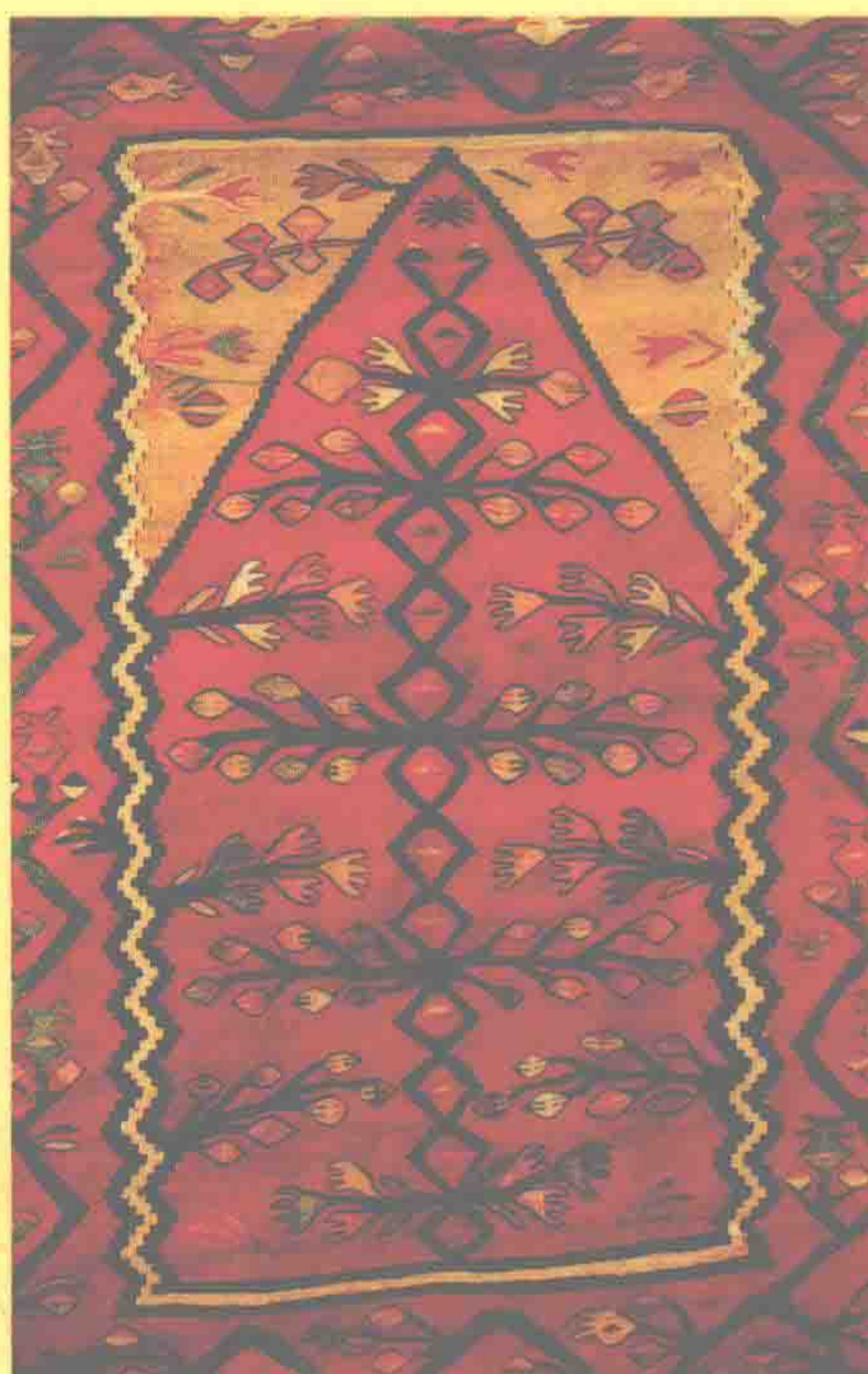


RAYMOND WILLIAM BAKER

Islam

WITHOUT FEAR



EGYPT
and the

NEW ISLAMISTS

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RAYMOND WILLIAM BAKER

H A R V A R D U N I V E R S I T Y P R E S S
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Designed by Gwen Nefsky Frankfeldt

*For Elaine, Sarah, Dorian, Madalyn, and Pamela,
who shared this voyage of knowing and loving*

O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of God is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And God has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).

