Western values.¹² Great attention is given to the ways in which these values can be protected, and to the means of combating Muslim terror; the discourse is supported by principles, plans, strategies and actions willed to defend against the 'terrorists'.¹³

Furthermore, a clear distinction is drawn between types of Muslims: the fundamentalist, extremist or Islamist and the moderate. Dialogue with the moderates composes part of the strategy for combating the terror of Islam.¹⁴ The moderates are seen to have a greater proximity to Western ideals, and can assist in the realization of ideological and theological balance within Islam. This proximity qualifies typology as it qualifies religiosity, affecting the construction of identities. Such ideological constructions allow for a minimalist space for understanding the Muslim self and Muslim predicament in modern contexts. Additionally, these ideological constructions do not bear in mind the necessity of an equitable analysis.

Islamic legal perspectives enter this form of discussion as a means to negotiating and articulating new means to approaching Islam in modern contexts. Great attention has been directed towards Islamic law and its reform. This attention is produced and generated by the question of whether or not Islamic law is antithetical to human rights and civil liberties recognized within the West. These questions are framed historically and politically in light of various concerns for: the legitimacy of Shari'ah within modern constitutional frameworks; liberties of the individual; religious minority rights; and women's rights, among others.¹⁵ While Anver Emon suggests that Islamic societies seek reform 'out of the ashes of colonialism' in need of 'nationalist definitions that distinguish them from their former colonial masters' and in need of the establishment of an 'authentic identity', she also maintains that in the spirit of doing so, Islamic societies ideologically isolate themselves from the global scene.¹⁶

This point is further articulated by both Abdullahi An-Na'im and N.J. Coulson, who suggest that in following the traditions set forth within Islamic law, Muslims are resisting a 'break with the traditions of the past'.¹⁷ In criticism of the development of Islamic law, authors contend that its applicability within a modern framework is questionable; it is described as 'premodern'¹⁸ and 'akin to the principles upon which Plato's Republic was founded'.¹⁹ For instance, Howard denies the congruity of Islam and human rights by suggesting that the 'Islamic conception of justice is not one of human rights'.²⁰ The Islamic legal tradition, thus, becomes a focus of criticism, and Islamic reform becomes necessary: the reformation, re-articulation and re-interpretation of Islamic law and the basis on which it stands.

Given these frameworks, Muslims can be easily grouped based on religious convictions, creating religious typologies that in effect are a manifestation of the interplay between these discourses on Islam and its expression in personal lives (degrees of religiosity are implicated): secular Muslims, liberal Muslims, moderate Muslims, fundamental Muslims, extremist or fanatical Muslims, are shades of religiosity on a spectrum.²¹ Furthermore, these analyses and perspectives engender an atmosphere of hesitation, doubt and lack of certainty with regard to Islamic law and, thus, practice. These modern discourses on and approaches to the question of Islam in modernity are factors in the creation of a problematized and complicated sense of religious identity and religiosity.

While these frameworks locate the problematic within Islamic discourse and Muslim self-perception and worldview, there are other frameworks that locate the problematic within modern discourse and the modern political predicament that complicate Muslim identity construction and existence. Islamic identity is linked to 'modern geopolitical, economic, and social struggles'.²² I. Lapidus situates Muslim identity within the framework of a 'direct response to the global changes that constitute modernity'²³ and the accumulation of changes that Muslim societies have undergone including anti-colonial struggle and the role of renewal and reformation in the process.²⁴

Ayesha Jalal introduces yet another perspective by arguing that these movements mobilize around the concept of the nation, a distinctly Muslim conception of the nation that represents 'Muslim self-projections of identity'.²⁵ To Jalal it is an 'ingenious way of offsetting the growing disenchantment' and an expression of the importance of solidarity of a community predicated on a sense of belonging to and an identification with the tenets of the faith and its traditions. This 'theological centralization' is a means to 'individual self-affirmation [...] leading to purposeful collective action'.²⁶ On the other hand, John Esposito suggests that these movements and changes signify a 'quest for identity, authenticity, and community, and a desire to establish meaning and order in both personal life and society'.²⁷ This ability and endeavour to both situate and understand the problematics of Muslim identity are a starting point. They reveal the uppermost layer of engagement with these issues; such analyses require further interrogation and deeper involvement with the issues at hand. The assessments of the problem of

