INTRODUCTION

limadha ta'akhkhara al-muslimun wa-taqaddama ghayruhum?

Why have Muslims fallen behind,
and why have others forged ahead?
(Shakib Arslan, 1930)

SOME SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS AGO, a book bearing the title *Why Have Muslims Fallen Behind, and Why Have Others Forged Ahead?* was published in Cairo.[1] At the time, the Syrian Lebanese journalist, writer, and politician Shakib Arslan (1869–1946) was addressing a Muslim and Arab public—but his question has lost none of its sting today. It has, if anything, grown more acute and pressing because the situation in the Arab world, and in many parts of the wider Muslim domain, shows not much improvement compared with the West, but also compared with non-Western cultures—in Asia, for instance, especially in the Far East. In the Middle East, time seems to stand still. Indeed, in light of the development now sweeping other parts of the world, it seems to be falling behind.

How did it come to this? How could this occur in the Arab-Muslim world? Is this lamentable situation exogenous, arising because of Western culture's dominance and its subversive effects on the region? Or is it endogenous? Does it come down to economics or to politics? Or is it a result of religion or of culture? And is there a remedy? What needs to be done?

These questions, pressing as they are for the Middle East and for the wider Muslim world, cannot be answered adequately, much less conclusively, here or indeed anywhere. They are too complex to yield simple or

facile answers. Still, these questions continue to be raised, not always openly, often hesitantly, sometimes even shamefacedly. Questions about the condition of the Arab-Muslim world, especially when posed by Westerners, are liable to be deemed offensive, as if, right from the outset, they imply an unspoken, disparaging judgment of Islam—a civilization that for centuries was anathema to Christendom and the wider West.[2]

Any concern about the Middle East and its inhabitants' lived experience arouses suspicion—suspicion, as it happens, that is quite uncalled for, despite being deeply ingrained today in the West. For far too long, Christendom and the West as its secular garb generally have regarded the religion, culture, and civilization of Islam as constituting the ultimate Other. At best, East and West have been familiar aliens: simultaneously close and far apart. Over time, this relationship of constant proximity engendered its own set of images, which depicted the Orient, Islam, and Arabs in an unfavorable light. It was important for Muslims to repudiate such images of themselves that had been formatted by others, especially when these had evidently hardened into a canon.

The Palestinian American literary scholar Edward Said outlined what this canon entailed in his book *Orientalism*, published in the late 1970s. In it, Said took on the body of Western scholarship concerning the "Orient" and Islam, addressing himself to specialists and the general public alike. Since then, the term *Orientalism* has been deemed derogatory, referring to an academically shaped attitude toward the East in general and toward Islam in particular, in which Westerners rewrite the "Orient" (and Islam) in light of their image of the Other, only to disparage what they have rewritten. Said argued that the scholarship amassed in this dubious undertaking had, in effect, advanced the West's dominance and penetration of the region. In essence, he was mounting a critique of the notion of a canon of Oriental scholarship as a necessary first step toward intellectual and cultural decolonization.[3]

With his thesis of a Western "Orientalizing" canon—a thesis that, however accurate in certain respects, is nevertheless questionable overall—Said put his finger on a fatal weakness in the traditional academic representation of the Other. To be sure, much in the arsenal of scholarship on the Orient and Islam was in need of critical overhaul and revision. But in the years since Said wrote his seminal work, this has largely happened;

indeed, it has at times overshot the mark. So the problem Said bequeathed to posterity is now situated elsewhere: his critique of the West's mode of imaging the Orient has succeeded all too well, and this success has not always benefited the people of the region. One can go further: Said's views have abetted an unholy alliance between *premodern* conditions still prevalent in the Middle East and an apologetic *postmodern* discourse that has established itself in the West.

The unfortunate effect of this alliance has been to withhold from Middle Easterners the fruits of modernity, which is to say their experience of the present. It is this present lost that prompts the painful question about the state of affairs in which the Arab and Muslim world finds itself entangled. This is the question that Shakib Arslan has spelled out so explicitly in the title of his book.

This book is something of an intervention, designed to transcend contemporary fault lines and to see the Muslim world's predicament with fresh eyes. It seeks to clarify the state of the Arab-Muslim East but not to genuflect to the pieties of postmodern discourse. The questions it raises are chiefly related to the past, although their implications resonate in the present.

