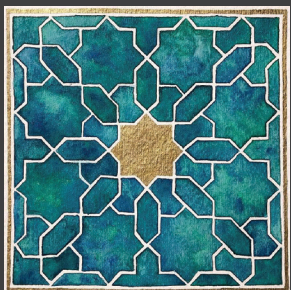




Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi, a citizen of Tunisia, is a professor of Islamic legal theory and Islamic contemporary thought at the International Islamic University Malaysia (IIUM). His academic background is in economics and sociology, and he has been engaged for many years in interdisciplinary research, with a particular focus on *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah*, human nature and values, and social theory. He has published extensively, with over 30 journal articles and 14 books in Arabic, English and French to his credit. Moreover, he has delivered a substantial number of conference papers in Malaysia and in other countries. He serves on the editorial and advisory boards of several academic journals. In addition to his teaching responsibilities, he currently serves as editor of the International Journal of Muslim World Studies, published by the International Institute for Muslim Unity.



At the heart of Bennabi's philosophical framework lies a spirited and profound intellectual expedition anchored on the drive for civilisational renewal. His insights into these core themes are as timeless as they are transformative.

Dato' Sri Anwar Ibrahim
Prime Minister of Malaysia

This is a monumental work on an eminent Muslim intellectual whose achievements are both remarkable and multifaceted. Professor El-Mesawi translated the rich legacy of Bennabi in its totality into English, thereby facilitating access for those who would otherwise be unable to access it in either Arabic or French. Moreover, El-Mesawi's selection of topics, critical notes and bibliography are of great value for those seeking a comprehensive understanding of Bennabi's intellectual corpus.

Ibrahim Mohamed Zein
Acting Dean, College of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Hamad Bin Khalifa University, Doha.

This translation is welcome for several reasons. Briefly, it would enable many more English-speaking readers in many parts of the world who could neither read Arabic nor French to have the opportunity to read it and thus to be better acquainted with the ideas and thoughts of Bennabi and their historical contexts.

Professor Emeritus Datuk Dr Osman Bakar
Rector, International Islamic University Malaysia, IIUM

* The watermark picture features Malik Bennabi and Nelson Mandela with a group of mujāhidīn of the Algerian revolution.



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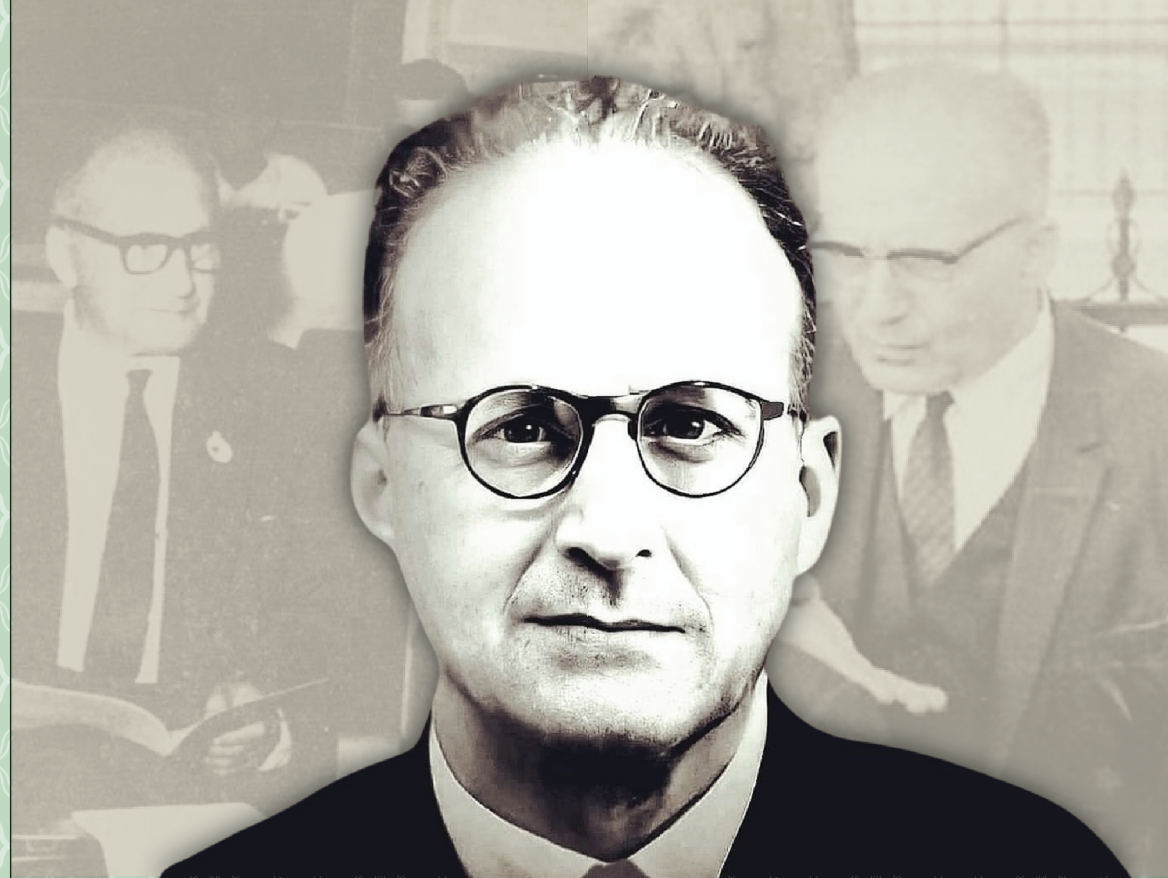
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A MALIK BENNABI READER
Volume One
A Muslim Visionary in the Whirlwind of Colonial Modernity

Mohamed El-Tahir
El-Mesawi



A MALIK BENNABI READER

A Muslim Visionary in the Whirlwind of Colonial Modernity

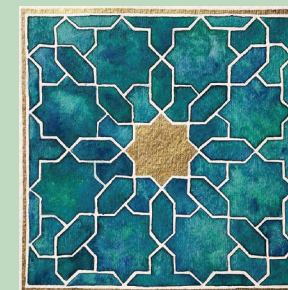
Foreword by
Anwar Ibrahim

Preface by
Osman Bakar

Translated, annotated and with introduction by
Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi

Volume One

This book represents an attempt to provide a comprehensive translation of Malik Bennabi's intellectual work, with the objective of introducing the reader to the seven central themes that occupied Bennabi's mind throughout his career as a thinker and writer. The first volume of the book covers four of those themes, namely metaphysics and religion, society, culture, and civilisation.





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Preface by
Osman Bakar

Afterword by
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International Institute of Islamic Thought, Washington



International Institute
for Muslim Unity



Islamic Book Trust
Kuala Lumpur

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I have seen that whoever writes a book one day says the next day: If this had been changed, it would have been better. And if this had been added, it would have been better. And if this had been said earlier, it would have been better. And if this had been left out, it would have been nicer. Here is one of the greatest lessons, and it is proof that imperfection is the lot of mankind.

al-qāḍī al-fāḍil ‘Abd al-Raḥīm al-Bīsānī
(526-596H/1131-1200AD)

Contents

Foreword ix

Preface xiii

An Age, a Man, and a Mission: Malik Bennabi's Journey xix

PART ONE

RELIGION, PROPHETHOOD AND THE QUR'AN

- 1 The Religious Phenomenon:
Two Competing Epistemic and Metaphysical Systems 3
- 2 Revelation, Prophethood and The Prophetic Movement 17
- 3 Toward a New Approach to the Study
of the Qur'anic Phenomenon 33
- 4 The Origins of Islam: Examination of the Sources 57
- 5 Phenomenological Characteristics of Revelation (*Wahy*) 63
- 6 The Content of the Qur'anic Message 81
- 7 Qur'anic Lights on The Origin of Monotheism 95
- 8 Islam: Meaning, Faith and Promise 103
- 9 The Preserved Book 113

PART TWO

SOCIETY AND SOCIAL DYNAMICS

- 1 Terminological and Conceptual Clarifications 119
- 2 Species and Society 127
- 3 Interpretations of the Historical Movement 131
- 4 The Roots and History of Social Relations 139
- 5 The Permanent Riches 145

6 Social Wealth	159
7 Society and Moral Values	165
8 Society and Ideas	171
9 Ideas and Social Edification	177
10 Social Relations and Psychology	183
11 Social Pathology	195
12 Foundation of Social Education	201
13 Changing the Human Being	215

PART THREE

CULTURE: ITS MEANING, CONSTITUTION AND FUNCTION

1 A Psychological Analysis of Culture	225
2 Culture and Sociology	233
3 A Psychological Synthesis of Culture	261
4 Cultural Crisis	291
5 Culture and Globalism	297
6 Anti-culture	313
7 Co-existence of Cultures	323
8 The Problem of Culture in Algeria	339

PART FOUR

IDEAS AND THE SOCIO-HISTORICAL DYNAMICS OF CIVILISATION

1 Two Answers to the Cosmic Void	349
2 The Child and Ideas	359
3 Civilisation and Ideas	367
4 The Vital Energy and Ideas	373
5 The Realm of Ideas	381
6 Imprinted and Expressed Ideas	389
7 The Idea-idol Duel	397
8 On Civilisation	405
9 From Accumulation to Construction	433
10 The Role of Religion in the Formation of Civilisation	441
11 Defending the Intellectual Capital	459

Foreword

On the grand canvas of knowledge, scholars, academicians, scientists, and even intellectuals today are compelled to specialise in ever greater detail. They paint with finer brushes, detailing smaller corners with greater precision. A striking illustration of this is how the World Health Organisation's international classification of diseases now distinguishes over 17,000 types of injuries, diseases and causes of death—ways the body could fail that are far beyond the capacity of any single physician to comprehend. Notwithstanding ChatGPT and its ever-evolving versions as well as rivals such as Gemini, we have indeed come a long way since Ibn Sīnā compiled *al-Qānūn fī al-Ṭibb* (*The Canon of Medicine*) in 1025, all the while producing insightful expositions on the physical sciences, Islamic theology and philosophy, with no paucity of creative energy to write works of poetry. Now, taking Ibn Sīnā as being emblematic of the pinnacle of the Islamic Golden Age, one might naturally surmise that the era of the Muslim polymath concluded with the end of that age in the fourteenth century CE.

And yet, during the twentieth century, in what was arguably one of the most wrenchingly difficult periods for the Muslim world, there emerged Malik Bennabi, a polymath who has been compared with the likes of the great Ibn Khaldūn. Bennabi's work spanned a vast spectrum of subjects, ranging from theology and sociology to international relations and economics. The pages that follow provide a panoramic view of Bennabi's towering intellectual landscape, offering insight into a mind that refused to be circumscribed by the boundaries of any single discipline.

At the heart of Bennabi's philosophical framework lies a spirited and profound intellectual expedition anchored on the drive for civilisational

renewal. His insights into these core themes are as timeless as they are transformative. In his estimation, civilisational progress should not be pigeonholed into material advancement, while the imperative for moral, spiritual and intellectual well-being should be paramount. *Qiyam* or values, therefore, represent a cornerstone of Bennabi's philosophy. In his eyes, values are not relics of the past but the bedrock upon which future progress, in the all-inclusive sense, should be built.

Bennabi saw the fate of civilisations as being ultimately tied to the cultivation of the individual, with culture forming a crucial pathway. In his seminal work *The Conditions of Renaissance (Les Conditions de la Renaissance)* published in 1949, Bennabi wrote: "The total sum of ethical characteristics and social values attained by the individual since his birth, as a primary resource within the environment in which he was born, culture is the living environment and milieu in which man acquires and formulates his habits and personality." In this view, culture plays a fundamental role in shaping the individual, and it is within the cultural milieu that the revitalisation of a civilisation finds its true foundation. Such a primacy being ascribed to culture recalls Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*, where culture is defined as "the study of perfection", demanding the necessity to educate and humanise "the State," being the true organ and repository of the nation's collective "best self."

Essentially, any critique of Bennabi's thoughts on civilisation will amount to naught sans his expostulations on *islāḥ* and *tajdīd*. While one should not be bogged down on the semantic equivalents—whether it be revitalisation and renewal or reform and innovation, or near cognates such as *nahḍah* and *ṣaḥwah*, etc.—Bennabi's approach towards *islāḥ* and *tajdīd* is fundamentally philosophical. For some, therefore, his perspectives may seem too abstract to be of much use in the rough and tumble of policy and politics. But here's the rub: for failure to grasp his overarching civilisational calling would tend to lead to the perception that Bennabi was obsessively focused on intellectual renewal at the expense of more practical and mundane aspects of legal, economic and political reform.