—Quran, Surah: 49:13

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Introduction

This book tells the story of a group of centrist Islamist intellectuals who call themselves the “New Islamist Trend.” They think of their intellectual school as an outgrowth of the centrist Islamic mainstream, or *Wassatteyya*. The group is driven by a positive, mainstream vision which they affirm in thought and practice, rather than by defensive fears. Rooted in Egypt, the New Islamists address with considerable influence the broader Arab Islamic world. Their work poses the central question addressed in this book: whether an Islamic project of the center, speaking for an Islam without fear, can address effectively the demands of our global age.

The New Islamists first formulated the manifesto of their group in the early 1980s and circulated it widely among intellectuals. Because of adverse political conditions, however, the manifesto was not published until 1991 by its primary author, Kamal Abul Magd, an internationally known constitutional lawyer. The book, entitled *A Contemporary Islamic Vision*, immediately elicited widespread discussion. However, the most productive critique came somewhat later in 1994 from Sayyid Yassine, a highly respected public intellectual, director of the Al Ahram Center for Political and Strategic Studies, and an influential critic of the Islamic trend. The lively debate that ensued on the pages of the *al Ahram* newspaper between Yassine and Abul Magd introduces the major themes of this book.

Yassine begins with the important acknowledgment that the New Islamists, unlike other groups, “do not claim the role of spokespersons of Islam.” Instead, he comments approvingly, they “deliberately present their ideas as simply one available view, subject to public discussion.” Yassine then launches his critique by saying that he finds nothing that is “new” and little that is distinctively “Islamic” in the manifesto. He advances three of the most telling arguments typically made against Islamist moderates,

charging them with passive complicity in the violence of the extremists, totalizing and unrealistic ideological claims, and failure to respond in creative and novel ways to Egypt's pressing national needs. In a dismissive move characteristic of secular critics, he asks: "Wouldn't it be more worthy for the statement writers to highlight the criminal, extremist violence disguised by Islam and condemn it clearly and categorically?" In response, Abul Magd defends the statement as "a cry for salvation" and expresses regret that Yassine has failed to respond to the substance of this moderate program in favor of yet another attack on the extremists. However, recognizing that Yassine has stated a widespread criticism of the centrist Islamic project, mounted by critics in Egypt and abroad, Abul Magd seizes the moment to offer a spirited defense. "Yassine knows perfectly well," Abul Magd argues, "that I spent, together with the other authors of this statement, more than thirty years condemning violence and warning of its implications loudly and vigorously, while refuting the claims of the violent groups." The electric exchange between the two writers sets in sharp relief the core issues of the struggle for Islam, waged by secular Muslims, moderate Islamists, and violent extremists. This debate in *al Ahram* immediately captured the attention of Egypt's political class.¹

Given Islam's remarkable global importance, the debate deserves an even wider audience. In the second half of the twentieth century, the world witnessed a "return of religion" to challenge the secularization that had everywhere seemed an inevitable dimension of modernization. In Arab countries, this global phenomenon took the form of an "Islamic Awakening" that was advanced by varied Islamist currents, groups, and movements.² These Islamist forces ranged from quietists who focused on individual belief and ritual to extremists who sought to remake their societies along religious lines with the use of violence. In the Arab Islamic world the *Wassatteyya*, a broad centrist current, took shape between these extremes. This moderate Islamic mainstream eschewed the passivity of the religious quietists and called for the transformation of society along Islamic grounds. However, they categorically rejected violent methods as incompatible with the goals they sought. Their notions of both ends and means embodied the core values of Islam, notably justice. The transformation they envisioned as both process and goal must be consonant with these higher purposes at all stages. Rooted in the nineteenth-century work of such pioneers of renewal as Muhammad Abduh, this Islamic mainstream achieved its most enduring expression in the Muslim Brothers organization, founded in Egypt in 1928 by Hassan al Banna. The Brotherhood drew its mass strength from the middle class, especially its lower strata. By mid-century the Muslim Brothers had attracted approximately a million adher-

ents to their project of Islamic renewal as an antidote to decline. However, a clash with the Free Officer Movement of Gamal Abdul Nasser that seized power in 1952 led to the Brotherhood's repression by the mid-fifties and almost total eclipse for several decades. In the early 1980s, however, Anwar al Sadat released the Brothers from Egypt's jails and encouraged their activities in a circumscribed way as a counterbalance to his rivals on the left. Despite these manipulative intentions, it would be a mistake to see the return of the Muslim Brothers as simply the outcome of government maneuvers. The unexpected successes of the Brothers since their 1980s re-emergence owes a great deal more to the genuine appeal of their broad orientation toward Islamic renewal. The rebirth of the movement was a central chapter in the larger story of a worldwide reassertion of religion. While a marginal and violent minority of the Brothers took the extremist path during the years of repression, the mainstream, moderate current secured a recognized place in public and civic life with a conscious strategy of accommodation with the government and a program of peaceful social change. The resilience of the centrist Muslim Brothers provided testimony to the continued relevance of Islamic renewal as a way to come to grips with the contemporary world.