Islam, and the problem of a modern discourse in relation to Islam, require a greater awareness of the shifting place of the sacred in its various spheres of existence and performance, and the correlating struggle of Muslim identity in modern contexts for an adequate assessment and analysis of the predicament.

Despite such range in the study of Islam and modernity, few, if any, devote an entire study to the predicament of Muslim identity and the shifting place of the sacred. Even within literary analyses most focus on the theme of the encounter, or the East/West binary in a way that reveals the search for identity. The topics reviewed include: the struggle with the dichotomy and attempts at eliminating it; the struggle to embrace Western values while maintaining selfhood; rejection of colonial imposition; and reformation or self-criticism.

Within the framework of the contact theme of East/West, M.M. Badawi focuses on the centrality of Islam within Egyptian literature in relationship to identity. Badawi reviews the place of Islam in Egyptian literature by looking at pre-modern and modern poetry and prose. For instance, he discusses works from the Arab Renaissance (which began in the mid-nineteenth century), in which the 'figure of Muhammad continued to play a significant part in Egyptian poetry'²⁸ and in which idiom, illusion, imagery and language 'are all deeply and unmistakably rooted in the Islamic religion and the Islamic tradition'.²⁹ On the other hand, Rasheed El-Enany focuses, thematically, on the relationship of the East to the West by performing a 'reverse study of Edward Said's famous *Orientalism*' through an exploration of Arab fictional and quasi-fictional responses to Western culture. He articulates and reveals integral aspects of the problematic of Muslim identity within a modern framework, and significant ideas in understanding Muslim self-perception in relation to the 'other'.³⁰ His analyses portray the ways in which some authors articulate difference from the West and pride in Eastern heritage (Tawfiq al-Hakim), how others attempt an amalgamation of values (Taha Hussein), while others articulate a sense of shame in relation to the West and Western progress (Yahya Hakki).³¹

Muslim self-perception and problematic of identity can and should be situated within historical and political frameworks. Approaching the contact theme in a similar fashion to that of El-Enany, Stephan Sheehi situates the problematics of self-perception and religious identity within historical and political frameworks. Sheehi, specifically, situates

Arab identity within the larger framework of the struggle of the Arab world with the West and with Western 'supremacy' to enlighten an understanding of the problem of identity. He pays close attention to the developments in Egyptian history towards the end of the Ottoman Empire and the initiation of British colonialism, leading towards a review of the modern conception of selfhood: Islamic and national.³² What is particularly astounding about his assessment is the explanation of the language of binaries that captivates the discourse on the Arab world, and the Arab intellectual stance in response to such a discourse. All of these topical assessments lead to the conclusion that modernity has an unrelenting impact on Arab and Muslim subjectivity, from which dialogical and dialectical responses emanate. A current and detailed analysis of the impact and of the nature of the responses to the challenges posed is, however, lacking.

Some authors frame Muslim responses within the historical and political scene and in relation to the shifting place of religion and religious discourse, often revealing the predicament of religious identity. Mona Mikhail discusses the search for an authentic identity within the framework of the shifting place of religious traditions by focusing on the works of Yusuf Idris (1927–91) and Naguib Mahfouz. She advances the argument that her assessment examines 'allegories which reflect very clearly and unequivocally certain aspects of the accepted existential crisis of faith [. . .] [that are] intimately linked with the main issues of belief in God'; they are acts of revolt as a 'rejection of the human condition'.³³ The way in which she assesses the shifting place of the sacred is of importance, specifically if placed within the context of the subsequent rising of secular discourse/politics within Egypt. Hafez does exactly that in his engagement with a few works from the 1960s.

