

Part I

Introduction



The Middle East: Assumptions and Problems

The Middle East in Western Eyes

Writing a general book about the Middle East is a daunting task, not only because of the enormous complexity of the subject, but also because of the pervasive prejudice in the West against the region and its peoples. In recent years, the Iranian revolution, the war with Iraq, and the rise of Osama bin Laden have all served to fuel western anxiety, and the situation has been exacerbated by the long-term influx of Muslim immigrants into those European countries that want their labor, but do not want to accommodate their culture or give them full rights as citizens. Events such as the uproar in France over Muslim girls wearing headscarves in school and xenophobic violence directed against Muslim workers in Germany indicate the present extent of western dread of and hatred toward Islam.

Contemporary western enmity, however, is not simply a consequence of modern conflict. It is a reflection of the thousand-year rivalry between the Muslim Middle East and Christian Europe for economic, political and religious hegemony over the western hemisphere and beyond – a contest dominated until recently by Islam. Through the sixteenth century, Europe was terrified by the specter of a reverse crusade, a Muslim invasion into the heart of Christendom that would repeat the earlier Islamic conquest of Spain. These fears seemed all too well-founded as the Ottoman army, under the leadership of Sulieman the Magnificent, marched on Vienna in 1529 and arrived before the city walls in September. Only the reluctance of the Turkish troops to spend the winter away from home prevented their victory, and it appeared likely they would return again the next year to resume their siege, reduce Vienna to a satrapy, and threaten the whole heartland of Europe.

It was not until 1571 that the myth of the Sultan's invincibility was dispelled as Hapsburg galleys defeated the Ottoman fleet in the Battle of Lepanto. But this setback hardly ended the Ottoman challenge to

Christendom. Only in 1606 did the Sultan deign to treat a European power as an equal, signing a treaty with the Hapsburgs to end a costly stalemate on the Danube. As late as 1683 another vast Ottoman army again besieged Vienna, and was only vanquished due to its lack of heavy artillery. Soon thereafter, in 1699, the treaty of Karlowitz obliged the Sultan to give up Transylvania and Hungary – the first time Ottoman territory was returned to Christian control. Although not recognized at the time, the balance of power had decisively shifted. The Ottoman retreat marked the end of Muslim conquest in Europe and the beginning of the slow development of western domination over the Middle East; domination definitively signaled by Napoleon’s conquest of Egypt in 1798. The great Ottoman Empire, which had aspired to convert the world to Islam, now was obliged to look to the West for inspiration; instead of being Europe’s nemesis, it soon would be its “sick man.”

Although from the modern western vantage point the eventual victory over the Ottomans seems inevitable, at the time the reverse result appeared more likely. Unlike the fragmented, provincial, superstitious, and often incompetent European dynasties, the Ottoman Empire had a centralized Imperial court, capable leadership, a relatively efficient bureaucracy, and a magnificent, loyal and well-organized army. Given these circumstances, the “natural” triumph of the European powers was actually far more problematic than it now seems, and the panic of sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe was well justified.

The historical memory of this great and costly struggle for domination remains potent in the Occidental cultural unconscious, and has most recently been summoned up in what used to be Yugoslavia by the self-styled protectors of Christendom who slaughtered their Muslim neighbors in order to defend Europe against a new Islamic *jihad* (holy war). The hysterical fear of Muslim “fundamentalism” that is so wide spread today in Europe and America arises, at least in part, from the same historical source, and takes its place within a venerable tradition of the demonization of Islam itself. The Prophet Muhammad, regarded by Muslims as the Messenger of God, has regularly been portrayed in western literature as a lecherous and grasping villain, as an agent of the devil, and even the anti-Christ. No other leader of any great religion has ever been so systematically vilified and reviled or treated with greater contempt in the West than Muhammd, nor has any other religion, save perhaps Judaism, been held in such scorn.¹

Simultaneous with the disparagement of the Muslim religious annunciation, the civic life of the Middle East has also been roundly condemned by western theorists. Since they first became a threat, the Muslim Empires of the Middle East have been depicted in Europe as vast tyrannies where political action was completely suppressed under the iron rule of a despot; the West, in contrast, was seen to favor citizenship

and participatory government. This perspective was perhaps most famously stated by Hegel, who was contrasting the Ottoman Empire with his own country of Germany when he wrote in *Reason in History* that “the Orientals knew only that *one* is free, the Greeks and Romans that *some* are free, while we know that *all* men absolutely, that is, as men, are free.”²