Yet, I believe that it is essential that we occasionally take a step back and look at our endeavours through more ecumenical lens. Far from being dismissive of practical matters, Bennabi's points of emphasis are clearly indicative of a recognition that while the foundation of any lasting transformation lies in the realm of ideas and values, thoughts no matter how

Foreword

lofty will remain fleeting and intangible without action. For example, in the tumultuous arena of governance, ideals must be translated into reality without, however, sacrificing long-term goals on the altar of short-term solutions. In this regard, Bennabi's philosophical approach challenges us to consider the enduring principles that should guide our actions and policies, rather than resort to band-aid solutions or quick fixes.

Another notable aspect of Bennabi's work deserving of emulation is his commitment to balance in his approaches. Unlike secular reformers, he firmly anchored his reform concepts within the framework of Islamic principles, refraining from endorsing any departure from religion. Instead, he advocated a nuanced stance that embraced the core of Islamic spirituality while promoting the practice of *ijtihād*, which of course is much more than the simplistic rendering of "independent reasoning," as some would have it. Here, one recalls Iqbal's ascription of *ijtihād* as "the exertion with a view to forming an independent judgement, in opposition to rigidity and stagnation, while remaining firmly entrenched on the Qur'an and the Sunnah," an approach followed through by the likes of Yusuf al-Qaradawi and Taha Jabir al-Alwani. In a similar vein, Bennabi's assessment of the stagnation afflicting Muslim societies would necessarily warrant a hard-nosed refusal to succumb to the tempting but one-sided approach of attributing blame solely to external forces. Instead, he fearlessly drew attention to the internal factors contributing to the challenges faced by Islamic societies.

As we delve into *Bennabi Reader*, we are confronted with the relevance of his ideas to contemporary challenges. While his writings may be several decades old, they have nevertheless not only withstood the test of time but continue to provoke, even harangue, us to provide the answers to the complexities of our time and seek solutions firmly rooted in our spiritual and intellectual heritage. On a personal note, I have been an ardent student of Bennabi since my ABIM days and continue to discover new bezels of wisdom and pragmatism in his works. *A Bennabi Reader* is undoubtedly a showcase of exceptional scholarship, and kudos must go to Professor Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi for his monumental endeavour in translating and annotating Bennabi's works.

Dato' Sri Anwar Ibrahim

Prime Minister of Malaysia
January 2024

Preface

This two-volume work is a collection of selected book chapters and articles written by Malik Bennabi (1905-1973), a twentieth-century Arab-Muslim thinker who hailed from Algeria. These essays were originally written in French and most of them were translated into Arabic, the former being the official language of colonial Algeria during which period Bennabi lived most of his life. His French education explains his prolific literary output in the language, which next to English has become the most popular European literary language of Westernised and modern educated Muslims. Dr Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi, a fellow professor at the International Islamic University Malaysia, who is the translator and editor of this work, is to be congratulated for undertaking the laborious task of not only translating into English but also collecting and selecting the essays for the purpose of translation at hand. This work is especially significant because it represents the first English translation of most of the essays in question. According to the translator-editor, no other English translation of Bennabi's works undertaken on such a comprehensive character has previously appeared in print.

This translation is welcome for several reasons. To begin with, it would enable many more English-speaking readers in many parts of the world who could neither read Arabic nor French to have the opportunity to read it and thus to be better acquainted with the ideas and thoughts of Bennabi and their historical contexts. Bennabi was a product of the twentieth century, which arguably has proved to be the most impactful century on humanity, especially on the global Islamic community (*ummah*) to which he proudly belongs. He is still a relatively unknown figure outside his native country Algeria and other countries of the Middle East, even among Muslims when

compared to many other Muslim scholars and thinkers of the last century. But two of his writings that were rendered into English decades ago have caught the attention of many people, Muslims as well as non-Muslims. I am referring to his *Islam in History and Society* translated from French (*Vocation de l'Islam*)¹ by Asma Rashid, a Pakistani scholar,² and his better-known *The Qur'anic Phenomenon* that was also originally written in French (*Le Phénomène Coranique*). The latter book has two English renderings, one by Abu Bilal Kirkary³ and the other by Dr El-Mesawi himself.⁴ The two books received a favourable response from many readers, including me. They showed Bennabi as having a fresh approach to the discussion of Islam and modern world problems that is especially appealing to young Muslim readers.

Bennabi's book *Islam in History and Society* brought back good memories of my first encounter with Dr El-Mesawi. The year was 1991. I was then an Associate Professor and a Deputy Dean at the Faculty of Science, University of Malaya. On September 1-4, 1991, the University's Institute of Advanced Studies hosted "The International Seminar on Malik Bennabi" which it co-organised with the think-tank, Institute for Policy Studies (IKD) that was closely linked to the then Malaysian Minister of Finance, Dato' Seri Anwar who less than two years later became Deputy Prime Minister. The seminar turned out to be a historic event. It was the first international conference in the Muslim world to focus on the thought of Bennabi.⁵ Several prominent scholars spoke at the Seminar, including Abdullah Oman Nasif, Abd al-Sabour Sahin, Asma Rashid, Zafar Ishaq Ansari, Mohd Kamal Hassan, and Ammar Talbi, an Algerian intellectual and university professor, who had worked with Bennabi was unable to attend the Seminar, but his paper was read by Abdul Rahman Doi (IIUM). Dato' Seri Anwar delivered the keynote address and officiated the Seminar. Indeed, the Seminar was a historic gathering of prominent Muslim scholars and public figures from various parts of the world to honour the scholarship of Bennabi. This Seminar helped disseminate and popularise his creative thought to a wider audience.

I have heard Dr El-Mesawi several times reminding others of the great historical significance of the 1991 Seminar. Naturally, I am very pleased to be told about this fact because I was personally involved with the Seminar not only as a host and as a member of the Organising Committee, but also as a speaker. The paper I presented was titled "Malik Bennabi's Philosophy

of Science.” It was at this Seminar that I first met El-Mesawi who was one of its invited speakers. The title of his paper was “Malik Bennabi’s Contribution to Islamic Social Theory.” He was then an MA student doing research on Bennabi at the International Islamic University Malaysia, then located in Petaling Jaya. Ever since that time, I have seen him passionately researching and writing on various aspects of Bennabi’s life and thought. Today, I see him as a leading world scholar of Bennabi. The present work is a clear testimony to his scholarship on this important intellectual figure of twentieth-century Islam.

In conjunction with the Seminar, the first Malaysian edition of *Islam in History and Society* was published.⁶ This edition carried an appreciative foreword by Anwar Ibrahim. A Malay rendering of this edition of the book was also published at the same time.⁷ It was after I got a copy of Bennabi’s *Islam in History and Society* not long before the Seminar that I decided to write a paper for presentation at the Seminar. Its title “Malik Bennabi’s Philosophy of Science” was in line with my official area of specialisation at the University of Malaya. Prior to the Seminar I had taught philosophy of science at University of Malaya for fourteen years since 1977. Before that I taught the same subject for a period of five years at the National University of Malaysia (UKM).

Before reading Bennabi’s *Islam in History and Society* his only book that I had read and had done so with thoroughness many years earlier was *The Qur’anic Phenomenon*. I bought a copy of Kirkary’s translation of the work (1983) in the United States when I was a doctoral student at Temple University, Philadelphia in the early 1980s. El-Mesawi’s translation appeared many years later. By itself, *The Qur’anic Phenomenon* would not be sufficient to serve as a source of ideas for a seminar paper on Bennabi’s philosophy of science. But I was quite encouraged when a copy of his *Islam and History and Society*, which is widely regarded as Bennabi’s most important work, came into my hand. After reading it, I was satisfied that the two books taken together as sources of reference would furnish me with enough materials to write a seminar paper on an introduction to his philosopher of science. Now that I have read this two-volume work that covers a wide range of civilisational issues, many of which with implications for history and philosophy of science, I feel I am in a better position to write a new article on Bennabi’s philosophy of science that will do fuller justice to this great thinker.

It would be a welcome development in the contemporary study of

twentieth-century Muslim thought if more people were to read the writings of Bennabi. Academically trained in the engineering sciences, this scientist-turned philosopher is an important intellectual figure to be closely studied. His perceptive thoughts on many philosophical and socio-cultural issues facing modern and traditional civilisations invite an at once critical and sympathetic response especially from present-day students of Islam and its civilisation. Based on what I have read thus far of his writings, I have no hesitation in considering him as an enlightened Muslim thinker and scholar of the twentieth century.

When Dr El-Mesawi invited me to write a preface to this work I gladly accepted the invitation, especially after seeing the impressive chapter content in both volumes that count in total as many as eighty-six titles. These chapters provide discussions of critical issues that have engaged the modern mind for so long in practically every major branch of knowledge. In volume one of this work, the issues treated include revelation, prophethood and the prophetic movement, phenomenological characteristics of the Qur'an, Qur'anic lights on the origin of monotheism, the roots and history of social relations, social wealth, social relations and psychology, a psychological analysis of culture, a psychological synthesis of culture, coexistence of cultures, the role of religion in the formation of civilisation, and defending the intellectual capital. In volume two of this work the issues include democracy in Islam, anti-Islam, which was the twentieth century anticipation of contemporary Islamophobia, the dictates of intercultural dialogue, the civilisational foundations of economics, spirituality and socioeconomics, Orientalism and Occidentalism, the chaos of both the Muslim and Western worlds, colonisation and colonisability, and the metaphysical foundation of Islamic humanism. In the conclusion of the two volumes Dr El-Mesawi provides a translation of Bennabi's Last Will and Testament.

The contents of the two volumes clearly show that Bennabi's alert mind was fully engaged with all the major issues confronting twentieth-century humanity. He was equally concerned with issues of the global Muslim *ummah* and humanity at large. In dealing with issues of the whole humanity he always had in mind what the Qur'an could offer them from its divine treasures. To appreciate Bennabi's lifelong intellectual concerns it is necessary to understand the historical context in which he lived. His life spanned the first three quarters of the twentieth century. During this period, he witnessed such impactful events as the two World Wars, the rise and

Preface

spread of Communism that were to ignite political revolutions in many parts of the Arab-Muslim world, the anti-colonial movement, the rise of pan-Islamism in the Muslim world, the Arab-Israeli Six-Day War, and the burning of the Al-Aqsa Mosque that led to the formation of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC). In this work Bennabi shared with us his insightful reflections on numerous facets of these world issues that are worthy of our close attention and critical evaluation.

Additionally, Bennabi needs to be understood in the context of the intellectual tradition that he inherited, which was the Arab-Islamic tradition. His thought was partly shaped by that tradition, but he also wanted to renew it in the light of the conditions of human civilisation prevailing in the first three quarters of the twentieth century. This much is clear to us when we see that his ideas betray a significant influence of Ibn Khaldūn (1332-1406), a founder of the science of civilisation, who hailed from the same North African region, and at the same time show innovation in his conceptualisation of civilisation. Bennabi's ideas on civilisation deserve a special study, especially when considering that his Western contemporary, Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975), was also immersed in a civilisational study that likewise acknowledges a great debt to Ibn Khaldūn's scholarship.⁸

In conclusion, I would like once again to congratulate Dr Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi for producing this fine work which is a significant contribution to the legacy of Muslim thought in the twentieth century. May Allah grant him a long and healthy life so that he may continue to make meaningful scholarly contributions to the advancement of Islamic thought *Wabi'LLāh al-tawfiq wa'l-hidāyah, wa-bihi nasta'in.*

Professor Emeritus Datuk Dr Osman Bakar

Rector, International Islamic University Malaysia, IIUM

25 October 2024/22 Rabiul Akhir 1446

Notes

¹ Originally written in 1949 the book was published in 1954 on the eve of the Algerian Revolution.

² The work was first rendered into English by Asma Rashid in 1979 and the translation was completed over a period of several years. The translations were published in instalments in

the well-known Pakistani journal *Islamic Studies* beginning with the publication of the translation of the book's Introduction and Chapter One in the vol. 18, no. 1 (1979) issue of the journal. The last instalment (translation of chapters 5 and 6 of the book) was published in the journal's vol. 24, no. 4 (1985). The series of translations was later published as a book. See Malek Bennabi, *Islam in History and Society*, trans. and annotated, Asma Rashed (Islamabad: Islamic Research Institute Press, 1988).

³ See Malik Bennabi, *The Qur'anic Phenomenon*, trans., Abu Bilal Kirkary (London: International Islamic Federation of Student Organisations, IIFSO, 1983).

⁴ See Malik Bennabi, *The Qur'anic Phenomenon: An Essay of a Theory on the Qur'an*, translated, annotated and with an introduction by Mohamed El-Tahir El-Mesawi (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 2004).