Hafez describes the 1960s as the: 'decade of confusion, a decade of numerous huge projects and the abolition of almost all political activities; massive industrialization and the absolute absence of freedom' and the defeat of 1967.³⁴ As such, the literature of the 1960s attempted to communicate and 'express the complexities of this epoch' focusing on issues of individualism, 'patriotism and nationalism'.³⁵ The most important theme in this blend is the 'obsessive search for freedom in a world which seems to have been abandoned by God and surrenders its reason and logic to an inverted law'.³⁶ His commentary on this theme allows for a due consideration of religious meaning, and its loss through

an analysis of the psychological development of central characters, narrative techniques that embody this development and the shifting time and logic of events.³⁷ The search for meaning and identity coincides with the loss of religious meaning; cultural formation was affected by the instability and unpredictability of the time. The question of whether or not the instability and unpredictability of the contemporary period lend themselves to similar understandings of the nature of society, and understanding of the challenges posed to religious identity, is of importance.

The state of uncertainty that is dominant in Egyptian society and is expressed in its literature is analysed further by Muhammad Siddiq. From the perspective of the mapping of identity 'against the backdrop of contemporary Egyptian culture, politics and history' he examines the Egyptian novel as a contested genre.³⁸ Paramount to his discussion and contribution is the disorienting effects of the encounter with the 'other' and the consequent hybrid state that is at the core of Arab identity. He further focuses on the space which religion occupies within the Egyptian novel: philosophical religious orientations within Naguib Mahfouz's *Al-Qāhirah al-Jadīdah* (1945); the critique of religious superstition in Hakki's works; the celebration of 'unabashed' desire and the conjoining of 'religion and hedonism' in *The Cairo Trilogy* (1956–57).³⁹ Siddiq's work is very much to the point for the task at hand.

The conducted analyses of religion and Muslim identity in the texts discussed above in large part take the form of an expression of the dichotomous relationship between Islam and the West, and the expression of contradictory values. There is also a focus on the tension with regard to the full acceptance of the West and Western values, in the process of the search for identity given against a backdrop of social, cultural, political events and changes within society. However, the lacunae are located within the assessment of religious identity within Egyptian society. There is a lack of a comprehensive study and a comprehensive understanding of the shifting place of the sacred as a result of the history of the encounter, and the subsequent effect on religious identity and religious ideology and religiosity.

The lacunae lie in the following areas of study:

- (1) the shifting place of the sacred as a result of colonialist discourse and Western knowledge systems;

- (2) a study of the struggle for religious identity as a struggle for individuality and representation;
- (3) the study of consequent problematics and of change within the sacred universe and its expression within various spheres;
- (4) an understanding of these in relation to religiosity, and the manifestation of individual dispositions with regard to the sacred within these contexts of change;
- (5) the search for and the presentation of viable options with regard to the tension between Islam and modernity.

This study fills some of these gaps.

Book Structure and Content

I. Book Structure

The book is organized around a diachronic analysis that begins with the late nineteenth century and ends with the contemporary period. Part I of the book covers the historical and cultural developments from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century. Part II of the book covers the historical and cultural developments from the early twentieth century to the middle of the twentieth century, while Part III covers the period from the middle of the twentieth century to the present.

II. Chapter Contents

Part I aims to lay the foundations for the discovery of the displacement of the sacred and the struggle with individual religiosity. This part of the book is focused on three main issues of concern. The first issue of concern is clarifying that the predicament faced by adherents of religion (faith) is one of a crisis of orientation. This crisis of orientation is ideological in nature and poses a threat to the sustainability and validity of revelation-based forms of knowledge. Tracing the development of the process of the crystallization of this crisis frames the first chapter: 'The Enlightenment Project and Secularization in the West'. The second chapter, 'Modernity and Islam in Egypt: The Struggle for Self-Representation and the Problem of Orientation', discusses the second issue of concern. It traces the penetration and effect of secular and modern discourses of understanding the world on the Islamic point of reference, and conception of identity. It also

outlines the ways in which Egyptian society has attempted to respond, with the purpose of highlighting that:

- (1) there is a crisis of orientation;
- (2) Islam remains central to Muslim thought.