The Brotherhood was the movement out of which the New Islamist Trend emerged as an independent critical force, shaped as much by reaction to the shortcomings and failures as by the successes of the Muslim Brothers. Nevertheless, the New Islamist Trend owed a great deal to the organizational and intellectual work of the Brotherhood and, in particular, to the inspiration of Hassan al Banna.

Today, more than two decades since Egypt's New Islamists first cohered as an intellectual school, it is possible to take the measure of their work. The task is an important one. Egypt plays a role of unique importance in the Arab Islamic world. Because it is the most modernized of the Arab states, with a cosmopolitan image shaped for international tourism, Egypt's deeply rooted Islamic identity and character are often obscured. In fact, Egypt has been a seedbed for a wide range of both extremist and moderate interpretations of Islam that have inspired movements with effects far beyond its borders. However, it is reform Islam that has the deepest roots in Egypt's extremely complex culture and history. There is no better place to assess the struggle within Islam that sets the Islamic mainstream against violent extremists. In the wake of September 11, questions have emerged with new urgency that can perhaps best be addressed from this critical Egyptian vantage point: What are the prospects of reform Islam today? Is Islamic moderation on key cultural, social, and political questions possible? What is the shape of the future that centrist Islam promises? The New

Islamists have given clear and compelling answers to all of these questions on both theoretical and practical planes. For the most part, however, language barriers and cultural differences have meant that these important aspects of mainstream Islam that flow from New Islamist interpretations have been largely ignored in the West.

Like other great religious traditions, Islam can be grasped in the most meaningful way through the human interpretations of the divine message that in turn inform belief and behavior. Religion is in this sense a lived interpretation, and it is people who make that possible. The central figures of the New Islamist School who appear in the following pages bring the possibilities of centrist Islam to life. Egypt's New Islamists include individuals whose writings are known throughout the Arab world and the larger Islamic circle. Yusuf al Qaradawy, for example, is frequently identified as perhaps the most influential Islamic scholar in the Islamic world today. Fahmy Huwaidy has undoubtedly the clearest and best-known journalistic voice for Islamist perspectives heard today throughout the Arab world. Many regard the late Shaikh Muhammad al Ghazzaly as one of the best-loved religious figures of twentieth-century Islam. As a school of centrist thinkers, the New Islamists represent a major intellectual force in Egypt, the Arab Islamic world, and beyond.

There are no sound scholarly reasons for the critical gap in the Western understanding of Islam for which they speak; the historical record is there to be surveyed and assessed. The New Islamists have done more than raise speculative questions. In the impressive body of their scholarly work and the record of their active roles in public life, these remarkable and diverse individuals—lawyers, a judge and historian, a journalist, and several major religious scholars—have produced a reformist elaboration of the role of the arts and education in Islam; the character of Islamic community and the ways in which it should be regulated; gender relations; the status and rights of non-Muslims; the nature of Islamic banking and economics; the relationship of state and society; and Islam's global role. All of these issues are addressed in a recognizable and understandable social context. Precisely because these Islamic scholars have maintained an organic relationship to their society as individuals and as a group, their work can be situated in the modern history of Egypt and the Middle East. Non-specialists as well as specialists can appreciate the character and importance of their contributions.

Each of this book's three sections on the New Islamist vision for culture, society, and politics opens with an introductory piece—a commentary from the abundant cultural critique, satirical and insightful, that is standard fare for Egypt's intellectuals, including the New Islamists. In very hu-