This mode of western discourse continued into the nineteenth century, even though western imperial power was well established in the Middle East and the Ottoman Empire enfeebled. In these changed circumstances, as fear gave way to patronage,³ the great sociologist Max Weber described the typical Middle Eastern state as an arbitrary, personalized kingship, marked by overlapping, incoherent and whimsical administrative and judicial institutions staffed not on the basis of ability but on the basis of loyalty to the ruler. The Sultan himself reigned without any purpose beyond simple retention and enjoyment of the pleasures of domination; his minions existed merely to curry his favor and to extract plunder from the realm, and the people were an inert source of revenue. For Weber, the legitimacy of this inefficient and cruel form of authority was “irrational”, based only on the populace’s passive acceptance of tradition and the leader’s coercive power.⁴ From this point of view, Iraq’s Saddam Hussain is an unexceptional representative of a long lineage of arbitrary Oriental tyrants who serve as reverse images of the western democratic tradition.

These dark assessments are typical of much of the standard scholarly European understandings of premodern (and modern) forms of Muslim government in the Middle East. Their accuracy will be evaluated in later chapters; here I only note that the prevailing denigration of Muslim polity and religion has often been utilized to validate a glorification of the virtues of western culture and rule as more humane and more efficient than anything found in Muslim society. Having subdued and colonized the Middle East, Occidental observers no longer saw power, but only gross inefficiency and corruption. The Ottoman Empire, the prototypical Middle Eastern despotism, became a pathetic sight, incapable of responding to the challenges of the contemporary world, governed by irresponsible incompetents prone to lust and greed. As Marshall Hodgson writes, from a colonial perspective, in the late Ottoman era “everyone in a public position seemed to be for sale except as he might be checked by brute fear of an unscrupulous tyrant.”⁵ European rulers could therefore easily justify their rule as necessary for stemming the abuses endemic to the Middle Eastern state.

Within this ideological context, Europeans believed that Muslims could not achieve reforms for themselves since they were fundamentally incapable of rational thought and reasonable action. As Lord Cromer, British consul-general of Egypt from 1882 to 1907 complacently stated,

“the want of mental symmetry and precision . . . is the chief distinguishing feature between the illogical and picturesque East and the logical West”;⁶ and elsewhere he wrote flatly that “somehow or other the Oriental generally acts, speaks, and thinks in a manner exactly opposite to the European.”⁷

We can say then that the western imagination of the Middle East and of Islam that is prevalent today has been shaped by a long and antagonistic history. Precisely because of its record as a military and ideological rival to European domination the Middle East has served as a negative standard against which the Occidental imagination could define itself; hostility (as well as attraction) toward the Muslim world is part of the process of western self-construction. As Edward Said has famously written, the western understanding of the Islamicate “has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world.”⁸

However, Said has also argued that any western representation of the Middle East as a culturally specific entity must be seen as an expression of hegemonic authority, applied to dominate the disenfranchised, dehumanized and voiceless Muslim “Others” by turning them into objects and “types” who can be manipulated and exploited.⁹ This radical perspective may be heroic, but recognition of the power and cultural hegemony of the West does not require as a correlate the rejection of the possibility of constructing general comparative arguments about Middle Eastern culture, nor does it require negating the real historical and cultural patterns of Middle Eastern society simply because that society has been viewed through western eyes.

The real question ought to be: what does Middle Eastern culture consist of? Are its constituents too vague to be useful, too far removed from ordinary reality to be compelling? Perhaps so. But, as Rodney Needham argues, we can limit the field of inquiry by focusing on those aspects that “evoke . . . some sharper sense of the quandary of human existence”;¹⁰ that is, on the manner in which persons within cultural worlds seek to gain a respite from mortality through winning distinction for themselves and respect from their peers. This quest springs precisely out of the existential human tension between self and other, between autonomy and participation, and begins with the simple question “what sort of life ought a person live?” Or, put more abstractly “what are the notions of individual and society that are pre-eminently valued in a given cultural milieu?” Starting from this point, we can then consider sympathetically the ways Middle Eastern people try to live out their ideals – how they fail, how they succeed, and the sorts of strains and paradoxes that arise in response to the demands of their ethical world.

Where is the Middle East?

