CHAPTER TWELVE

LIBERAL CRITICS, ‘ULAMA’ AND THE DEBATE ON ISLAM  
IN THE CONTEMPORARY ARAB WORLD*

Muhammad Abu Samra

INTRODUCTION

In the mid-1960s a small group of Arab intellectuals engaged in a new discourse concerning what they saw as a crisis that dominated the political, social and cultural life of Arab societies. At first, these intellectuals diagnosed the crisis as a lack of progress in achieving the objectives of Pan-Arab nationalism. A few of them criticized the dominance of traditional religious thinking in Arab societies. In consequence of the military defeat of 1967 every aspect of Arab life was submitted to harsh examination. The defeat has been perceived not only as a military one but equally as a social and cultural one. The rise of Islamic radicalism and its political and social programs at the end of the seventies deepened the sense of pessimism among liberals favoring progress. The tyranny of Arab regimes, the weakness of democracy, and other social and economic failures made the crisis a comprehensive one.

In this frustrating reality and in light of the dominance of traditional Islamic values, liberal intellectuals turned to the study of Islam, its history, theology and scriptures. For them, the problem was not with Islam in itself (which they perceived as an important component of the society’s culture and identity) but rather with its dominant traditional understanding, which is considered an obstacle to the social and cultural modernization of Arab societies.

The liberals believe that a critical reinterpretation of Islam can contribute to the promotion of a social and political order based on such modern values as civil rights, equality, freedom of thought, and cultural and intellectual openness. Generally, liberals are socially and politically marginal in contemporary Arab societies; but their presence in the

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cultural sphere—such as the literary field, academia, and the written and electronic media—is remarkable. They are also actively engaged in diverse human rights and feminist organizations. Their views are communicated mainly through publications, symposia, and media programs and debates. Leaving aside the judicial prosecution and physical persecution that some of them have faced, those who promote Western projects for the democratization of the Arab world have increased the local and international public interest in their views and writings.

In a few cases these critics had been trained academically in the field of Islamic studies; they include Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, Khalil ‘Abd al-Karim, Muhammad ‘Abid al-Jabri and ‘Abd al-Majid al-Sharafi, among others. But most of the liberal critics lack formal academic training in Islamic studies. For example, Muhammad Sa’id al-‘Ashmawi is from the field of law; Fatima Marnissi is a sociologist; Fu’ad Zakariya, Sayyid Mahmud al-Qimni, Sadiq Jalal al-‘Azm and Khalil Ahmad Khalil specialize in philosophy; the academic training of Luwis ‘Awad is in English literature; Nawal al-Sa’dawi is a physician; Muhammad Shahrur is from the field of civil engineering; The academic specialization of Ahmad al-Baghdadi and Turki al-Hamad is in political science; Faraj Fuda (d. 1992) was an agronomist. And this list is only partial.1

Regardless of their academic, political and religious differences, these intellectuals have turned to the study of Islam because of social and political considerations rather than out of academic interest. They seek to submit Islamic scriptures and formative history to historical examination. They believe historical understanding can weaken and undermine the hegemonic ahistorical Islamic interpretations that constitute one of the causes of the cultural crisis in Arab society and pose an obstacle to the creation of a broad social basis of critical religious thought.