man terms, these brief commentaries set major themes for the analysis that follows, often displaying the humor that Egyptians characteristically use to deal with the trying circumstances of their personal and national lives. The section on the cultural realm of education, treated in Chapter 1, and the arts, discussed in Chapter 2, opens with a satirical piece that makes an imaginative link between the diversionary excesses of popular culture, represented by Egypt's most famous belly dancer, and the defensive and ineffectual ruling establishment. The chapters on society—Chapter 3, dealing with community, and Chapter 4, on the economy—are introduced by a review of an essay that lampoons the distortions of Islamist extremists of all kinds who divert attention from the national agenda to secondary issues, like exaggerated Islamic dress, and in the process mask the humane face that the New Islamists seek to reveal. Finally, an assessment of a brief satirical essay, very much in touch with the popular mood and New Islamist political judgments, introduces Chapter 5, on politics, and Chapter 6, on foreign policy. The essay captures the sense of profound disillusionment that Egyptians feel with the emptiness of nearly all aspects of political and civic life, thereby opening an important space for mainstream Islam as understood by the New Islamists to articulate alternatives outside of politics and beyond civil society.

Kamal Abul Magd concluded his exchange with Sayyid Yassine by pointing to the history of the New Islamists' accomplishments: their numerous publications on fundamental issues of culture, society, politics, and the economy, and their active interventions in public life on behalf of their principles. There is no better introduction to that recent history than the events of the Cairo Book Fair of 1992, to which I now turn.

The crowds gather early and soon fill the large hall, spilling out onto the pavilion to occupy the surrounding spaces of the newly opened fairground in greater Cairo. The occasion is the 1992 Book Fair, the twenty-fourth in a tradition that always makes the Cairo opening an important cultural event, and occasionally something more.³ The presence of Shaikh Muhammad al Ghazzaly, one of Egypt's renowned religious leaders and the best known of the New Islamists to ordinary Egyptians, guarantees that large numbers of people will come. When Shaikh Ghazzaly led the prayers on the occasion of the great Islamic celebrations, as many as a quarter of a million people from all walks of life would gather in the public squares of Cairo.

This day, however, Shaikh Ghazzaly will not lead prayers. In the featured event of the Fair, Ghazzaly, as a centrist Islamist, is to debate the question of an Islamic versus a secular state with one of the most prominent of Egypt's secularists, the writer Farag Foda.⁴ With Ghazzaly to represent the



The late Shaikh Muhammad al Ghazzaly, regarded as one of the leading twentieth-century scholars of Islam. (photograph courtesy of Muhammad Abdul Qudus)

Islamist trend, but very much in his shadow, stands the head of the Muslim Brothers, Mamun al Hudaiby.⁵

From the moment the printed program for the 1992 Fair appears in the newspaper *al Ahram*, the attention of the political class focuses on the dialogue between the Islamists and the secularists. Intellectuals throughout the country immediately grasp the significance of the event: the Book Fair debate gives a tangible, contemporary expression to the competing claims of two national projects that have vied for the soul of Egypt for over a century. Shaikh Muhammad al Ghazzaly embodies the belief of Egypt's Islamist centrists that only a state reformed on the foundations of Islam can provide Egyptians with an authentic yet modern and democratic political community. Farag Foda represents the secularist principle that a "religious" state could not provide the kind of government required by the conditions of the late twentieth century.

Outside the hall young men, many bearded, predominate in the crowd. As the numbers swell, the uniformed police become more assertive, guid-

ing the newcomers to ever-wider circles around the building, while keeping the approaches to the hall clear. The crowd accepts this direction. The word spreads that Shaikh Ghazzaly is already inside. Periodically, the police-escorted cars of dignitaries make their way slowly to the entrances, and the young men guess the names of a distinguished intellectual, a celebrity, or a high government official. The crowds react most when Farag Foda arrives. He is recognized immediately, having made himself a public figure very clearly identified with an assertive secularism, pronounced in the most uncompromising terms. With his usual dramatic flair, Farag Foda arrives only when the crowds are in place. He makes his way confidently through the front entrance, accompanied by his elegantly dressed family.

Strange shadows cast themselves over the event, not yet recognized as ominous but felt with some uneasiness on that winter day. When small groups of bearded young men begin to cluster in animated circles, it is not immediately clear that they are simply assembling for group prayers. At the same time, an unannounced but easily recognized presence threatens to stifle the promised national dialogue. The uniformed police are not alone in representing the regime on the Book Fair grounds. As the crowds grow, the secret police make their presence felt. Toughs dressed in street clothes, armed with clubs not so subtly concealed in their clothing, periodically emerge, at one point ringing the main entrance. Directions to the swollen crowd take the form of menacing pushes and prods. The bearded young men grow sullen. They begin the rhythmic chanting of "God is Great, God is Great," at times associated with militant actions. The stage appears set for confrontation. Shaikh Ghazzaly then intervenes over the loudspeaker system, stating firmly that he dislikes such exclamations. He immediately announces the beginning of the noontime prayer. The young men drop the chants and begin to prepare for the communal prayer, while the secret police slowly blend back into the crowd. Dialogue, with prayer as prelude, preempts violence.