But before proceeding on this pathway, some basic terms need to be clarified. To this point, I have used the words “Middle East” and “Muslim” as if their meanings were self-evident and as if the Middle East and Islam were coterminous. Of course, neither is the case. Obviously the Middle East cannot be defined simply as Muslim society, since more Muslims live in Indonesia, Bangladesh and India, as well as in sub-Saharan Africa, than live in the Middle East. Yet at the same time, it is clear that the territory of the Middle East and the religion of Islam are closely intertwined, since it was from Arabia that Islam originated and spread, as the Prophet Muhammad’s charismatic annunciation of a new shared belief system created a new mode of being in the world that permanently reconfigured the region’s previously existing cultural models for living.

It is also true that, although the Arabic of the Quran is recited everywhere in the Muslim world, regardless of the local language, the spirit of Islam is nonetheless strongly effected by the cultural milieu in which it finds itself. The same is the case for Islam over time; the way the Quran is understood and interpreted today is not the same as it was in the past; nor is the Islam promoted by authorities the same as that preached by populists.

If simply being Muslim is not enough to define the Middle East, then what is? Following Said, postmodern theorists have argued that any such designation is necessarily pernicious, since it obscures local and even personal differences for the purpose of making categorizations which serve to divide “us” from “them”, with “us” as necessarily superior. Because such distinctions are destructive and dehumanizing it follows that to categorize the Middle East as a cultural region, or to understand Middle Easterners as having a distinct cultural heritage, is an act of aggression. Such an approach makes any sort of comparison impossible, and turns the Middle East into a conglomeration of local particularities and specific individuals, without any historical or social continuity. This is a falsification of the experience of Middle Easterners themselves, who understand their world as having exactly the sort of unity and identity that postmodern theorists deny them.

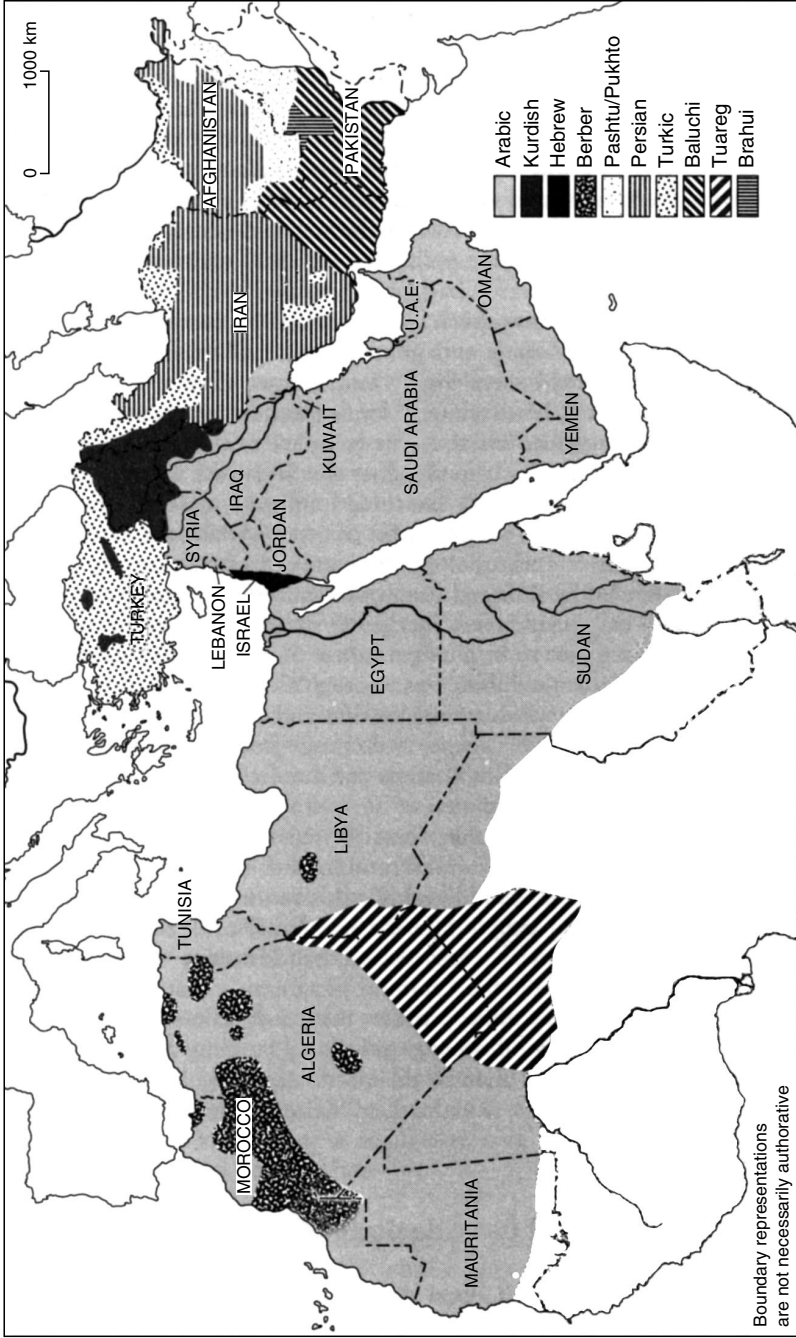
More appealing and useful is the pragmatic argument made by the influential historian Marshall Hodgson for “Islamdom” to be defined as the area of the Nile on the west to the Oxus on the east. This, he said, was the cultural core region of Muslim society because it was here that the most authoritative states and courts held sway during the heyday of Islamic rule and provided the cultural models which the rest of the Muslim world followed.