My concern with the Middle East is both historical and political. It grows out of my involvement with the region over many years, out of my intellectual participation in its fate. My aim is to revisit questions linked to an earlier interest of mine: the fate and the social fabric of the people living there. I do not deny that interest in this subject has been related to political projects that have sought to induce radical change. And yet those projects, even in their day, generated the very questions that now perplex us: questions of development, modernity, secularization, and emancipation.[4]

These radical political inclinations are no more. Their proponents spoke in the then not yet discredited categories of the great worldviews of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—freedom and equality, socialism and communism, Marxism and psychoanalysis. The traditions urged with such radical intent and in such multiple guises were indeed those of the West, especially the Enlightenment. Cloaked in a seemingly anti-Western rhetoric, the project of radical change indeed sought to

inject these traditions into the Middle East. Nothing came of it, however. But the traditions they represented—and this beyond all time-bound ideological distortions—still supply a useful compass for navigating the present crisis in the region.

Prompted by pressing political issues, two areas suggested themselves for close scrutiny. One was the Palestinian conflict; the other was the continuity of the prevailing central state power in the Arab Middle East and the striking weaknesses of everything related to civil institutions. The first area of study fed into the second by asking how it came about that the legal guarantees regarding possession of land in the Middle East were so poorly articulated. Control of land, as well as the legal and institutional arrangements put in place to ensure that control, was in flux.[5]

The second area of study was the role of state, society, and property in the Middle East. Framing it in terms of the history of institutions and social structures, I sought to explain the striking preponderance of the power of the central state. Paradoxically, because of its autonomous character, the state, for all its capacity to be the stronghold of power, is structurally weak because it is insulated from any changes or transformations society potentially might create. When changes *are* instigated, they are top-down, decreed and enforced by state power. They are administrative and by nature authoritarian, and they involve subordinating the population.[6]

Some of the language used in this book is drawn from a different time, which is not a bad thing. Even if current thought has shifted away from "society" to "culture," the old categories have not lost their explanatory power, especially with regard to cultures and societies that are struggling to cope with modernity or (as in the case of Muslim countries, particularly in the Middle East) have not performed up to the expectations modernity demands. It is instructive to try to explore such questions without instantly and automatically invoking religion as the cause.

Culture, however, gets its due in this undertaking—culture in the sense of "soft" phenomena such as belief and ethics, law and conscience. Concerning our subject, there is no way to evade these questions. They must be raised either covertly or overtly, because in the Muslim world, the question of culture seems thoroughly imbued with the sacred.

The presence of the sacred as studied in this book is less related to the religious sphere in the narrow sense (that is, theology, dogma, or liturgy)

than with the burning omnipresence of transcendence in all aspects of life—and precisely where Western thinking would least expect it. Thus the sacred, as construed here, is an anthropological energy of sorts that needs to be culturally differentiated, temporally delimited, and institutionally regulated if it is to be rendered bearable. Such delimitations of the sacred, including even its partial profanation, are resorted to in a lengthy process of disenchanting the world, a process embodied in secularization.

Secularization is a process of partitioning and diversifying a social order that once happened to be an integral whole and from whose core the sacred radiated. In the process of secularization, that whole dissolves into discrete spheres of inner and outer, private and public, holy and profane. In this process, the divine sovereign is transformed into worldly procedures; multiple separate powers replace the absolute integrity of the sacred in meaning as well as in function.

Secularization delimits the sacred. Without the constraints of secularization, the sacred is omnipresent in daily life and in all its routines: in the world of work, in the sphere of ethics and morals—and in politics, too. When the sacred is ubiquitous, the distinction between the inner and the outer worlds is transcended. In the domain of violence and the use of force, the energy of the sacred transgresses the human drive to preserve one's own biological existence. The distinction between worldly and heavenly is transgressed.

The violence particular to sacred time is not intrinsic to the religion of Islam. It is much more the result of a traumatic collision between two modes of life: the Western secular mode, based on the acceleration of time (that is to say modernity), and Muslim lifeworlds, which, while reflecting a traditional self-image of superiority, are characteristically impregnated with the sacred and therefore based on the deceleration of time.

My aim is not to write a history of Arabs and Muslims, or, for that matter, of the Middle East. Instead, I explore questions of development (or, more precisely, of why it has been hampered) in the domain of Muslim culture and civilization. Moreover, this phenomenon became visible in the early modern period, when massive transformations were discernible in the West. The emerging contrast between the West and the Muslim world is diagnosed as the foundational cause of the present crisis. Although

analytical in its approach, this historical perspective is infused with empathy for its subject. This is not a contradiction because empathy is a means of understanding.