⁵ For a comprehensive report of the Conference, see Fawzia Bariun, "The International Seminar on Malik Bennabi, 1-4 September 1991," *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, vol. 8, no. 3 (1991), pp. 563-567. Fawzia Bariun was one of the speakers at the Seminar.

⁶ See Malik Bennabi, *Islam in History and Society*, trans. Asma Rashid and preface by Anwar Ibrahim (Kuala Lumpur: Berita Publishing, 1991).

⁷ See Malik Bennabi, *Islam Dalam Sejarah dan Masyarakat* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1991).

⁸ On the contributions of Ibn Khaldūn and others—al-Fārābī (870-950), Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975), and Samuel Huntington—to the science of civilisation, see Osman Bakar, "Towards a new science of civilization: A synthetic study of the philosophical views of al-Fārābī, Ibn Khaldūn, Arnold Toynbee, and Samuel Huntington," *Synthesis Philosophica*, 62 (2/2016), pp. 313-333.

Index*

Names Index

A

- Abbas, Ferhat, xxviii
 Abdelkader, Emir, xxxviii
 Abel, 278
 Abdel Nasser, Gamal, xxx, xxxviii, 239
 ‘Abduh, Muhammad, 36, 268, 411, 412, 419, 435, *Risālat al-Tawhīd*, 419
 Abraham (prophet), 18, 83, 89, 95-98, 128, 279, 21, 40, 43, 46, 57, 58, 59, 60, 65, 69, 103, 104, 113, 128, 141, 195, 205, 248, 390-91, 446
 Abū Bakr al- Ṣiddīq, 58, 106, 369
 ABIM, xi
 Adam, 104, 107, 151, 227, 272, 278
 Alwani, Taha Jabir al-, xi
 Ansari, Zafar Ishaq, xiv
 Abū Hurayrah, 103
 Abū Jahl, 72
 ū Ṭālib, 82
 Azad, Abul Kalam, 329
 Addis Ababa, 314
 Aeschylus, 280
 Afghānī, Jamāl al-Dīn al-, 411-12, 434
 Afghanistan, xxv
 Africa, xxxii, xxxv, xxxviii, 114, 298, 301, 303-07, 313-14, 316-17, 331; Black, 298; North, xvii, 20, 148, 150, 152, 330, 374, 417; Tropical 127
 African Symposium of Algiers, 299
 Africans, 313
 Agadir, 150
 Aghānī, al-, 167
 Jarmouni, Aissa, 318
 Akbar, Emperor, 297, 325, 328
 Al-Hidabi, Dawood, xliii
 Albania, xxv
 Alesia, 120, 122
 Algeria, xiii, xx-xxvii, xxix-xxx, xxxiii, xxxvi-xl, 34-35, 37, 146, 148, 150, 179, 209, 216, 246, 268, 342-43, 363, 376, 392, 397, 399, 406, 410-14, 417, 419,

* The index includes only names and terms that appear in the main body of the text.

461; pre-colonial, 405; Republic of
 Algeria, xxxvi
 Algiers, 148, 339; Battle of, xxx
 Amel-Marduk, 25
 America, xxxviii, 23, 37, 121, 298, 383,
 ancient, 422;
 Americans, 340
 Amos, 20, 22-23, 26, 83
 Anatolia, 148
 Andalus, 162
 Ann Arbor, xxxviii
 Anşār, 141, 174, 274, 390
 ‘Antarah, 71
 Antiquity, 105, 234, 279
 Apostasy Wars, 369
 Aqsa Mosque, al-, xvii
 Aquinas, Thomas, 84, 268, 367, 411
 Arab, xiii, xvii, xx, xxxii, xxxiv, xxxvi,
 xxxix, 34, 35, 36, 39, 40, 45, 57, 71, 72,
 119, 151, 165, 166, 167, 174, 185, 205,
 225, 228, 229, 235, 239, 240, 241, 242,
 251, 261, 265, 280, 283, 299, 364, 385,
 413, 414, 438, 443
 Arab Days (*Ayyām al-‘Arab*), 174
 Arab League, xxxii
 Arabs, 39-40, 45, 57, 165, 167; of
 Jāhiliyyah, 45
 Arabia, xxv, 148, 166, 390, 397; Jāhili, 59
 Arabian Peninsula, 173, 205, 370
 Archimedes, 362, 390
 Aristotle, 280, 330, 367, 389
 Arnold, Matthew, x; *Culture and
 Anarchy*, x
 Asāl, 352
 Asia, xxxii, xxxv, xxxviii, 298, 300, 331
 Assyrian Empire, 195

Athens, 228, 234, 300
 Azhari, Ismail, xxxviii

B

Baal, 20
 Bab (the), 23; Babism, 114
 Babel, 350
 Babylon, 24, 25
 Baghdad, xxxviii, 173, 198, 229, 370, 393
 Bakar, Osman, xvii, xliii
 Balzac, 280
 Bandung, 217, 303, 313, 325, 329, 408;
 Conference, xxxii, xxxv, 297, 299, 307,
 314, 324-25, 328, 332-33, 408
 Badr, 65, 205
 Ḥunayn, 59
 Şiffin, 204
 Beijing, xxxviii
 Beirut, xxxviii
 Belgium, xxiii, 145
 Benamara, Abderrhaman, xlii
 Ben Badis, Abdelhamid, xxxvii, 268
 Ben Bella, Ahmed, xxx, xxxi, xxxvi, xxxvii
 Ben Kébir, 216
 Ben Saï, Mohamed, xxiii
 Ben Saï, Saleh, xxiii, xxix
 Ben-Gurion, 459
 Benkhadda, Benyoucef, xxx
 Bennabi, Malik, ix-xi, xiii-xvii, xix-xxxi,
 xxxii, xxxiii-xliii; *Āfaq Jazā’iriyyah*,
 xxxviii; *Perspectives Algériennes*,
 xxxviii; *Les Conditions de la
 Renaissance*, x, xxvi, xxix, xxxiv;
 Vocation de l’Islam, xiv, xxviii, xxxvii;
 Islam in History and Society, xiv-xv;
 The Concept of Islamic

- Commonwealth*, xxxiv; *Fikrat Commwealth Islāmī*, xxxiv; *The Intellectual Struggle in Colonised Countries*, xxxiv xxxvii; *The Question of Culture*, xxxiv, 162, 201; *al-Ṣu'ūbāt 'Alāmat al-Numuw fi'l-Mujtama' al-'Arabī*, xxxiv; *Le Problème des Idées dans le Monde Musulman*, xxxiv, xxxviii, xxxix; *Le Phénomène Coranique*, xiv, xxvi; *al-Zāhirah al-Qur'āniyyah*, xxxiii, xxix, 444; *The Qur'anic Phenomenon*, xiv, xv, xli, 95; *Pourritures*, xxxii; *SOS Algérie*, xxx; *L'Afro-Asiatisme*, xxviii, xxix, xxxi, xxxiii, xxxv, 197, 325; *Birth of Society*, xxxiv; *Discourse on New Construction*, xxxiv; *Mudhakkirāt Shāhid li'l-Qarn*, xxxviii; *Mushkilat al-Thaqāfah*, xxxiv; *Bayna al-Rashād wa'l-Tih*, xxxix; *Democracy in Islam*, xxxiv; *al-Muslim fi 'Ālam al-Iqtisād*, xxxix
- Berber Dahir, xxvi
- Bever-Bridge, 399; *Le Monde est Un*, 399
- Bhagavad Gita, 331
- Biarritz, 150
- Bible, 19, 57, 82, 86, 96, 280, 331, 418; (Book of) Genesis, 9, 83, 86, 96, 217; Book of Judges, 20; Gospel, 44, 57, 82, 87-88, 113, 178, 280, 418-19; Gospel Law, 88; Masoretic documents, 46; New Testament, 44, 57, 85, 87, 113; Old Testament, 57, 113; Pentateuch, 82; Ten Commandments, 87; The Sermon on the Mount, 87; Torah, 87
- Bilāl (bin Rabāḥ), 135, 184, 206-07, 382, 446
- Bismarck, 340
- Bordeaux, 150
- Boumédiène, President Houari, xxxviii, 178, 339, 343
- Brahma, 418
- Branley, Charles, 274
- Brazil, 8
- Brezhnev, 459
- British, 247, 249, 250, 251, 253, 408, 412
- Brussels, 333
- Buddhism, xxxii, 17, 369, 418; Buddhist, 418
- Buffalo Bill, 121
- Bukhārī, al-, 60, 225
- Burke, Edmund, 399
- Byzantine, 268
- C**
- Caesar, 120
- Cairo, xxviii-xxxi, xxxiii-xxxv, xxxviii, 239, 245; University, 239
- Canada, xxvii
- Carlyle, Thomas, 81
- Carthage, 383
- Castro, Fidel, 216
- Catholic, 329
- Centre d'Orientation Culturelle, xxxvii
- Chaldea, 96, 97; Chaldean people, 97
- Charlemagne, 274
- Charles X, 419
- Chicago, xxxviii
- China, People's Republic of, 172, 314, 327, 342-43, 369, 393, 435-36, 460
- Chinese (the), 106, 121, 123, 252, 269, 292, 300, 324, 327, 331; blue ant, 327

Chklovski, I., 177; *Universe, Life, Reason*, 177
 Christ, Jesus, 44, 57, 89, 349, 418
 Christianity, xxvii, xxxii, 84; Albigenian movement, 84; Reformation, 84, 240, 409
 Christians, 57, 83-84, 88, 96, 121, 160, 178, 183, 274, 323, 328, 367, 369, 375, 382-83, 410, 418-19, 443-44
 Cirta, 339
 Club des Pins, 177
 Cold War, xxvii, 313
 Columbus, Christopher, 383, 409
 Comte, Auguste, 233, 246, 352
 Congress of Black African Writers, 298-99
 Constantine, xxvii, 216, 339-40, 342-44, 464
 Council of Nicaea, 57, 113
 Crusades, 323, 409
 Crusoe, Robinson, 350, 359,
 Cuba, 314
 Cultural Orientation Centre, 464
 Crusoe, Robinson, 350-52, 359-60, 362
 Cyrenaica, 148

D

Damascus, xxxv, xxxviii-xxxix, 229, 293, 393
 Daniel, Jean, 215
 Dante, 85, 410; *The Divine Comedy*, 85
 Darwin, Charles, 246, 304
 Day of Judgement, 87, 151
 Dayan, Moshe, 370
 De Bonald, 178
 de Vinci, 410

Defoe, Daniel, 350, 367-68; *Robinson Crusoe*, 350, 368
 Descartes, René, 268, 269, 272, 330, 370
 Desdemona, 251
 Detroit, xxxviii
 Doi, Abdul Rahman, xiv
 Dostoevsky, 280
 Dreux, xxiv
 Dupont de Nemours, 216

E

East, 173, 195, 349; Far, 120; Middle, xiii, 318
 École Nationale des Langues Orientales Vivantes, xxi
 Ecole Spéciale de Mécanique et d'Electricité, xxii
 Éditions du Seuil, xxviii
 Editions Maspero, 179
 Egypt, xxix-xxx, xxxii-xxxv, 34-36, 39, 43, 72, 159, 413-14
 El Nemouchi, 459, 463
 el-Sadat, Anwar, xxxii
 Empedocles, 389
 Engels, Friedrich, 413
 England, 132, 368, 413
 Erhard, 340
 Eskimos, 134
 Ethiopia, 174
 Euclid, 4, 389
 Europe, xxiii, xxxviii, 34-35, 139, 145, 178, 229-30, 234, 246, 248, 251, 268, 279, 298, 304-05, 330, 349, 352, 367, 383, 392, 409, 415, 418-19, 443; Eastern, 320; Renaissance, 207, 229-30, 233-35, 237, 267-68, 270, 279, 304,

Index

323, 330, 367, 409, 410, 413, 419, 447;
Western, 408
Eve, 278
Ezekiel, 87

F

Fārābī, al-, 248
Farazdaq, al-, 167
Faris, Waleed Fekry, xlii
Fārisī, Salmān al-, 390
Fez, 326
Fleming, Alexander, 274
France, xx-xxiv, xxvii, xxix-xxx, xxxiii,
xxxvi, xl, 3, 10, 150, 217, 363, 382, 413
Furet, François, 215