The traditional anthropological demarcation of the Middle East has generally followed Hodgson's notion of a cultural core, but moved the center to the west, excluding the Oxus region and placing it in Central Asia, while expanding the Middle East to include North Africa (the so-called *Maghreb*, or "west"). For anthropologists, this distinction made sense because of marked differences between the two regions in terms of material culture and social practice. These differences led anthropologists to argue that the people of the Oxus belong to a different "trait complex" than the people of the Maghreb, Arabia, and Persia. From this perspective it is not the pomp of the court, but local knowledge, material culture, and typical patterns of action that determine a culture area.

If we accept the "trait complex" perspective we can delimit, albeit provisionally, the spatial range of the Middle East, which can be pictured as centered on the axis of north latitude 38, and extending from the southwest to the northeast over an expanse of approximately seven million square miles. It is bounded on the west by the Atlantic beaches of Morocco and stretches east across North Africa, into Arabia, through Iran, and finally merges into Central Asia and south Asia in northern Pakistan and southern Afghanistan. In the southwest, the region does not reach beyond the Sahara and in the southeast is halted by the Arabian Sea. In the north, the frontier is naturally set by three inland seas: the Mediterranean, the Black, and the Caspian, and then finally by the peaks of the Hindu Kush mountains.¹¹

It will be immediately recognized that this is the heartland of the early history of Western civilization. It is here that goats, sheep (and pigs!) were first domesticated; here that agriculture was discovered and the Neolithic revolution changed men and women from hunters and gatherers into farmers and pastoralists. It is from this region that many of the foods we take for granted were first cultivated: wheat, rye, barley, onions, garlic, olives, grapes, melons, apples, plums, figs, dates, apricots, pears, peaches, chick peas, broad beans, walnuts, almonds. It was also in the Middle East that the first literate urban civilizations arose, greatly extending the productivity and power of humanity, but also subordinating the many to the few. These imperial civilizations built huge monuments to honor the glory of their dynasties and rulers, and they used the new invention of writing to keep accounts, tell stories of men and Gods, and record the histories of the rise and fall of empires.

This is obviously an enormous, ancient, highly complex and varied region. Its past is marked by the vicissitudes of thousands of years of human history; it is the home of the first literate culture, and has within it not only three major language groups – Arabic, Persian, and Turkic – but also other smaller but distinct linguistic units, such as Kurdish, Pukhtu and Berber. It is the mother country of Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism, along with the now dominant religion of Islam, which



Map 1.1 Modern states and major languages in the Middle East.

is itself divided between mainstream Sunnis and Shi'i sectarians, along with a number of smaller subjects, offshoots and heresies. The territory has within it huge inland seas, great deserts and harsh mountain ranges, but contains too a portion of the world's most fertile farming areas. Its populace include some of the wealthiest people in the world, and some of the poorest; they work as camel nomads, shepherds, peasant farmers, fishermen, merchants, and at the numberless occupations to be found in the great urban centers; they live in distinct and occasionally warring states governed by divergent polities – socialist, nationalist, religious, and monarchical.