This book is composed of six chapters. They follow a timeline, inducting the reader into issues central to the malaise with which I began. Chapter 1 deals with the present. It examines a recent review of this hampered development in the Arab world. The document in question is the *Arab Human Development Report*, issued by the United Nations for the first time in 2002. This picture of the Arab world sketched in dry statistics may serve as a stimulus to tackle historical questions from the more distant past.

Moving from the present day to the recent past, chapter 2 foregrounds 1924, the year when the Turkish Republic, arisen from the ashes of the Ottoman Empire, abolished Islamic institutions of long standing, notably the caliphate. The deepening crisis into which this plunged the Muslim world spread to adjoining areas such as India, which, prior to that subcontinent's partitioning in 1947, had the largest concentration of Muslims in the world. The situation in British India after the 1920s matters for our inquiry, since the relationship between the Hindu and the Muslim population became increasingly troubled as independence approached. From this fertile soil sprang the first shoots of an interpretation of Islam that would later be characterized as radical. Moreover, the topography—the matrix of time and space—of the crisis that struck the Muslim world in the 1920s and 1930s yields insight into even earlier events. I will show how deeply this crisis was rooted in the circumstances of the nineteenth century and how it was aggravated by the rivalries of the Great Powers, playing the "Great Game" in the area encompassing the North-West Frontier and Central Asia, and also by the "Eastern Question," which sealed the fate of the Ottoman Empire.

The causes of this crisis lie in the different trajectories taken in the early modern era by the West and the Muslim world. We will explore this in chapter 3, which raises the question of secularization and modernity in relation to one of its core aspects—language and printing—and pursues this issue down to the present. The mechanical reproduction of texts marks, as much as anything does, the advent of the modern era. We will ask why, in the Muslim world, the introduction of the printing press was delayed for about three hundred years. Did this delay impede the spread

of knowledge, and thus development? What role did the sacred play in this? And what kind of profanation was wrought by the mechanical reproduction of writing? At issue is the presence of the sacred in the very pores and interstices of Arabic writing, and in the language itself, especially in the Muslim's holy book, the Koran. The presence of the sacred is glossed here as a barrier to the kind of reform of language and usage that is the sine qua non of modern development. We go on to ask whether reform is being hampered today by some sacred taboo analogous to the earlier Muslim resistance to printing.

The early modern era was a time of radical change, as medieval Christendom evolved into what we now recognize as Western culture. The Renaissance, the invention of printing, the Reformation, and the "discovery" of the New World—these upended the entire medieval worldview. Chapter 4 discusses how little this process was remarked upon in the Muslim world. That this was so may be linked to the massive expansion of the Ottoman Empire then under way and its unquestioned domination of the trade routes in the Old World. Meanwhile, in the West the riches of the New World, in the form of gold and silver, had amplified the emerging new economic order of mercantilism. The dynamic unleashed by the mercantile spirit crafted a work ethic that would be fully developed only in the later industrial age. If the Ottoman Empire, and with it the Muslim world, managed to remain untouched by this early development, it would be drawn into this whirl at a later date and under unequal terms. Whether the Ottoman Empire was drifting into decline or stagnation, or was even on the brink of collapse—a question prompted by an emerging gap, then becoming increasingly evident, between the institutional, technological, and scientific cultures of East and West—was repeatedly debated from the late sixteenth century onward, especially among Ottoman intellectuals and bureaucrats.

Chapter 5 shows why and how the central government regulated "society" in the Middle East. The form and processes of the worlds of work and social life were generally determined by institutions and legal ordinances imbued with the sacred. From the beginnings of Islam to the end of the Middle Ages (that is, Islam's classical era), the conjoining of political power and economic benefit was pursued by means of institutions whose purpose was to extract riches in the form of booty, taxes, and rents; in a later age,

there were also ground rents for oil resources. The accumulation of property, the limits that were applied to the use of capital, and, in particular, the form of labor and its temporal regulation are discussed in this chapter with reference to the Arab-Muslim Middle Ages. The point of thus framing our discussion is that Muslim civilization was then unquestionably superior to Western Christendom. So why did this scenario not yield what we now recognize as development? Why did the high culture of the classical age of Islam not lead, as analogous historical tendencies later would in the West, to an era of Muslim protomodernity—despite the fact that in that earlier Muslim world, elements of "bourgeois society" were not hard to find? Was this due to external factors, such as the incursions of the Mongols or the Black Death? Or did it result rather from the characteristic unmediated domination of the fabric of social life by central rule?