G

Gabès, 150
Gaddafi, Muammar, xxxviii
Galilei, Galileo, 410
Gandhi, Mohandas Karamchand, 122,
298-99, 329, 331
Garaudy, 106
Gascons, 150
Gascony, 150, Moors, 150; Gulf, 150
Gemini, ix
Geneva, 313, 314, 326; Conference, 326
Genghis Khan, 114, 381
Gentiles, 88
Germany, xxii, xxvii, 159, 198, 234, 238,
245, 339-40, 397, 462
Germans, xxiv, 408
Gestapo, xxvii
Ghār Hīrā', 174, 390
Ghazālī, al-, 37, 185, 272, 275, 342
Ghifārī, Abū Dharr al-, 184, 185

Gobineau, 304
God, xxiv, xxviii, xlv, 5, 9-10, 17-18, 24,
36, 38-40, 42, 44, 46, 59, 68-71, 73, 83-
84, 86-87, 95, 97-99, 103-05, 114, 134-
35, 141, 167, 173, 187, 195, 205-06,
218, 227, 248, 250, 262, 273, 282, 351,
353, 382, 390-92, 418, 446; of Israel, 24
Goethe, 340
Gounjaria, Nageeb, xliii
GPRA, xxxvi
Granada, 173, 370
Great Pyramid, 39
Greece, 389
Greeks, 39, 97
Guevara, Che, 215, 216
Guignebert, 85; *L'Evolution des Dogmes*
(*The Evolution of Dogmas*), 85
Guizot, François, 139, 442-43
Gutenberg, 409

H

Hadfield, J. A., 187-89
Halford, John, 443
Hananiah, 21-25
Hassan, Mohd Kamal, xiv
Ḥātim al-Ṭā'i, 174
Ḥayy ibn Yaḳẓān, 351-52, 359-60, 362,
373
Hegel, 18, 132-33, 140, 178
Hell, 85
Hereafter, 85, 390
Herriot, Edouard, 315
Herskovits, M.J., 315
Hertz, Heinrich, 274
Hijaz, 66, 72
Hilāl bin Umayyah al-Wāqifi, 391

Hindu, 389, 418
Hinduism, 328, 331
Hitler, 304, 370, 397
Hoda (El-Mesawi), xliii
Holland, xxiii, 408
Homer, 389
Hosea, 20
Hubble, 8
Hūd, 89
Hussein, Taha, 34-35; *Fī'l-Shi'r al-Jāhili*, 35
Ḥunayn, 66
Hyde, 204

I

Ibn Durayd, 225
Ibn Khaldūn, ix, xvii, 173, 198, 225, 229, 233, 247-48, 272, 318, 374, 442
Ibn Rushd, 248, 268
Ibn Sa'd, 174; *Tabaqāt*, 174
Ibn Saud, xxv
Ibn Sīnā/Avicenna, ix, 411; *The Canon of Medicine (al-Qānūn fī al-Ṭibb)*, ix
Ibn Ṭufayl, 350-51; *Ḥayy ibn Yaqzān*, 350
Ibrahim, Anwar, xi, xv, xliii
Ibrahim, Hafez, 414
Ibn Tūmart, 343
Imprimerie Misr, xxviii
India, xxix, 23, 122, 183, 297-99, 328-29, 331, 389, 411-12; Sepoy Mutiny, 411
Indonesia, 172, 217, 407, 417
Iqbal, Muhammad, xi
Iraq, 172, 461
Isfahānī, al-, 167
Ishmael, 167

Ishtar, 97
Islam, xiv-xvi, xxv, xxvii-xxviii, xxxii, xxxiv, xxxv, xxxvii, xl, 17, 20, 35, 38, 40, 45-46, 57, 59-60, 66, 72, 82-84, 97, 103-05, 107, 114, 121, 162, 173, 203, 206, 210, 274, 328, 369-70, 390, 397, 418-19, 445, 449
Israel, 114, 418
Israelites, 88, 418
Italy, 397, 408, 413
Ivan the Terrible, 419
‘Izz bin ‘Abd al-Salām, al-, 400

J

Jacob, 83
Jāhiliyyah, 35, 39-40, 65, 165, 173-74, 382, 397
Jāhiz, al-, 41, 45; *Naẓm al-Qur’ān*, 41
Jakarta, xxxviii, 325
Japan, xxv, 132, 393, 408, 414-15, 435, 437; Islam and, xxv
Jeddah, xxxviii, 393
Jehoiachin, 25
Jekyll, 204
Jeremiah, 19-20, 22-26, 57, 63, 83, 113, 349; Book of, 19, 113
Jerusalem, 20, 26
Jeune Afrique, 179
Jew(s), 25, 45, 183
Joan of Arc, 272
John the Baptist, 89
Jonah, 22
Jordan, 148
Joseph, 73, 89
Judah, 25
Judaism, xxvii, 84, 87, 329

Index

Jung, Carl, 185-86, 226, 361
Jurjānī, al-, 41; *Dalā'il al-I'jāz*, 41

K

Ka'b bin Mālik, 391
Ka'bah, 3, 398
Kāhinah, al-, 148
Kanstantinov, 237; *Progressive Ideas and Social Evolution*, 238
Karl Marx's, 352
Kawakibi, al-, 412
Keyserling, 441, 443, 444, 448
Khadījah (Paulette Philippon), xxiii, xxix, 82
Khaldi, Dr Abdelaziz, xxvii, 178, 179, 217
(akso El Nemouchi)
Khālid bin al-Walīd, 196
Khansā', al-, 174
Khartoum, xxxviii
Khrushchev, 419
Kingdom of God, 85, 87
Kirkary, Abu Bilal, xiv
Konstantinov, F.V., 236

L

La République Algérienne, xxviii
Lafayette, xxxviii
Lammens, Father, 35
Laroui, Abdallah 179
Last Judgement, 85
Lavoisier, 86, 246
Le Jeune Musulman, xxviii
Le Monde, 399
Lebanon, xxxiii, 159
Leeds, xxxviii
Leibniz, xxx

Lenin, Vladimir, 317, 343, 408, 413
Leningrad, xxxviii
Leonardo da Vinci, 39-40, 411
Levant, 159
Lévy, Sylvain, 127
Lévy-Bruhl, 127, 234
Libya, xxxiii, xxxvi, 148, 413
Linton, Ralph, 235, 237, 238, 239, 240,
Liszt, 253, 262
Lods, 26, 87
London, xxxviii, 303
Los Angeles, 384
Luat-Claret, xxix
Lucretius, 352
Lyssenko, 234

M

Ma'arri, al-, 85; *Risālat al-Ghufrān*, 85
Mādīnah, 59, 65, 161, 174, 390
Maghreb, xxii, 195, 318
Magjan, 183
Maimonides, Moses, 84
Makkah, xxxix, 65, 210; Qurayshite, 374
Malan, 304
Manchuria, 59
Manshu, 123
Marārah bin al-Rabī' al-'Amrī, 391
Marconi, Guglielmo, 274
Margoliouth, 35-36, 72
Marrākushī, Abū 'Alī al-Ḥasan al-, 152, 228
Marx, Karl, 177-78, 359, 413, 418, 442, 444, 449
Mary, 89
Massignon, Louis, xxi, xxvi

- Mazahéri, Aly, 197; *La Vie Quotidienne des Musulmans au Moyen Âge*, 197
- Mediterranean, 150, 300
- Mendeleyev, 6-7
- Mesopotamia, 198
- Messalina, 280
- Micah, 20
- Michelangelo, 330
- Middle Ages, 246, 406, 437
- Mollet, Guy, xxx
- Mongol tribes, 123
- Moreno, 197
- Montet, 19, 113
- Moret, 39
- Morgan, 234
- Morocco, xxvi, xxix, xxxiii, 59, 148, 150, 228, 326
- Moses (prophet), 43-45, 84, 98, 383, 418
- Mossadegh, xxviii, 462
- Mostaganem, 150
- Moussaoui, 463
- Mu'adh, 59, 205
- Mubarak, Zaki, 34
- Muhājirūn, 141, 174, 274, 390
- Muhallab bin Abī Šufrah, al-173
- Muḥammad (Prophet), 17-18, 22-23, 35, 38-40, 42-46, 57-60, 64-71, 81-84, 89, 103-04, 113, 121-22, 135, 141, 161, 167, 183, 205-08, 210, 225, 248, 262, 274, 291, 343, 349, 369, 376, 383, 390-93, 446, 448
- Muḥammad the Prophet of Freedom*, 104
- Mulūk al-Ṭawā'if, 162
- Musaylimah, 114
- Muslim(s), xiii, xiv, xxiii, xxiv, xxxv, xxxvi, xxxix, xl-xlii, 34, 38, 40, 42, 45-46, 96, 99, 106, 134, 141, 152, 196, 203-04, 209-10, 248, 282, 353, 411, 418, 445
- Muslim bin al-Ḥajjāj, 103
- Muslim Brotherhood, xxxv
- Mussolini, 397
- N**
- Napoleon, 382
- National Liberation Front (FLN), xxx, xxxi, xxxvi
- Nazis, xxvii
- Nazism, 245
- Nejd, 66
- Nero, 280
- Netherlands, 150
- New Continent, 121
- New Democracy, 236
- New Stone Age, 120, 134
- New York, xxxviii, 252
- Newton, Isaac, 247, 249, 253, 262
- Nicholas Boileau, 385
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, 234, 343, 351, 383, 390
- Niger River, 10
- Nik Madihah al-Mustabsyirah bt Nik Ab-Rahim, xliii
- Nile, 134, 418
- Nouvel Observateur*, 215
- O**
- Ogburn, William, 235-40
- Okbi, Sheikh El, 209
- Organisation of African Unity (OAU), 314
- Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), xvii

Index

Orient, 443
Othello, 251, 254

P

Pakistan, 148
Palestine, 159, 283, 314
Palestinians, 99
Panikkar, 329
Papin, Denis, 409
Paradise, 85
Paris, xxi-xxii, xxv, xxviii, xxxi, xxxviii, 34, 303, 326, 342, 462
Pascal, 342, 383
Paul, St Vincent de, 274
Pavlov, 183-84, 373
Persia, 23, 159, 174
Peter the Great, 383
Petrovich, Yuri, xxxviii
Pharaoh, 39, 43
Phidias, 39, 279, 330
Philistines, 96
Planck, 352
Plato, 367, 389
Pleistocene Epoch, 368
Popov, Nikolai G., 274
Portuguese, 413
Potiphar, 73
Prague, 459
Preuves, 215
Protestant, 329
Provisional Government, xxxvi
Ptolemy, 120
Pythagoras, 389

Q

Qaradawi, Yusuf al-, xi

Qur'an, the, xvi, xxvi, xxxiii, xli, 33, 35-36, 38-41, 45-46, 57-59, 65-66, 70-73, 81-89, 95-98, 104-06, 113-14, 128, 134-35, 165-66, 171, 206, 277, 229, 262, 268, 273, 282, 331, 353, 364, 374, 381, 391, 397; *al-'azîz*, 73; Book of God, 59; Book of Islam, 114; Hârût, 72; Ibrâhim, 128; Jâlût, 72; Luqmân, 89; *malakût*, 72; Mârût, 72; Men of the Cave, 89; Şâlih (prophet), 89; Two-Horned One (*dhu'l-Qarnayn*), 89
Quraysh, 40, 59, 135
Qurṭubah, 268

R

Rabelais, 341
Racine, 280
Râfi'î, al-, 72
Ramadan, 204
Rashid, Asma, xiv
Rambouillet, 282
Renan, Ernest, 412
Révolution Africaine, xxxviii, xxxix, 459
Ridha, Rachid, 36
Riza, Ahmad, 412; *Moral Bankruptcy of Western Policy in the East*, 412
Robespierre, 382
Romans, 148, 307
Rome, 160, 228, 234, 298, 300
Rosenberg, 443
Rumaila, 461
Russia, 10, 150, 159, 299, 436

S

Sabbagh, Toufic, 36
Sahara, 149, 150, 151

Salma, xlii
 Satan, 85, 98, 114
 Satyagraha, 329, 331
 Saudi kingdom, xxv
 Sauvaire, Henri, 197
 Schacht (Dr), 340
 Schopenhauer, 234
 Schuré, Edouard, 17; *Les Grands Initiés*,
 17
 Second Isaiah, 22, 83
 Septuagint, 46
 Sermon on the Mount, 87
 Shahin, Abd al-Sabour, xiv, xxxiii
 Shakir, Mahmoud Mohamed, xxxiii, 38,
 40
 Shamash, 97
 Shaw, Bernard, 280
 Schubart, Walter, 443
 Sicard, E., 352
 Sinai, 342-43
 Solomon, 3

T

Talbi, Ammar, xiv
The Social Contract, 178
 Théry, Gabriel, 84
 Third World, xx, 145, 172, 180, 313, 314,
 352, 407, 459, 460, 463
 Thucydides, 442
 Tibet, 17, 324
 Tolstoy, 349
 Totonji, Ahmad, xliii
 Toynbee, xvii, John Arnold, xvii, 133-34,
 139-40, 369, 408, 413, 417, 443-44, 449
 Tripoli, xxxviii, 419-20; 419-20
 Trotsky, 186