In short, the region shows such a range of different ecologies, histories, social organizations, beliefs and governments that uniting all of them under one label would seem highly tendentious, despite the fact that certain traits, such as tent style and kinship organization, are very widely shared throughout. But the trait complex method lumps together all attributes as if they had equal value: tent style and kinship structure are equivalent as characteristic indicators, and one searches to see how many traits are shared to compile a list of groups which are more or less typical. This sort of anthropology has gone out of fashion ever since it was wittily derided by Edmund Leach as a butterfly collector's approach to the study of society, that is, as a sterile compilation of ever-proliferating categories to be put against one another in the ethnographic equivalent of museum exhibit cases.¹² Leach's critique has force, but he did not mean it to preclude generalization and comparison entirely; his concern was to discover deeper structural patterns beneath surface appearances, which would then allow for more meaningful correlations and more significant comparisons.

The real question is whether these shared traits are expressions of some deeper and pivotal cultural and moral continuity. As I have mentioned, I believe we should look for this continuity in the manner in which Middle Eastern people face the existential problems involved in constructing their ethical choices and self-identities through what Muhammad Arkoun calls the "cultural imaginary"; that is, the deeply-held indigenous values that provide the most salient and strongly motivating bases for action, feeling and thought among Middle Easterners themselves, inspiring them in their ordinary lives, in their symbolic and religious experiences, and in their dialectical interaction with the rest of the world.¹³

Equality and Individualism as Central Values

In this book, I argue that these central values include egalitarianism, competitive individualism, and the quest for personal autonomy – values

that are shared with the West, and especially with America, but that are not to be found in most cultures. Far more prevalent historically and cross-culturally is the deification of authority, so that the right to command is ascribed to a certain sacralized social stratum, which is set apart from and above the rest of the society. To hold superior rank in such a society one must be born or adopted into the elect, whom all the rest are morally obliged to obey. Acceptance of sacralized ranking finds its most radical expression in the caste system of India,¹⁴ but can be found in all cultures where an elite group is marked off permanently from the hoi polloi. The pattern of ascriptive hierarchy is, in fact, taken by many scholars to be the defining characteristic of pre-industrial society.¹⁵

But among Middle Easterners, as among Americans, such rating is anathema; for both, moral equality is taken for granted as an essential human characteristic; rank is to be achieved by competition among equals, not awarded at birth to members of an aristocratic social stratum. Americans and Middle Easterners also share a faith that all human beings are equal in the eyes of God, and that all humans are born as free and autonomous human agents, who struggle to gain positions of honor and respect among their fellows and salvation in the afterlife.

Shared values of egalitarianism and competitive individualism are to be found in any number of ethnographic and historical accounts of the region. Typical is Henry Rosenfeld's description of the Bedouin nomads, among whom "each kin group, not accepting exclusive control of resources, fundamentally considers itself the equal of others in regards to prestige, honour, status, and in rights."¹⁶ And elsewhere, among Jordanian villagers, Richard Antoun notes that the average fifteen-year-old "man" "regards himself now as no man's servant and only undertakes chores out of the generosity of his own heart for his friends, and out of a sense of obligation for his kinsmen."¹⁷ Similarly, among the Pukhtun of northern Pakistan every man "thinks he is as good as anyone and his father rolled into one,"¹⁸ and local proverbs continually stress the equality of the tribesmen, who, like rain-sown wheat, "all come up the same".

It might be argued that these rural people are egalitarian because they are, in fact, all equal – equally impoverished. But what is remarkable is that in the Middle East, even in the face of distinctions in status and wealth, the same ideology holds. For instance, among the sedentarized Lur of Western Iran, where a small elite own almost all the land and animals, Jacob Black reports that:

All Lurs consider each other on a footing of intrinsic equality; that is to say, the status of any given individual at any given moment is seen as achieved. No-one is born politically superior to anyone else. All Lurs believe that individual industry is the key to personal achievement and

that only ineptitude, sloth or bad luck can prevent a man from attaining the highest goals, or, alternatively, can bring a man of importance and standing into straitened circumstances.¹⁹

And in urban Morocco, despite vast differences in wealth and power, Paul Rabinow tells us that poverty “indicates only a lack of material goods at the present time, nothing more. Although regrettable, it does not reflect unfavorably on one’s character.”²⁰

The same egalitarian ethos is reflected in the absence of honorifics in the Muslim world. As Bernard Lewis notes: “From the beginning to the present day, there are no hereditary titles, other than royal, in the Islamic lands, except on a very limited and local scale, and even there by courtesy rather than by law.”²¹ This egalitarianism even extends to rulers, who are never referred to as fathers to their people; the most recognition given to the Sultan is the Ottoman title of “aga”: elder brother (an appellation that, as we shall see, reflects a distinctive Turkic kinship structure). This again indicates the absence of any absolute ideological distinction between ruler and ruled. Meanwhile, the people are typically referred to as “brothers” or “sons” of the nation, which is then imagined as similar to a tribe, with its members equal co-participants under the aegis of the state.