The third chapter, 'Islam and Modernity: The Predicament of Identity', aims at defining and describing the consequential effects on Muslim identity, and the subsequent search for authenticity. The fourth chapter, 'Narrating Islam, Modernity and Muslim Identity', attempts to chart a narrative of the linkages between these three elements (Islam, modernity and identity), so as to conceptualize the way in which the religious is disrupted, and the subsequent disruption of or effect on religious identity and religiosity. These issues of concern set the foundations for an understanding of the predicament of Islam and modernity, and the effect on Muslim identity and religiosity.

Part II examines the intellectual shifts and their underlying ideologies. [Chapter 5](#) examines the Egyptian national drive towards independence, progress and means to self-identification through a conceptualization of organizational principles in Egyptianist terms. The theoretical underpinnings of territorial nationalism are approached through an investigation of historical change, and the ideas of key Figures (such as Lutfi al-Sayyid and Muhammad Husayn Haykal). The way in which the territorialist vision is further elaborated and imagined in fictional narratives is examined through an interpretation of Haykal's *Zaynab* and al-Ḥakīm's *Return of the Spirit*. [Chapter 6](#) examines the shift in focus through the analysis and discussion of the ideas of central Easternist intellectual figures, and their re-conceptualization of the means of constructing and conceiving self, society, nation and progress. These include Amīn and al-'Aqqād.

Part III showcases a narrative of the displacement of the sacred, and the subsequent effects on religious identity and religiosity. [Chapter 7](#) outlines the transformation in an entire world and its worldview (from sacred to secular) and the consequent effects on conceptions of existence (time and space) and sense of existence (security, or alienation and exile). This mirrors the transformations that took place in the context of the Egyptian nation, and projects the transformation in Muslim society and Muslim identity. The intent here is to show the ultimate distinctions in

conceptions of existence (sacred versus secular, as they are expressed in time and space), their direct association with a worldview (transcendent and enchanted versus disenchanting), and their ultimate effects on (religious, Muslim) identity and sense of religiosity (or relationship to the sacred). This is approached through the study of one key fictional narrative, Abdel-Hakim Kassem's *The Seven Days of Man* (1969).

Chapter 8 is a transition into the deeper consequences of the transformation, and the complex and multi-faceted reality of crisis it manifests. From the vantage point of the destabilized sacred order, its social structures or social formation, and the ushering in of an unrestricted individuality, problems within the social sphere and the constructions of identity are examined. Through the study of Naguib Mahfouz's *Midaq Alley* (1966), Salwā Bakr's *The Golden Chariot* (1991), Baha Tahir's *Love in Exile* (1995) and Alaa al-Aswany's *The Yacoubian Building* (2002) several issues are brought to light: increasing consumerist and materialistic ethics; the commodification of all values; political corruption; and the ultimate loss of value of a heritage, culture and roots.

Chapter 9 focuses on women's issues specifically. Using Salwā Bakr's *The Golden Chariot* (1991), the effects of the erosion of the religious order on the lives of women are examined. Particular attention is paid to the multi-layered system of subjugation and control that exists in society, and the intersection of structural and ideological demands on identity (traditionalism, modernism and religiosity). Ultimately, one finds that women are unable to navigate through or derive a sense of agency from any one of the existing discourses of existence and identity, they are pressured by the demands, and their realities are ultimately complicated, unjust and disabling to any sense of personal development. More importantly, in cases of a real interest in and need for religiosity, its existence and its realization in personal lives, the overpowering and destabilizing modern order impedes a harmonized and secure sense of religious identity.