Tse-tung, Mao, xxxviii, 236-39, 292, 327,
 343, 369; *On New Democracy*, 236
 Tunisia, 148, 150, 413
 Türkiye, 246
Twentieth-century Encyclopedia, 225

U

Uḥud, 66
 ‘Umar bin al-Khaṭṭāb, 40, 45, 58, 72, 167,
 196, 206, 250
 Umayyads, 447
 Umm al-Qurā, 412
 Union Démocratique et du Manifeste
 Algérien (UDMA), xxviii
 United Arab Republic, xxxiv, 283
 United Nations (UN), 325
 United Nations Educational, Scientific
 and Cultural Organisation
 (UNESCO), 298, 305, 324-25
 United States of America, xv, xxxviii, 23,
 37, 105, 121, 239, 298-99, 376, 383,
 407, 442
 University of Malaya, xiv, xv
 Upper Nile, 134
 Ur, 96
 USSR, 204, 340, 369, 408, 418

V

Varna Congress of Sociology, 352
 Vietnam, 314, 341, 342
 Vigouroux, 74
 Villa d’Este, 253, 262
 Volstead Act, 376
 Vulgate, 46

Index

W

Wajdi, Muhammad Farid, 225
Walid bin al-Mughīrah, al-, 40-41, 45, 72
Warsaw, 459
Washington, xxxv, 298, 324, 326, 330,
332
Watt, James, 409
West, 269, 328, 330, 375, 412, 414, 461;
American Far, 121
William the Conqueror, 247
Wills, Joe Bradford, xliii
Wilson, Colin, 292; *The Outsider*, 292
World Health Organisation, ix
World War, First, 300, 376, 405; Second,
xxii, xxiv, 145, 159, 246, 340, 370, 407

Wright, Richard, xxxii, 217; *The Colour
Curtain*, xxxii

Y

Yahweh, 20, 22, 87, 418
Yemen, 59
Young Turks, 412

Z

Zama, 120
Zarathustra, 351
Zayd bin Thābit, 58, 59
Zechariah, 89
Zein, Ibrahim M., xlii
Zhdanov, 269
Zhou Enlai, 332

Subject Index

A

- absolute (the), 25; certainty, 60, 96; deity, 83; form of currency, 152; maximum limit, 161; power, 83; principles, 26; psychological, 26
- accident(s), biological, 7; cultural, 4, 397; double, 8; historical, 5; of the prophet's self, 26; psychological, 19
- acculturation, 252; phenomenon of, 243; process, 243-44; programme, 342; spontaneous, 228
- accumulation, 343, 436, 438; additive, 122; and construction, 441; and *thingness* mentality, 414; chaotic, 417; *choséisme* and, 413; excessive, 436; of byproducts, 341; of data, 270; of individuals, 122, 140; of materials, 414; of problems, 315; of resources, 414
- action(s), xi, xiii, xxxi, 21, 87, 131, 134, 147, 151, 160, 167-68, 171, 187, 250, 266, 275, 279-80, 282, 301, 344, 359-60, 384, 406, 415, 438, 445, 561; Abraham's, 98; and reactions, 132; armed, 406; blind, 265; collective, 160, 165, 171, 189, 196-97, 360, 373; collective spirit and, 151; commendable, 167; concerted, 140, 165, 188, 195-97, 205, 369-70; correct, xxxvi; cultural, 325; decisive, 330; effective, 134; God's scheme of, 187; harmonious, 160; harmony in, 265; historical, 135, 140; human, 87, 383; ideas and, 266; incentives of, 250; logic of, 282; Marxist thought and, 105; means of, 179; of colonialism, xxxix; of society, 360; pace of, 332; political, 265, 323, 406; reciprocal, 445; social, 188, 263, 266, 407; thought and, xli, 152, 171, 411; unified, xxxvi, 140, 205
- activity, 20, 188, 226, 297, 328, 332-33, 352, 359-60, 382, 449; collective, 139; common, 160-62, 168, 184; cultural, 20, 246, 339; human, 228, 359-60; intellectual, xxxviii, 330; movement and, 445; of instincts, 187; social, 140, 449
- adaptation, 74, 132, 149, 293; conditioning and, 205-06; etymological, 74; original, 73; psychological, 8
- administration, 216, 399; colonial, xxiii, xxv, xxvii, xxxix, 146, 399; foreign, 406
- aestheticism, Italian, 419
- aesthetics, 236, 264-65, 278, 330, ethics and (or), 273, 276, 279-80, 301; technique and, 349
- ageing, societal, 382
- agenda(s), 292, 328; intellectual, xxxviii; *Islāhist*, xxxvii;
- aggression, colonial, 370
- xxxvi, 215, 313, 385, 400, 419
- Algerian(s), xxi, xxxviii, 147, 216-17, 405, 406, 464; -French, xv; and Muslim civilisational context, xxvi; and Muslim peoples, 152; and Muslim populations, 152; assembly, 147; Association of Algerian 'Ulama',

Index

- xxviii, xxx; author, 216; cause, xxx; consciousness, 406; doctors, 462; folklore, 318, 342; government, 463; Muslim Congress, 398-99; cities, xxxvii; conscience, 398; immigrants, xxiii; independence, xxv; intellectual elite, xxix, 400; intellectual refugee, xxxi; intellectual scene, xxvi; *Islāh*, xxxvii; *Islāh* movement, 412; man, 150; newspapers and magazines, xxviii; ophthalmologis, 462; people, xxiii-xxxi, 179, 341, 398, 405; people's independence, xxxvi; politics, xxxi; populace, xxxvi; problem, 147; Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (GPRA), xxxvi; public life, 399; renaissance, 406; Revolution, xxx-xxxii, xxxv, xxxvi, 215, 313, 385, 400, 419; society, 343; town of Tébessa, xxii; 'Ulama', xxxvii; visionary, xl; writer, 299; worker(s), 217, 363; 'zāims', xxxiii
- animality, 293
- antagonism, 4
- anthropomorphism, 83, 104; plurality and, 84
- apathy, 131, 276, 282, 393, 405, 434, 447
- archetype(s), 140, 174, 367, 381-84, 38-93
- art, 69, 70, 98, 216, 227, 229, 233, 253, 278, 283, 300, 316, 333, 349, 442
- Aryan, 349
- assimilation, 249, 253; integration and, 185; of ideas, 248; process of, 254
- association, 127, 129, 263
- atmosphere, xxiv, 85, 202, 204, 238, 252, 291, 293, 307, 314, 317, 327
- authoritarianism, 397
- authority, 10, 36, 63, 104, 174, 250, 328, 447
- axiom, 7-9, 411
- axis, xxxv, 172, 324, 326, 444; ascending, 444; descending, 444; Tangier-Jakarta, xxxv, 298, 324, 325, 330, 332; Washington-Moscow, xxxv, 298, 326, 330, 332; Washington-Moscow-Tokyo, 326
- ## B
- backwardness, xxii, 129, 131, 314
- banks, 10, 96
- barakah*, 305
- beauty, 39, 162, 252, 275-77, 279, 331, 389, 438
- behaviour(s), 24, 201, 203, 217, 243, 246, 250, 252-53, 262, 264, 270, 278, 291, 377, 384, 400, 441, 447, 449; character and, 270; discrepancy in, 251; divergent, 250; efficiency and, 415; human, 276; individual's, 184, 208-09, 447; Islamic, 282; Jeremiah's, 23; lifestyle and, 297; of animals, 293; of individuals, 236; of the prophet, 24; pattern of, 235; people's, 203; permanent, 26; personality and, 183; revolutionary, 217; social, 187, 235, 244, 263, 270; theory of, 269
- being(s), 21, 44, 81, 97, 142, 206, 360; alienated, 405; anarchic inertia of, 267; and personality, 204; complex, 142; human, 19, 39, 83, 88, 104, 128, 146-47, 171, 173-74, 189, 205, 207, 215-17, 262, 294, 302, 324, 327, 360-62, 381,

393, 397, 409, 436, 448; invisible, 38; Muslim human, 445; native, 305; psychological and rational, 383; organic constitution of human, 437; social, 122, 416; spiritual, 252; state of, 141; complex, 142; human, 19, 39, 83, 88, 104, 128, 146-47, 171, 173-74, 189, 205, 207, 215-17, 262, 294, 302, 324, 327, 360-62, 381, 393, 397, 409, 436, 448; invisible, 38; Muslim human, 445; native, 305; psychological and rational, 383; social, 122, 272, 416; spiritual, 252; state of, 141; Supreme Being, 382; true, 204
 biology, 234; animal, 445; of social organisms, 399
 biosphere, 249;
 blasphemy, 25
 bloc, Eastern Socialist, xxxviii

C

capabilities, 59, 134, 265, 406
 capital, 147, 317, 461; and wealth, 129; human, 414; indestructible, 339; initial, 317; intellectual, xvi, 414, 461-62, 464; labour and, 450; oil, 461; orientation of, 147
 catalyst, 97, 105, 202, 268, 437, 441; essential, 292; initial, 245
 catastrophe, 293, 343
 cause, 83-84, *creative, conscious*, and *voluntary* specific, 9; primary cause, 5, 9
 challenge(s), xi, xxi, xxix, xxxiv, xxxv, xxxvi, xxxvii, xxxviii, xli, 17, 38, 71-72, 82, 86, 113, 121, 133-35, 140, 159, 172,

196, 202, 217, 276, 292, 297, 301, 303-07, 313, 317, 328, 361, 369; and opportunities, 301; contemporary, xi, 307; global, xxi; Marxist, 369; natural, 134; optimum, 133; post-colonial, xxxix primary, 304
 chaos, xvi, 267; and anarchy, 162; cultural decadence and, 208; obscurity and, 227
 charlatan, 271, 305
 child (the), 63, 183, 252-53, 276, 281-82, 293, 339, 360-62; and ideas, 359; development of, 361; integration into society, 361; learning process, 271; of the spirit, 446; old, 271; process of integration, 362; social integration, 362; soul of the, 253; wild, 249, 293
 children, 152, 165, 169, 245, 271, 277, 307, female, 166-67; burial of alive girl-, 166; girl-, 167, of Adam, 104
choséisme, 412-14
 civilisation(s), x, xvi, xxxviii, xl-xli, 3, 5, 9, 105, 119, 129, 132, 140, 142, 145-47, 151, 153, 161, 168, 172-73, 178, 207-08, 216, 230, 246, 270, 272-75, 277, 280, 283, 292-93, 301, 304-06, 318, 323, 325-26, 328-29, 333, 339, 341-42, 344, 350, 367-370, 374-75, 377, 381-83, 389-90, 393, 405-07, 409-11, 414-19, 434-38, 441-48; African, 302, 318; apogee of, 350; Arab-Islamic, 228; Arab-Muslim, 443; bio-historical synthesis of, 441; chronology of, 208; concept of, xli; conceptualisation of, xvii, construction of, 413, 441, 443; contemporary, 106; continuity of, 449;