In this environment all men, regardless of standing, can and do meet and interact without deference. This pervasive value is expressed in the Muslim salutation “Peace be upon you” which does not refer to the status of the other; nor is there any bowing and genuflecting when persons of different social rank meet. The handshake and the embrace, which are signs of equality and intimacy, are Middle Eastern institutions. Even the legitimacy of the king was marked by a simple handshake given to him by his advisors and the *ulema* (the learned); this handshake affirmed the equivalence of the contracting parties at the very moment that power was officially conferred on the ruler. If the ruler was in theory equivalent to his entourage, who only ceded him power, the entourage also were fundamentally equal to one another in their pursuit of the ruler’s personal commendation. In the Middle East the acquisition of political power was never thought of as rising up through set degrees of hierarchy. That imagery is limited to spiritual ascent.

It is with this background in mind that Lewis writes: “This is a society which always in principle, and often, at least to some extent, in practice, rejects hierarchy and privilege, a society in which power and status depend primarily on nearness to the ruler and the enjoyment of his favor, rather than on birth or rank.”²² Similarly, Marshall Hodgson states flatly that in the Islamicate “equality was the basic principle, above all among free adult males”; in this context “every free Muslim should be accorded that personal liberty and dignity which was expected

by the Arabian tribesman – being bound to obey no man without his own assent . . . (therefore) all free Muslims ought to be treated on an essentially equal basis.”²³

The ideal of equality was carried over into the ecclesiastical realm where, more than any other faith, Islam demands recognition of the elemental equivalence of all believers before God and the dignity and personal responsibility of the individual in fulfilling his religious duties. Even the Prophet was no more than a man, and worship of him, or anthropolatry of any sort, is forbidden as the worst of sins. Ideally speaking, in Islam there is no ecclesiastical hierarchy, no ordained clergy, no central church structure, nothing to stand between the individual Muslim and Allah. In its radical affirmation of the direct confrontation between man and God, Islam goes even further than Calvinism.

Equality and competitive individualism are not the sole values of Middle Easterners, but coexist and correspond with a high estimate of the importance of bravery, independence, and generosity; a personal honor code based upon self help, hospitality, blood revenge, sanctuary, and rigid sexual mores of female chastity and seclusion. It is also crucial to note that honor is not only personal, but is also inextricably located within the patrilineal and patriarchal families, clans, and tribes into which men and women are born, and to which they owe obligations of loyalty and support. As we shall see, these ideals also coincide with strong cultural assumptions about female weakness and inferiority, with negative racial and ethnic stereotyping, and with notions of noble and base lineages – all of which contradict the premise of human equality. This ambiguous blend of beliefs and values is intertwined with and causally implicated in a shared ethos of mercantilism, social mobility, cosmopolitanism, and calculating rationality.

The culture of the Middle East is therefore not an empty reflection of western domination, as some have claimed; nor is it only a conglomeration of random individuals, each unique, separate, irreducible and impenetrable, as a postmodernist approach might indicate. Rather, the Middle East has at its core many of the values that are presently believed to be essential characteristics of the modern western world: egalitarianism, individualism, pluralism, competitiveness, calculating rationality, personal initiative, social mobility, freedom; but these are set within a distinctive historical context based upon chivalric honor, female seclusion, and patrilineality and that also favored invidious distinctions between men and women, whites and blacks, tribesmen and peasants, nobles and commoners, free men and slaves.

From this perspective the Muslim “Other” is not unrecognizable to the westerner; quite the contrary. In fact, our antagonisms are all the more deeply felt for the very fact of our likenesses, which challenge any claims by either party to absolutely separate realities and identities. By



Plate 1.1 A recent photograph of the suq (bazaar) in Aleppo, Syria.

considering the ways in which the taken-for-granted faith in equality and individual freedom effect social reality in the political, religious, and personal realms in the Middle East, we can discover how subordination and hierarchy are legitimated, hidden, or denied within a cultural milieu that like our own, assumes the intrinsic equality of all participants.²⁴

But before this discussion can take place, we need to consider, in brief outline, the social, historical, and ecological context in which this special value system that we share with our Middle Eastern cousins arose and prevailed. This is the task of the following chapters.