For three hours, the debate over an Islamic versus a secular order proceeds without a single incident. Ghazzaly speaks first, while the potential for violence still hangs in the air. He begins by reviewing the history of Western incursions and depredations that goes to the heart of the story of the West in the Islamic world. Ghazzaly reminds his audience that Egyptians won the hundred-year battle against the violent usurpations of the colonizers. But they did so, he cautions, at disabling costs to themselves and their precious Islamic heritage. "We were left," Ghazzaly unsparingly intones, "with deformed personalities" and "far from our heritage." Their confidence shattered, too many Egyptians sought to adopt the ways of the conquerors. Such an embrace of the secularism of the West, Ghazzaly

warns, eroded the sense of identity and belonging that Islam affords. Egyptians will find success in the modern world “only by renewing our connection to Islam and by ridding ourselves of educational, legislative, and intellectual colonialism.” To this end, Ghazzaly holds out the promise of the Islamic state and rejects the notion of imitating the secular regimes of the West.

Do Western societies really offer models worthy of blind imitation? Ghazzaly refuses to overlook the flaws of even the most powerful of the secular societies of the West, citing in particular the moral laxity, criminal violence, and double standards of American society. Why, he asks, do Americans tolerate the collapse of moral values and ravages of poverty reflected in so many violent crimes in their cities? Responding to the familiar attacks in the West that equate Islam with obscurantism, he states that “Islamic government is not against reason because such government will perform its duties according to the Holy Quran and to reason.” Ghazzaly distinguishes sharply between an “Islamic” and a “religious” state and refuses the identification between the two. He adds that centrist Islamists want to renew the roots of community in Islam, which had established a powerful civilization fourteen centuries ago, because such is “the demand of the nation, and failing to realize it will mean denial of the people’s will.”

With a deft gesture to the enormous prestige of Ghazzaly, Farag Foda prefaces his remarks with an admonition to those assembled that interruptions and outbursts from the floor signal a lack of confidence in those on the podium who represent their point of view. Foda then quickly advances the basic premises of his case. He insists first that his remarks in no way bear on the religious commitments of Muslims. What he does question is rulership in the name of Islam, identifying this claim as one of “competing visions, disparate judgments, and disagreement.” He then establishes the flawed character, both historically and in current circumstances, of self-described Islamic governments and movements. Foda quotes Ghazzaly himself in a 1987 interview in *Rose al Yusuf* magazine, where the latter wrote that only in the era of the immediate successors of Muhammad was true Islamic *Sharia* [the provisions from Quran and *Sunnah* to regulate human behavior] applied. Otherwise, violent power politics marked the successive eras of the Islamic nation.

Asking his listeners to bear these statements in mind, Foda argues that if true Islamic *Sharia* was applied only during the times of the first caliphs, then clearly history bears witness against the Islamist position that relies in the first instance on the application of *Sharia* to provide for just Islamic rule. He points to Iran and Sudan as states whose attempts to create religious states based on *Sharia* have degenerated into massive repression and bloodshed. Since the Islamists have neither detailed programs nor compel-

ling policies to address the problems of the country, Foda states, "Egypt should never put its destiny in the hands of those who have only slogans and illusions, negated by history and by the harsh realities of neighboring countries." Foda points to the rash of violent crimes committed under Islamic banners, linking them to the precedent set by the "secret society" of the Muslim Brothers in the 1930s and 1940s. He also warns against the threat to national unity posed by the idea of a religious state. Foda categorically rejects the idea that the Christian minority should ever experience the injustice of being governed by the religion of the majority; he insists instead on national cohesion grounded in a non-religious principle of citizenship. He cites the outbreaks of violence with the Sadat assassination and the Gulf War as dangerous times when both sides to these conflicts justified their position in Islamic terms. Foda warns that religious faith should be preserved from the corruption of the political realm. He concludes with a call to continue the dialogue.⁶

Shaikh Ghazzaly focuses his response on the issue of *Sharia*, clarifying his point that, although *Sharia* was fully applied only by the rightly guided caliphs, even its imperfect implementation during the Ummayyad, Abbasid, and Ottoman eras of Islamic history secured the impressive advances in civilization made during these periods. Ghazzaly establishes the link between *Sharia* and the broad Islamic civilizational heritage rather than the narrow political order or some misleading notion of religious law. For Ghazzaly and the New Islamists the distinction between an Islamic state and a religious one is critical, though all too often obscured by the secularists. Islam as a civilization is inclusive and tolerant, far from the closed and rigid ideas that the notion of a religious state invokes. Ghazzaly concludes his references to Islamic history with the reminder that the West, in its own drive to progress, drew on the heritage of those Islamic civilizations in learning and especially in science, including medicine, to secure its own advance.