- culture and, 72, 269, 349; culture of, 228, 300, 307, 349; cycle (s), of, 208, 267, 375, 447, 448, 449; cycle of Islamic, 173; definition of, 406, 410; destroyed, 88; development of, 273, 333; drama of, 81; Egyptian, 417-18; emerging, 66, 273; end of, 448; European, xxii, 229, 409-443; fate of, x, formation of, xvi; foundations of, 413; genius of, 328, 332; human civilisation, xvii, xx, xxxix, 3, 438; human life and, xxiii, inbalance in, 280; initial state of, 207; interpretation of, 442, Islamic, 83-84, 268, 370, 413, 444-45; Japanese, xxv, man of, 146; logic of, 442; modern, 105, 268, 389, 437; movement of, 350; multifaceted phenomenon, xli; Muslim civilisation, xix, xxvi, 367, 443; of antiquity, 105; phenomenon of, 441, 444; problem(s) of, 216, 325, 413, 441; process of, 206, 208; product(s) of, 142; 328, 415-16, 436, 437, 442; semblance of, 436; sociology of human, xxxix; shared human, 438; stages of human, 3; successive, 146; thing-centric, 436; synthesis of, 419, 438; traditional, xvi, universal, 350; values of, 368, 420; Western, 240-41, 243, 268, 273-74, 328, 411, 434-35, 438; world, 438
- civilisational, ix, x, xv-xvii, xxvi, 65, 326, 435, 436, 437, 448; calling, x, catalyst, 437; context, xxvi; foundations, xvi; framework, 326; inception, 65; issues, xv; process, 435; progress, x; renewal, ix-x; satndpoint, 448; state, 436; study, xvii
- coefficient, colonisability, 141, missionary, 45; moral, 415
- coherence, 160, 385; cultural, xxxviii; incoherence, 385, 392
- cohesion, 329; force of, 275; internal, 328; tribal, 374
- colonialism, xxvi, xxxiii, xxxvi, xxxvii, 147, 180, 209, 217, 266, 280, 305-06, 314-342-43, 405, 412, 433-35, 459; actions of, xl, capitalism and, 409; complexities of, xxxvi; era of, 313; European, xx; fog of, 406; French, xx, xxvi; legacy of, 342; machinations of, xxix, xxxi; *maraboutism* and, 412; neo-, xxxii, xxxviii, 216; new, 314; phenomenon of, 179; problems of, 385; residual effects of, 343; shackles of, xxv; sin of, 303; straightforward, xxxvi; Western, xxv
- colonisability, xvi, xix, xxvi, xxix, xxxi, xxxiii, xl, 141, 385, 412; deficiencies of internal, xxxvii
- colonisation, xvi, xix, 306
- coloniser(s), 302, 306, European, 147; former, xxxii, 459; world of, 141
- command(s), 206; majestic, 86
- Communism, xvii, 408
- community, xxxi, xxxv, 106, 152, 160, 174, 210, 250, 264, 269, 281, 299-300, 391-92, 405; academic, 95; African, 303; Asian, xxv; best, 87, 105, 353; diplomatic, 326; global Islamic, xiii; intellectual, 298; Islam as a faith, xxxiv-xxxv; Jewish, 20; Muslim, xxv,

- 41, 59, 103, 205, 250, 369; pilot, 299;
sense of, 262
- conception, 68, 84, 168, 215, 237, 351;
cosmological, 5; human, 38, 68; of
God, 83; Qur'anic metaphysical, 84
- conditioning, 184-88, 205-06, 208, 316,
373-77, 416, 445
- conflict(s), xxx, 6, 132, 140, 205, 302, 406,
446; armed, 314; btn. schools of
thought, 244; btn. science and religion,
10; btn. the soul and the innate
instincts, 207; btn. the spiritual and the
political, 204; btn. the state and the
Islamic ideal, 204; class, 377;
ideological, 180; notion of, 132-33; of
economic forces, 132; social, 236;
Vietnamese, 342
- conscience(s), xxiv, 66, 105, 133-34, 175,
298, 303-04, 306, 329, 341, 377, 391-
92; Abraham's, 97; Abū Dharr's, 184;
Algerian, 398; Christian, 383; control
of, 187; European, 304; human, xxxi,
82, 133, 302, 306; Muslim, 375; of the
Arab world, 239; the Muslim's, 204;
universal, 307
- conscious (the), 64, 251; domain of, 26
- consciousness, 3, 17, 21, 96, 98, 103-04,
114, 133, 187, 210, 226-27, 267, 271,
297-98, 300, 302-03, 305-07, 341-42;
Algerian, 406; class, 449; collective,
307; European, 305; European, 305;
global, 306; human, 3-4, 104, 133, 302,
306; Muslim, 114; polytheistic, 4;
sphere of, 226; state of, 20; stream of,
xx
- constitution(s), 385; American, 376;
biological, 206; French, 381; of a new
society, 120; written, 315
- construction, 39, 122, 140, 186, 187, 283,
302, 315, 331, 390, 414, 418-19, 4353;
accumulation and, 441; of civilisation,
413, 441, 443; social, 180
- consumption, of alcohol, 375; production
and, 407
- continent(s), xxxii, 305-06, 314; African,
314; New, 121;
- contradiction(s), 131, 166; amongst the
masses, 354; explosive, 406; inherent,
86; principle of, 132
- cosmogony, Qur'anic, 86
- cosmos, God, the creator and regulator of
the, 9
- countries, xiii, xxxii, xxxv, xxxviii, xxxix,
105, 150, 159, 172, 180, 197, 201-02,
241, 242, 244, 281, 283, 298, 325-26,
332, 343, 376, 407-08, 412-15, 417,
436, 463; African, 315-16; Afro-
Asian, xxxviii, 197, 313, 329, 408;
Arab, xxxi, xxxii, 34, 229, 235, 265;
Arab-Muslim, 242, 299; Arab and
Muslim, xxxvi, xxxix, 34, 36, 151,
229, 235, 240, 241, 265, 299; Asian
and African, xxxii; civilised, 149, 307;
colonised, xxxiv; developed, 162, 408,
413, 415; developing, 333, 352;
industrialised, 352; Islamic, 282;
Muslim, xxv, xxxviii, 34, 148, 201,
242, 265, 283, 299, 352, 397, 412-13;
Arab-African, 413; Muslim-
majority, 119; newly independent,
315; newly independent Asian, 340;

Index

- non-Arab, 36; of the Middle East, xiii;
of Tropical Africa, 127; over-
capitalist, 105; socialist, 178, 269; Third
World, xx, 352, 459; underdeveloped,
172, 242, 408, 417
- creation, 4, 73, 86, 104; and evolution of
phenomena, 83; day of, 104; *ex
nihilo*, 86; hierarchy of, 104; mode of,
86; nature of, 96; new, 151; of matter,
9; perpetual, 131; process of, 86
- Creator, and Regulator of the cosmos, 9;
one, 351
- crisis, 292, 293, 294, 299; Congolese, 342;
cultural, 291-94; European, 304;
global, 304, 306; in the Muslim world,
146, 299; of culture, 34; of ideas, 299;
psychological, 327
- criticism, xxi, xxix, xxxvi, 19, 21-22, 25-
27, 59-60, 64-65, 67, 292, 413;
constructive, xxi
- cultural universe, 171, 173-74, 370, 377,
381-83, 391, 397-98, 400; *Jāhili*
cultural, 374; nascent, 390; new, 174,
391; origins of the, 382; sacrosanct
links in the, 397; secular cultural, 382
- guidance, 123; 248, 276, 300, 330;
cultural, xxxvii; in intellectual life,
333; of a sublime moral spirit, 273;
technical, 283
- heritage, 148, 185, 235, 279; biological,
148; cultural, xxxix, 159; intellectual,
xi; of Africa and Asia, 331; of Rome
and Athens, 234; of the Greco-Latin
humanities, 269; psychic, 185
- culture(s), x, xvi, xxv, xxxiv, xl, 34-35,
106, 162, 226, 228-30, 233-47, 249-52,
261-63, 265, 267-73, 275, 278-80, 283,
291, 297-300-05, 313, 315-18, 323,
325-33, 339-43, 349-50, 352, 359, 367,
462; acquired, 303; adaptive, 236-37;
African, 298, 300, 302-07, 318; Afro-
Asian, 328-30, 332-33; and education,
269, 272; and civilisation, 119; 349;
anti-, 317; Arab, 34; Arabian, 73;
Arabic, 226; as a psychological and
social; Bedouin, 71; boundaries of,
324; Brahmanical, 297; Chinese and
Indian, 324; civilisation and, xxii, 325;
classical culture of Europe, 330;
Communist, 277; concept of, 225,
228-29, 233-34, 242, 250, 270, 297,
317, 339-41; definition(s) of, 234, 240-
42, 244, 264, 270, 316; destruction of,
238; developed, 278; dimensions of,
277; Eastern and Western, 438;
economy and, 463; economy of, 323;
educational aspect of, 272; English,
270; essence of, 254; European, 246,
268, 280, 349; evolution of, 237, 239,
325; evolutionary view of, 238; field of,
234; formation of, 236; foundation of,
262; function of, 273, 315; general, 264;
genius of, 279, 301; German, 340;
Greco-Roman, 44; human, 5, 324;
imperial, xxxv, 228, 300, 304, 349;
imperialist, 306; in Africa, 301; Indian,
325; integrity of, 316; interpretation of,
242; Islamic, 240, 297; literalism and,
270; Mao's conceptualisation of, 237;
material, 236; monotheistic, 84;
Muslim, 279, 325; nature of, 326; new,
72, 237; non-, 315-16; norms of, 278;

of civilisation, 300, 307, 349; of complacency, 267; of domination, 314; of empire, 280, 307, 317-18; of "renaissance", 332; orientation of, 147, 266-67, 280, 300, 450; pedagogical formula of, 262; phenomenon of, 261, 267, 280; popular, 37; pre-Islamic, 73; problem of, 237, 239, 261, 269, 303, 325; products of, 341; proletarian, 317; renewal of, 269; Roman, 301; roots of, 252, 350; significance of, 272, 291; social function of, 315; society's, 235; source of, 246; special nature of, 252; synthesis of, 324; themes of, xxxviii; theory of, 238; transformation of, 236; vocation of, 306; Western, 34, 279

D

dār al-Islām, 20

decadence, 267, 443; cultural, 208; decline and, 129, 141, 159; factors of, 146; *fiqh* of, 196; legacy of, 269; moral and religious, 20; social, 198

decline, xxiv, 105, 146, 149, 198, 370, 377, 444, 447; age of, 268; and decadence, 129, 141, 159; causes of, 203, 268; cultural, 318; genesis and, 444; gradual, 208; impurities of, 270; in human qualities, 293; in moral standards, 314; in revolutionary potential, 217; of civilisation, 146, 292, 389; of *maraboutic* fever, 398; of the *ummah*, 203; of traditional values, 267; phase of, 444; social, 266; spirit of, 146; state of, 147, 195-96

decolonisation, xx, xxxii, 217

degradation, 382; of the individual, 216
democracy, xvi, 122; essence of, 122; in Islam, xxxiv

demoralisation, xxxvii

depression, 131

deprivation, 417; humiliation and, xxii; poverty and, 433

desertification, 149, 150; *saharisation*, 149

despotism, 397

destiny, 106, 151, 268, 299, 302, 446; common, 197, 330; future, 297; history and, 88; man's, 208; of human beings, 217; of humankind, 325; of the group, 87

deterioration, xxiv, 198, 392; social, 197, 392

determinism, 7- 9, 22, 443; absolute, 9; materialist, 8

development(s), xx, xxx, 4, 33, 40, 67-68, 161, 178, 187, 233, 235, 239, 273-75, 278, 297, 313-16, 353, 364, 367, 407-10, 416, 420, 444; birth and, 436; cultural, 33, 324; economic, 171, 410; embryological, 171; eventful, 390; genesis and, 418; governance and, xxxix; historical, 173, 274; human, 332; index, 160; individual's, 368; intellectual, 19, 104; level of, 261, 407; literary and spiritual, 18; nature of, 408; of civilisation, 333; of Islamic civilisation, 445; of the child, 361; of the Judaeo-Christian dogma, 85; of social reality, 438; personality, 185; philosophical, 178; process of, 228, 233, 238; progress and, 269-270, psychological, 362; revolutionary, 84 ;

Index

- social evolution and, 162, 239, 305, 409; societal, 179, 278; sociological, 171; stage(s) of, 171-72, 239, 328, 397; technical, 416; technological, 381; threshold of, 420
 - dialectics, and logic, 83; historical, 393; religious, 71
 - dignity, 104, 276-77, 294; human, xxxii, 104; life of, 268; sense of, 276
 - dilemma, Bennabi's, xxviii; moral, 253; the Othello, 154
 - discourse(s), xxxvii, xlii, 40-41, 82, 85, 271; Bennabi's ideas and, xxxi; composition, 41; international, 331; oral, 70; pre-Islamic Arabic, 398; Qur'anic, 70; scientific, 119; Socrates', 179; verbal, 332
 - discoveries, 235, and new doctrines, 238; in astronomy, 10
 - discovery, 361, 362, 410; Newton's, 249; of America, 37, 383; of Asia, 234; of electricity, 416; of objects, 361; of the realm of ideas, 361; self-, 350
 - disintegration, 184, 196, 324, degeneration and, 161; of Muslim society, 195; of the network of relations, 196; of the social body, 196; of uranium, 436; process of, 364; total, 6, 196; ultimate, 161
 - disposition(s), 316-17; internal, xxxvii; natural, 45, 183, 206; original, 4; psychological, 330; spiritual, 446
 - doctrine(s), 132-33, 206, 235, 369, 442-43; Communist, 132; juridical, 60; Marxist, 133; new, 238; of creation *ex nihilo*, 86; Qur'anic, 46; unified, 412
 - documents, Judaeo-Christian, 57
 - dogma, 434; Judaeo-Christian, 85; of divine hypostasis, 83
 - dominance, 106, of deified natural forces, 104; power and, 300; total, xx
 - doubt(s), 39, 57, 83, 210, 302, 326, 433, 442; Cartesian, 19; methodological, 19
 - duty, 152-53, 292, 298, 315, 400; concept of, 398; to combat evil, 87
 - dynamics, xxxviii, 85, 326, 393, 444; chaotic, 146, internal, 236; of social reality, 438; social, 173; special, 436
- ## E
- economics, ix, xvi, xxxiv, xl
 - economy, 149, 340, 461, 463; individualistic and utilitarian, 351; of culture, 323; of the prophet's mission, 21; political, 233
 - edification, xxxvi, 412; of a new ecumenical framework, xxxv; of the new Algerian society, 343; self-, xxiii; social, 177, 180
 - education, 141, 152, 185, 236, 333, 363; acquired, 303; Bennabi: French, xiii and self-, xxii; culture and, 269, 272; formal, 271; liberal, 333; modern, 42; public, 331; responsibility of, 329; sex, 317; social, 201, technical, 283
 - efficacy, 160, 201, 202, 206, 243, 375, 420; full, 205; of ideas, 160, 246; of response, 133; of the Islamic ideal, 205; practical, 238; social, 187, 203, 248; types of, 147