Chapter 6 concludes the study by asking how time and history are represented in Muslim civilization. What reading of history did the Arab-Muslim world develop? How did it see itself in relation to the flow of time? Quite unlike the historical thought developed in the West—namely, as something tied inextricably to movement and development—within the context of Islam, the concept of time has been "sealed off," as it were, by the sacred. Does the phenomenon of decelerated time express material circumstances or perhaps a cultural anthropology particular to the Middle East? Or does the key lie in Islam as a religion? And just how do the material and the cultural worlds relate to each other? Does sacred time simply mirror stasis, the absence of change? Or does a historical perspective on time have an impact on social change? It is interesting that the core of historical thought in Islam is characterized by the understanding of time not as a linear development directed to the future, but rather as a return to an idealized, utopian past. Representations of ideal time, of the good and the righteous, are imbued with elements of divine law, for it is by obeying divine law that one is assured of leading a righteous life and, thus, fulfilling "history." Hence the juxtaposition of divine law and profane historical thought as arrested versus dynamic time.

Judaism, Christianity, and Islam are revealed religions; Islam and Judaism are religions of the law. Because both hark back to divine law, they are more in affinity with each other than with the third monotheistic religion

of revelation, Christianity. Indeed, so pronounced is this affinity that Judaism and Islam are virtually interchangeable. This common ground serves as an epistemic yardstick, especially when comparisons, inferences, or analogies hold out the promise of enhanced insight. If, however, there is a core difference between these two religions of the law, it is that two thousand years of Diaspora life have equipped Jews to live in two temporal orders: Jewish time and that of the local culture in whose midst Jews happen to be. Having to live in, and between, different times enabled Jews to develop a dual modus vivendi analogous to separated spheres of life that later evolved with secularization. This strategy of separation was not available to Islam. As a religion embracing law, power, and domination, Islam is an intrinsically political religion.[7]

The meaning of terms and concepts applied here is ambiguous and manifold. Take, for example, the term *Islam*. When it is used as a noun, the emphasis is on the sacred. Its adjectival form (*Islamic*), and even more the related adjective *Muslim*, both show a semantic shift toward more worldly meanings, whereas the noun *Muslim*, especially when used in its plural form (*Muslims*), again carries greater religious weight. But *Islam* can also stand for a civilization and culture, with the sacred held firmly at arm's length. This is chiefly the case when used in combination with other words and meanings—as, for example, in the title of Bernard Lewis's book on Middle Eastern Jews, *The Jews of Islam*. What *Islam* means here is less a religion than a social order, including a way of life, an art, a culture, a civilization in the widest sense.

The use of *Muslim* and *Arab* as attributions requires comment as well. Not all Muslims are Arabs, just as not all Arabs are Muslims. During the high tide of Arab nationalism in the twentieth century, however, homage was paid to an "ethnifying" (or even entirely ethnic) notion of Arabness. When *Arabs and Muslims* was put forward as a conjoined term, it related to those who belong both to the Arab nation and to the Islamic *umma*, the universal community of believers, drawing ethnic Arabness closer to the Muslim faith. As we can see, the differences are fluid, and this fluidity inclines sometimes more to the Muslim, or the religious, pole, and sometimes more to the national, or the ethnic, pole. Attributions often so closely approximate as to fuse: thus the terms *Arab* and *Muslim* may be used in the same context as synonyms.

The adjective *Arabic* can also describe different affiliations, or even be dissociated from *Arabs* as an ethnic term of belonging. For example, Middle Eastern Jews who have a strong sense of affiliation with Arabic language, literature, and culture can be referred to as *Arabic Jews* or even as *Arab Jews*, but not as *Jewish Arabs*.[8]

This book is not intended to be an academic treatise; rather it is an essay and, as such, is aimed at a broad readership. This is reflected in its manner of presentation. Thus the reference notes do not aspire to even approximate completeness. They are mere indications; only in exceptional cases do I make explicit reference to the scholarly literature.

I would like to express my gratitude to the academic and nonacademic staff of the Simon Dubnow Institute for Jewish History and Culture at the University of Leipzig, who aided me in many ways as I put the finishing touches on the text. I also thank my students in the History Department of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem for many inspiring discussions, chiefly on the question of secularization, and also the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, where I spent the academic year 2004–2005 as a member writing this book.