Thus the debate, with these notable disagreements over the idea of an Islamic versus a religious state and over the character and role of *Sharia*, comes to an end. As one reporter at the Book Fair puts it, the debate is important because "an audience used to hearing only one point of view, today was able to hear two opinions." He adds that "by the end of the debate the tension and the inclination toward violence had disappeared, showing that the present generation sorely needs real dialogue and not the monologue that has prevailed for more than ten years."⁷

The exchanges between Shaikh Ghazzaly and Farag Foda dominated media coverage of the 1992 Book Fair. Just as important, however, was the seminar given by Kamal Abul Magd where he formally introduced the

manifesto of the New Islamist School, *A Contemporary Islamic Vision*. The manifesto defined the moral and intellectual space from which Ghazzaly had argued for the Islamic, rather than religious, state. Written in 1980 and circulated at that time to a hundred and fifty Islamic and other intellectuals for discussion, the manifesto was first published only in 1991 and then again in 1992 to coincide with the Book Fair. The core group of new Islamists, including the Islamic scholar Yusuf al Qaradawy, the journalist Fahmy Huwaidy, the lawyer and specialist on *Sharia* Muhammad Selim al Awa, and the judge and historian Tareq al Bishry, in addition to Ghazzaly and Abul Magd, had all contributed ideas that were integrated into its major themes.

Although political conditions did not allow publication of the statement in 1980, the decade of the eighties was supportive in other ways of the promise of the Islamic centrists in Egypt. Looking back over those years in January 1990, Fahmy Huwaidy, the spokesperson for the New Islamists in *al Ahram*, pointed especially to victories in electoral politics and to the strong presence of the New Islamists in professional associations. Huwaidy tempered these grounds for optimism, however, with worry over lack of discipline and proper education in the growing Islamic body in Egypt and elsewhere. He warned against the use of Islamic symbols in un-Islamic ways, which confused those within the movement and alarmed those outside. Huwaidy linked the anarchic growth of the Islamic body to the failure of Arab regimes to make a decisive civilizational choice, leaving Arab societies divided between a Westernizing elite and masses deeply attached to Islam. Huwaidy also drew attention to potentially hostile ideological writings in the West, noting that influential Western intellectuals were announcing the global triumph of the Western liberal idea, while hinting in ominous ways that the Islamic world might be a recalcitrant exception and therefore a target. This ideological stance, Huwaidy cautioned, might well translate into hostile actions, whether by external forces or by the political regimes linked to them.⁸

Despite these cautionary notes, the New Islamist School hoped to build on the gains for centrist Islam registered in the 1980s. They moved decisively at the Book Fair of 1992 into the public space now open to them, asserting a new claim to intellectual leadership for which the careful work of the eighties had prepared them. The featured presence of the New Islamists at the Book Fair seems to confirm the more optimistic strands in Huwaidy's analysis.

In his seminar remarks at the Book Fair, Abul Magd advanced the claim that those who focus on the militant Islamic trends inevitably underestimate the growing appeal of the Islamic centrist mainstream, or



Kamal Abul Magd, Professor of Law at Cairo University and an international legal authority, admired and respected as an Islamist thinker. (photograph courtesy of *al Ahram* newspaper)

Wassatteyya, with which the New Islamists identified. The strength of the *Wassetteyya*, in Abul Magd's view, flows from its secure grounding in a comprehensive and substantive understanding of the higher purposes of Islam. Abul Magd stressed that, although the "angry trends" of political Islam dominate headlines, the *Wassatteyya* is winning supporters all over the Arab Islamic world who look to this centrist trend to lead a real renaissance based on Islam, rightly understood. The *Wassatteyya*, in their view, provides the inspiration for their contemporary vision of Islamic reform and renewal, inclusive and open to the world.⁹

For the New Islamists, the 1992 Book Fair was more than an opportunity to debate the secularists; it was an exemplary forum through which