- efficiency, 435; and behaviour, 415; of social network, 197; of society, 264; output and, 152; social, 243
- ego (the), 186, 196-97, 204, 227; formation of, 228; individual's, 189; or self, 187; personal, 361; self or, 226; subjectivity of, 187
- emancipation, Muslim, xxv; of instincts, 207-08, 447; of slave(s), 88, 104; of the conception of God, 84; of vital energy, 374
- empire(s), 159, 196, 303, 328, 349, 383; Ashurbanipal's, 196; Assyrian, 195; Byzantium, Persia and Ethiopia, 174; Chinese, 123; culture of, 280, 307, 317, 318; desire for, 300; French, xx; Japanese age-long, xxv; militarist, 301; of Ivan the Terrible, 419; Roman, 228, 300; (French) Second, 150
- energy, xxii, 87, 131, 151, 188-89, 205, 208, 282, 292, 328-29, 373, 448; creative, ix; energy transformation, 382; hydraulic, 448; intellectual, 462; intra-atomic, 149; kinetic, 243; loss of, 382; potential, 245, 448; preserved, 448; revolutionary, 215; vital, 186-189; 205-06, 208-10, 292, 373-375, 377, 381-82, 390-91
- enlightenment, estatic, 113; Age of Enlightenment, 442
- enquiry, 277, into the Qur'an, 33; scientific, 35; sociological, 234, 293
- environment, x, xxiv, 39, 44, 65, 85, 121, 131, 134, 139, 145, 202, 209, 210, 263, 270, 272, 275, 277, 303, 326, 327, 332, 359, 368, 374; alien, 253; animal, 293; arid, 275; biological, 252-53; cultural, 326-27; Islamic, 206; *Jāhili*, 166-67, 173, 209-10; natural, 134, 139; original, 201, 368, 393; primitive, 390; rural, 363; social, 147, 201-02, 247, 252, 275, 277, 280; spiritual, 254; surrounding, 236; the individual and, 249
- equation(s), 7, 160-61, 266, 416, 437; biological, 7; personal, 27; political, 449; specific, 7, 244
- equilibrium, 205, 280; harmonious, 306; new, 268; old, 132; state of, 391 static, 146; physio-chemical, 6
- era(s), ix, xx, 25, 63, 104, 107, 128, 152, 166-67, 179, 250, 280, 300, 323, 340, 433, 437, 443; Abbasid, 40, 195, Almohad, 173; Christian, 369; colonial, xxxvi, 307, 406, 413; Columbian, 442; contemporary, 166, 332; distinct, 267; distinct cultural, 352; Freudian, 317; *Jāhili*, 66, 120, 166, 168; Madinese, 162; Meiji, 414; modern, 406, 415; Muḥammad's, 68; new, xix, 267, of colonialism, 313; of ecumenical humanism, 307; of the *Mulūk al-Ṭawā'if*, 162; of the Muslim Golden Age, ix; post-Almohad, 173, 370, 377; post-Banfdung Conference, xxxv; post-civilisation, 173, 448; post-independence, xxxviii, xxxix; pre-colonial, 119; post-Second World War, 407; prehistoric, 127; pre-Islamic, 36, 39; present, 203; Prophet's, 57; Romantic, 262; Surrealist, 384; Umayyad, 208

Index

ethics, 262-65, 381; African, 301; and/or aesthetics, 273, 278-80; and morality, 273; Irreligious, 87; monotheistic, 87; Qur'anic, 87; remunerative, 81

ethnologists, 228; contemporary, 127

evolution, xxxvi, xxxviii, 7, 9, 38, 40, 104, 119, 129, 141, 146, 160-61, 236-37, 268, 303, 368, 397, 412, 433, 445, 447; and destiny, 268; change and, 160; cultural, 34, ; historical, 208; humanity's, 298; intellectual, 36; natural, 261; of (human, new, etc.) society, xli, 140, 171, 174, 196, 235; of culture, 237, 239, 325; of dress, 279; of ideas, 104; of ideology, 329; of matter, 5-6, 8-9; of Muslim thought, 36; of phenomena, 83; of the American mind, 238; of the Arab world, 225; of the state, 442; primitive stage of, 304; progressive gradual, 72; of the religious problem, 84; scientific, 269; social, 160-62; societal, 172; society's, 184; spiritual evolution, 306; stages of, 128, 145, 274; theological, 122; Darwin's evolutionism, 246

exegesis, 33-37, 73, 95; Qur'anic, 95

existentialism, 304

experience(s), 24, 185, 202, 300, 350, 361, 368, 408, 411, 433, 460, 461, 463; daily, 208; dual, 316; edifying, 462; emotional, 97; historical, 121, 417; human, 275; humanity's, 106, 185, 307; in the Soviet Union, 204; Japanese, 437; millennial, 359; of contemporary Muslim society, 370; of integration, 363; of Stakhanovism,

369; of the ecstatic, 21; of the [human] race, 189; of the Muslim world, 37; of the West, 328; ordinary, 227; religious, 21

experiment(s), 152, 202, 363; chemical research, 247; industrialisation, 408; of Galvani, 238; Pavlov's, 184; thermonuclear, 307; thought, 360

exploitation, 317, 420; and mistreatment, xxiv; capitalist, 105

F

factor(s), 6, 24-26, 33, 44-45, 87, 104, 129, 131-32, 139, 149, 165-66, 168, 171, 183, 187, 228, 241, 246, 250, 261, 263, 266, 268, 303, 359, 407; absolute, 25; constant, 437; contradictory, 132; cultural, 162, 262; defining, 272; determining, 242, 301-02, 315; diverse, 5; dynamic, 332; economic, 166, 444; enduring, 123; essential, 5; explanatory, 139; external, 374; final, 24; fundamental, 413; geographical, 301, 443-44; historical, 37-38, 239, 303; ideological, 360; industrial, 332; internal, xi; key, xxxv; local, 413; of decadence, 146; of fertilisation, 240; of nature, 150; of social change, 133; of time, 128; pathological, 19; permanent, 24; physical, 7; psycho-temporal, 445; psychological, 24, 134, 139; racial, 443; religious, 187-88; social, 198; subjective, 19, 254; thermodynamic, 6-7; time, 127; unique, 6

faith, xxxv, 36-37, 41, 43, 46, 85, 106, 121,
 206-07, 291, 393, 418, 438, 446
 finality, 140, 449
 fiṭrah, 206
 force(s), xxxii, 134, 151, 246, 294, 370,
 406; adverse, 151; biological, 373, 375;
 brute, xxxvi; conflicting, 132; deified
 natural, 104; dominant, 274; driving,
 34, 132, 139, 165, 243, 246, 369, 370,
 417-18; economic, 132, 139;
 electrostatic, 6; external, xi, 406;
 German, xxiv; guiding, 268;
 independent creative, 5; inexorable,
 18; inspiring, 207; intellectual, 328;
 material, 204; military, 369; moral,
 204, 328; motivating, 449; of change,
 133; of cohesion, 275; of law, 376; of
 real facts, 301; omnipotent, 10;
 opposing, 302; overwhelming, 217;
 polar, 442; real, 81; spiritual, 134, 139,
 204, 206-07; spring-like, 363;
 technological, 128; transformative, 236
 freedom, 104, 168, 189, 291; and well-
 being, xxxii; freedom, equality and
 fraternity, 383; moral, 168; of choice,
 189; sexual, 168
 function(s), xxxiv, 23, 127, 151, 206, 243,
 272, 273, 305, 367, 414, 460; (animal)
 reproductive, 7-8; biological, 205;
 bodily, 351; civilising, 368; historical,
 127-28, 328, 375; of religion, 447; of
 the human mind, 227; ordinary, 343;
 purposive, 140; social, 205, 208, 315,
 377; sustaining, 369; universal, 123

G

gap(s), 9, 324; between the spiritual
 and the social, 205; in global
 consciousness, 306; in the physical
 system, 7
 genius(es), 71-72, 123, 145, 278-80, 327,
 342, 344, 350, 443; and spirit of the
 pre-Qur'anic language, 71; and
 temperament, 39; Arab literary, 71;
 Arabic language's inherent, 36;
 convergent, 272; European, 229;
 Greco-Roman, 279; human, 65, 82,
 234, 410; Ibn Khaldūn's, 442; of
 civilisation, 328, 332; of Dante, 85; of
 the African people, 306; Roman and
 Greek, 228; Semitic, 279
 globalism, 128
 goodwill, collective 377
 Greco-Roman: antiquity, 279; culture, 44;
 genuis, 179; humanities, 330
 growth, 208, 248, 249; of Afro-Asian
 nations, 332; birth and, 436; of
 civilisation, 442; of culture, 245; of
 society, 283; psychological, 249;
 reversal of, 364; societal, 196
 guarantees, social, 367

H

hand(s), 291, 339, 359-60; and minds,
 276; expert, 179; Moses' white, 43, 45;
 of empty desert, 148; of people, 150
harkis, 179; *harkism*, 343
 hegemony, 180; colonial, xx; cultural,
 412; French, xx; imperial culture of,
 xxxv; world, 180
 hermaphroditism, 8

Index

- history, xv, 19, 22, 40, 45, 58, 103, 105, 129, 132, 139, 141-42, 146, 152, 159, 167, 172, 203-04, 208, 209, 226, 233, 239, 246, 265, 267, 272-74, 278, 300, 318, 328, 333, 405, 411, 414, 417, 441, 447, 449; and destiny, 88; and physics, 382; as a discipline, 442; continuum of human, 105; cyclical law, 442; domain of, 408; human, 96, 105, 134; eddies and waves of, 174; intellectual, 105-06, Islamic, 141; Israelite, 20; logic of, 442; making of, xli; march of, 324; Muslim, 393; of Abrahamic religion, 89; of anti-alcohol legislation, 375; of Germany, 238; of humanity, 103, 139, 390; of Islam, 40; of Islamic jurisprudence, 59; of languages, 72; of mankind, 133-34; of Muḥammad, 82; of Muslim society, 159; of our age, 331; of social relations, xvi; of the Chaldean people, 97; of the Muslim community, 103; of the Prophet, 65; of the prophetic movement, 38; personal history of Jeremiah, 19; processes of, 411; purpose of, 129; religious, 96; secular, 96; threads of, 306
- homo: natura*, 145-46, 148, 206, 445, 448; *sapiens*, 145
- humanity, xiii, xvi, xxi, xxxii, xlii, 3, 7, 104, 106-07, 127, 145, 174, 185-86, 217, 228, 272, 293, 298-99, 302-03, 305, 307, 318, 324, 327, 330, 342, 389, 448; contemporary, 324; experiences of, 185; future of, xxxix, 267; grand narrative of, 272; history of, 103, 105-06, 139, 390; integration of, 299; moral code for, 87; Muslims and, xl; paralysed, 104; present-day, 145; religious past of, 185; remote past of, 81; sense of, 349; spiritual evolution of, 306; spiritual history, 113; twentieth-century, xvi; *ummah* and, xvi
- humanism, 242; ecumenical, 307; French, 341; Islamic, xvi; pinnacle of, 19
- humanities, and social sciences, xxii; Graeco-Roman, 234, 269, 330
- humankind, 168, 325
- humans, xxxvi, 9, 18, 275, 327, 349; actions of, 359; and soil and soil, 437; animals and, 149; organic constitution of, 437
- humiliation, and deprivation, xxii; ugliness and, 276