Chapter 10 draws on this idea further and showcases the way in which identities are further problematized in a way that is both disadvantageous to individual development and to the development of a nation. A look is taken at the conflicted, contradictory and polarized nature of Egyptian society, and more particularly the conflicted and contradictory sense of individual identity (resulting from the conflated

ideological terrain). Another aspect of the complex reality is also revealed, that of a sense of attraction and repulsion to Islam and Islamic conceptions of the self (in response to and in a destabilized engagement with the complex realities). The conclusion of Part III of the book attempts to address all of these issues. It discusses a means towards a more rooted progress and modernity, and a more balanced sense of religious identity, by presenting the various solutions offered by the authors studied.

The conclusion of the book attempts to provide a comprehensive picture of the conflicted sense of Muslim identity and of religiosity. It re-assesses the initial questions of the book in light of new findings, summarizes these findings, and makes recommendations on these bases for resolving the dilemma, and for future researchers.

PART I

SECULARIZATION, ISLAM AND THE PREDICAMENT OF IDENTITY

Introduction

Islam has, throughout its history, played a pivotal role in the lives of its adherents. Islam's significance for its adherents stems from and is informed by it as 'a doctrine', a system of discipline and ritual, and 'a system of social ethics and practices'.¹ Throughout Islamic history, Islam has undergone significant reformation efforts as was socially and culturally perceived to be necessary from within its community. However, with the advent of colonialism, the introduction of the concept of the nation state, and the ushering in of the age of modernity, the form and structure of such reformation was much informed by the relationship of Islam and its adherents to the 'other' (the West) and its knowledge systems. Islam has since been confronted with the question of its own validity, from inside and outside the community of adherents. The struggle with the place of religion, the place of the sacred, has played out through the history of Islam within Egypt, at times expanding, at others withdrawing, as it dealt with political, social and cultural forces. This has presented and continues to present its adherents with a dilemma of identity: a constant shifting, manipulating, rejecting and reforming of religious symbols and meaning and further knowledge systems within Islam – an attempt to deal with the state of (post) coloniality, and the project of modernity.

Most Middle Eastern societies, after the end of the Ottoman Empire, have suffered fundamental problems over national identity, Muslim identity, and ways in which to compromise, comprise and live the 'self' in a 'modern' Middle East. The colonial experience has wrought unprecedented change, disruption and chaos to the Middle East: the society, the culture. With the advent of colonialism in Egypt, religion and religious institutions increasingly began to be situated within the peripheries of social, cultural and political thought. Al-Azhar, as a centre for religious learning, among many other religious centres within Egypt, became a target of criticism and reform; its position as a key representational body and a centre of learning was both threatened and attacked. This threat was directed not only at al-Azhar as a religious institution of religious learning and knowledge, but also at the '*ulamā*', as figures of authority. During the reign of Mohammed Ali, and later the British administration (represented by Lord Cromer) the subsequent efforts at reform changed the nature of religion as understood and practised by the community of adherents within Egypt.² Al-Azhar, and, de facto, religious institutions were decentralized as centres of knowledge, learning and authority. Other centres were introduced and other points of reference gained currency.

Western systems of thought, based on Enlightenment principles of the primacy of scientific empiricism, rationality, individualism, freedom and, by extension, constitutional rights, gained and received an increasing level of interest, attention and focus for the intelligentsia of the time. Colonialists, nationalists and Islamic modernists all attempted to re-frame the sacred, all having a great and effectual role in knowledge creation and representation of and about Islam, its doctrine, its system of codes and ethics, and its practice. For colonialists, Islam provided faith in tribal and uncivilized forms of ethics and practices. For nationalists, it was only a part, at times expressed as an inconsequential part, of a nation's (Egypt) expression of identity, history and culture, and thus, of no direct and necessary bearing on social and political thought and organization. For Islamic modernists, it was the key to understanding the world and the basis for understanding, tackling and dealing with all issues of concern in Egypt.

The postcolonial period has meant an extension and further expansion of colonialism and the dilemmas it has inflicted on Middle Eastern societies. In the case of Egyptian society, the peoples of Egypt did not so

much move beyond colonialism, rather, they have continuously attempted to deal with the chaos, the disarray and madness of colonial invasion of the societies, lives and identities of its peoples. Central to this struggle is the rewriting of historiographical narratives as attempts to legitimize relationships of proximity to the West; these are relationships of either closeness or distance, in terms of social, cultural, political, scientific and religious thought. They are attempts at gaining and acquiring a sense of validity, and acquiring a movement forward towards globally established conceptions of civilization, development and progress. This struggle is a crisis of how to deal with the project of 'modernity' on an individual and social level. Though colonized people (most often) respond to colonial legacy by writing back to the centre, writing back to the Empire, the struggle for Egyptian society was that at the crux of this response was writing back to the self. This act of writing to the self has taken the form of consistent and continual self-reflection and criticism that simultaneously addresses cultural meaning and self-perception, and colonial perspectives on the self. Thus it serves to address social and cultural concerns, and responds to perception and meaning emanating from the Empire. Egyptian society is continuously struggling with the place of the sacred; various religious traditions have provided the 'self' ways in which to deal with and respond to the polarities of religion and secularism, tradition and modernity. Furthermore, there is the struggle to find a place for the sacred in the face of (Western conceptions of) rationalism, liberalism and secularist thought, while struggling to contain/maintain a coherent, consistent Islamic 'thought', in the broadest sense of the word.

During the periods of reform of the nineteenth century, Islamic reformers, in the face of threat to Islam, attempted to validate it and express its centrality as a doctrine, a system of social ethics and practice, and as the basis for social and political organization. They also attempted to prove its congruity with rationalism. These efforts emulated the conviction that Islam has a vital role in Egyptian society and is of crucial importance to Muslim life. However, after World War II, the Islamic order experienced an increasingly regressive role in social and national politics, as there was scepticism about Islam's ability to theoretically and practically provide development and progress in the modern period (1900–30s). Some thinkers began to emphasize and glamorize the Pharaonic heritage of Egypt; others

attempted to link Egypt to the historical development of the West, while others insisted on a shared history and culture of Arab peoples of which Egypt and Egyptians are attested to be a part. The position of the *'ulamā'* became increasingly ambivalent as secularist politics became the dominant ideology (1950s–Mubarak era). Islam began to be increasingly re-framed; it was no longer being characterized as a religious norm that is binding in nature based on Divine law, but rather, as an ethical code. The perspective from which to understand Islam shifted.

Despite these variations in thought, it would be false to assume that, as a part of historical development, secularism will replace religion in an irreversible evolutionary process – the Islamic tradition consistently plays a vital and defensive role in the lives of Muslims in Egypt. It has across history been a source of social and cultural definition, and since the nineteenth century has played a definitive and defensive role. Instead, responses to such a predicament have constituted revivalism, reformism and the resurrection of a Muslim self and a Muslim society in the midst of a context undergoing modernist forces of change. Islam in modern Egypt continues, within circles of religious thought, to be viewed as a comprehensive theoretical and practical framework; it remains the origin and basin of faith. The battle to preserve and pronounce the pivotal role of Islam was expressed by religious institutions or organizations. Al-Azhar battled with the government over the changing face of both religious and educational institutions (1950s–present), and religious organizations, such as the Muslim Brotherhood (1920s–present), aimed at the reform of society (based on Islamic doctrine and principle) and for political representation.³ Since the Islamic resurgence of the 1970s, Islam has experienced a re-centralization, a movement from the peripheries of social, cultural and political organization to the centre. However, the colonial legacy of secular ideology, and current various manifestations of neo-colonial efforts to realize 'progress' in the Middle East, and the variant Muslim responses have all left irreversible marks on the intellectual landscape – it is currently an intellectual anomaly. Egyptian society has been penetrated by a wide array of referential points that inform members of society of parameters by which to measure various concerns, and of various levels of commitment to a variety of issues within Divine law. Furthermore, it has accepted and appropriated these various frames of reference.