I

- i'jāz*, 33, 36-46; concept of, 40-41
- historical meaning of, 38;
- idea(s), xxxii, xxxvi, xxxviii, 34, 68-69, 70, 81, 139-42, 152, 159-60, 165, 171-74, 177-80, 217, 235-37, 242, 245-48, 252-54, 263, 265-66, 273, 275, 282, 291, 298, 302, 316, 331, 343-44, 349-50, 352, 360-61, 382, 384, 390, 393, 397-99, 410, 412, 416, 435, 464; absence of, 384; acquired, 377; and discourse, xxxi; and idol, 397; and objects, 252-53; and principles, 187; archetypes of, 389; Archimedean moment of, 383; assimilation of, 248; atmosphere of, 238; Bennabi's, xvii, xxxi-xxxv, xxxvii, xl; betrayal of, 383; blank slate of, 359;

chain of, 67; child and, 359; collective, 240; concert of, 392; creative potential of, 245; crisis of, 299; current, 37; Darwin's ideas, 304; dead, 238, 393; deadly, 393; dearth of, 171-72; defence of, 464; deficiency in, 172; distrust of, 179; domain of, 173, 344, 460-61; driving, 369-70, 375, 382; dynamic fusion of, 390; efficacy of, 160, 246; ersatz, 385; exchange of, 178; expressed, 383-84, 389, 392-93; evolution of, 104; facts and, 459; false, 179; feelings and, xxiii; fertilisation of, 350; foundational, xxxiv; fundamental, 370; general, 237, 324; historian of, 367; human beings and, 171; imprinted, 383, 389-90, 392, 393; influence of, 236; key, 34; Islamic, 268; Keyserling's, 441, 444; lack of, 196, 360, 385, 414; living, 239; logic of, 282; man and, 415; Marxist, 418; master (archetypes), 381; material existence and, 237; modern, 34; moribund, 392; new, xxii, 235, 238, 463; novel, xxvi; objects and, 252, 369; obsolete, 377; order of, 67, 70, 385; original, 377, 385; outdated, 37; particular, 237; pathogenic 239, Pavlov's, 183; popular, 328; practical, 381; products and, 436; progressive, 237; promoter of, 367; realm of, x, 140, 159, 174, 197-98, 246, 248, 343, 351, 359, 361-64, 368, 381, 384, 389, 392, 415, 462; reception of, 35; representation of activity and, 333; role of, 187, 246, 367; scientific, 34, 37, 238, 328; social, 236-37; society and, 171; special, 235; sustenance of, 273; system of, 178, 367; technical, 171; things and, 240, 243, 249; Toynbee's, 449; universe of, 385; value of, 249, 461; vital energy and, 373; wealth of, 442; Western, 393; world(s) of, 238, 240, 247, 253, 262, 385, 389, 462

ideal(s), xi, 161, 188, 189, 203, 209, 210, 329-30; climate, 400; Islamic, 174, 204-06, 208-09, 354, 374, 398; cultural, 282; objective, 189; of chastity, 375; of moral perfection, 9, original, 161; particular, 121; religious, 206-08; sublime, 205

idealism, 263, 282, 315

identity, xxii, 123, 205; collective, 265, 268; cultural, 254, 272, 317, 327, 342; European, 304

ideological: and political struggles, 412; basis, 408; conflict, 180; contamination, 307; context, 240; contingencies, 408; edifice, 304; factor, 360; framework, 240; front, 460; germs, 307; infrastructure, 418; map of the world, 369; opposition, 237; order, 384; pathogens, 307; position, 217; principle, 328; stances, 217; struggle, 172; systems, 362; thinking, 246

ideology, xxv, xxxvi, xxxviii, 263, 306, 329, 419; Communist, 370; culture and, xxxiv; of the French Revolution, 382; Marxist, 240-41, 243; Marxist thought and, 269

ideophages, 463

Index

- ignorance, 265, 294, 397-98, 400, 448;
and illiteracy, 271; and poverty, 153;
learned, 400
- illiteracy, 407, 433-35; ignorance and, 271
- imbalance(s), 146, 280, 364, 397; cultural,
236, 397; moral, 10; political, 433
- imperialism, xxxviii, 283, 313, 329-30,
341; anti-, 329; Western, 414
- immigrants, xxii; Algerian, xxiii;
Makkan, 274
- inadequacy, 464, of axiom, 8
- independence, xxxii, xxxvii, 342, 370,
406, 435; Algerian people's, xxxvi
genuine, xxxvii; movement, xxviii; of
magnetism, 27; post-, xxxviii, xxxix;
War of, xxix
- indigènes*, xxi, xxiii, 216
- indigenous: legs, 462, 464; writers, xxvi
- individual(s), x, xxi, xxv, xxxi, 9, 18-21,
22, 26, 35, 37, 43, 63-64, 87-88, 95, 104,
114, 121-22, 128, 131, 139-42, 146-47,
160-61, 168, 173-74, 178, 183-86, 188-
89, 196-97, 203, 206, 216-17, 229, 235,
242-44, 247-250, 252-53, 262, 265,
269-72, 278, 281, 283, 292-93, 305,
314-17, 333, 342, 349, 361-62, 364,
368, 373-75, 385, 389, 391-92, 405,
410, 414, 445-47, 449; actions, 206,
249, 275; Afro-Asian, 325; aggregate
of, 183; and society, 184, 291; and the
group, 133; aspirations of, 332;
association of, 127; behaviour, 187,
208-09, 236, 244, 264, 291, 384, 415,
441; capacity of the, 331; communities
and, 151, 204; conditioned, 184, 186;
conglomeration of, 129; conscious self
of, 188; cultivation of the, x; destitute,
276; human essence of the, 294; in
modern society, 228; individual's
ego, 189; instinct of "communal life",
273; instincts of, 187, 207; integration
of the, 363; interests of, 189; isolated,
350, 352, 359-60; lives of, xx;
mercenaries and, xxvii; mind of the,
249; Muslim, 393; natural impulses,
205; normal balance of, 187; psyche,
208; psychological energy, 189;
psychological perspective, 226; 'raw',
204; relationship between ideas and,
397; sense of good, 275; sociological
development of, 171; solitary, 367;
types of, 271; unconditioned, 186;
vices of, 204; way of thinking, 275; will
of, 236
- industry, 254, 281-83, 328, 330-32, 341-
42, 408, 436
- inefficiency, 197, 242, 266, 281, 316
- inertia, 8, 131, 132, 242, 267, 393
- infantilism, 384-85
- inferiority, complex, 398; sense of, 303
- instinct(s), 151, 162, 169, 186-88, 206-09,
273, 293, 377, 441, 445-47, 449, 463;
basic, 25; bondage of, 207; group, 122;
human, 207; humanised, 187; inborn,
206; individual, 449; innate, 207;
integrated, 187; natural, 187, 207; of
communal life, 273; restrained, 448;
sensual, 168
- insufficiency, 133-34
- integration, 265, 360, 369, 375, 445; and
harmony, 160; and unity of the
Muslim community, 205; capacity

for, 375; child's, 361; conditions of, 375; essential, 187; experience of, 363; law of, 6; of cultural elements, 324; of humanity, 299; of individual(s), 140, 185, 373; of the human species, 298; process of, 360, 362-63, 374; process of Muslim society, 174; social, 362-64, 373

intellectomane, 63

intellectual: journey, xxxiii, xxxiv, xxxix

orientation, xxiii, xxvi, xxxix

vocation, xxviii, xli

intelligence, xxvii, xxx, xxxvi, 9, 67, 299; Absolute Metaphysical, 82

interpretation(s), 131-34, 234, 242, 244, 273, 352, 369, 417, 442, 444; alternative, 27; contradictory, 382; economic, 167; external, 370; historical, 17, 441; Marx's interpretation of the world, 177; methods of, 443; of civilisation, 443; of culture, 242; of psychological facts, 19; of the Islamic phenomenon, 444; opposing, 433; psychological, 26; rational, 442; sociological, 183

introspection, xxiv, 96

Iṣlāḥ, xxxvii, 398-99, 412, 419; movement, xxxvii, 399, 412

Islamic: commonwealth, xxxv; religious circles, xxvi; thought, xvii, xxxv, xlii, 96, 104, 353; values, xxxix, 268, 412; worldview, xxiii, xli

Islamism, 419; pan-, xvii, xxii

J

Jewish: community, 20; 418; particularism, 84; people, 44; policy, 25; prophetic movement, 22; religious literature, 22; tradition, 83; writings, 19

judgement(s), 40-42, 59, 85, 243, 245, 384, 391, 397; *a priori*, 316; critical, xix; Day of, 87, 151; independent, xi; individual's private, 189; Jeremiah's, 25; Last, 85; objective, 81; of history, 25; of reason, 207; paradoxical, 26; value, 184

jurisprudence, Islamic, 60, 196

justice, xv, 179

K

Kingdom, 85, 87

kinship, 69

knowledge, ix, xvi, xxii, 9, 18, 43, 46, 83, 97, 225-27, 248, 270-71, 272, 281, 283, 294, 340, 341; acquisition of, 271; archaeological, 46; branches of, 40; devoid of, 377; disciplines, 41; dissemination of, 271; domain of, 272; empirical, 228; fields of, 95; guidance and, 248; historical, 301; integration of, xlii; integrative approach to, xli; Islamisation of, xlii; lack of, 265; magical, 43; of the Qur'an, 206; psychological, 81; religious, 34; scientific, xxv; theory of, 269; true, 227

L

labour, 153, 316; -hour, 152; and capital, 450; division of, 360; of the enslaved, 104; orientation of, 147; standards, 262
laissez-faire laissez-passer, 105
language(s), xiii, 39-40, 59, 72, 207, 217, 225, 235-36, 251, 253-54, 278, 293, 446; Arab-Islamic, 72; Arabic, 36, 72-73, 225, 229; developed, 444; enigmatic, 253-54; European, 230; impact of, 63; *Jāhili*, 72; melodious, 71; national, 119; objective, 253; ordinary, 416; pre-Islamic, 229; pre-Qur'anic, 71; sciences of, 41; subjective, 253
law(s), 3, 6, 9, 26, 82, 119, 166-67, 376, 382, 391, 400, 437-38, 441, 444, 446; anti-trust, 105; Coulomb's, 6; cyclical, 442; divine, 441; general, 19; Gospel, 88; immutable, 9; Islamic, 59, 105; matrimonial, 68; Mosaic, 88; natural, 5, 206; of change, 120; of classical mechanics, 131; of eternal return, 383; of integration, 6; of large numbers, 209, 436; of moral progress, 187; of natural selection, 374; of physical phenomena, 86; of prohibition, 167; of sociology, 399; of space and time, 82; of supply and demand, 198; of the jungle, 374; of the spirit, 446; of the two beats, 352; original, 8; physical, 9; anti-alcohol prohibition, 376; single, 7; universal, 121; universal sociological, 217
legacy, 268; Bennabi's (intellectual), xix, xxxix, xli-xliii; colonial, 317; destructive, xxxvi; historical, 272;

Ibn Khaldūn's intellectual, 247; literary, 167; metaphysical, 268; of colonialism, 342; of decadence, 269; of *harkism*, 343; of Muslim thought, xvii; spiritual, 304; St Augustine's, 268
legitimacy, 382; of Muḥammad's mission, 70, of man and woman's union, 168
liberation, 215, 217, 329-330; and dis-alienation, 104; battle of, 315; internal, 329; liberation wars, 315; mission of moral, 303; national, 329; of Abraham's conscience, 97; of France, xxiii; of India, 331; path to, xxv; struggle for, 330
literalism, 270-71
logic, 25, 281-82, 419, 442; and philosophy, 39; Aristotelian dialectics and, 83; conventional, 411; implied, 42; internal, 419; modern, 166; of dialectical materialism, 442; of facts, 25; of history, 442; of historical events, 25; of ideas, 282; of the soul, 207; practical, 280-82, 328, 332-33; pragmatic, 264-65; spiritual, 446

M

Machiavellianism, 35
man, x, xxiii, 4, 7, 8, 21, 37, 41, 81-82, 96-97, 103, 135, 142, 146-48, 150, 167, 186-87, 189, 216, 225, 227, 235, 244, 269, 274, 281, 293, 301, 305, 324, 326, 340, 349, 359, 391, 405, 416-419, 437, 441, 448-49; African, 305, 314, 316; Algerian, 150; and ideas, 415; and society, xxii, xli; and woman, 168;

- civilised, 270, 303, 314; colonisable, 145; colonising, 145; creative powers of, 82; destiny, 208; European, 230; fundamental needs of, 442; image of, 305, 449; instinctive inclination of, 205; man-centred (tachnique), 381; mind of, 228; no man's land, 323-24; of the land, 229; orientation, 265; philosophy of, 269; progress, 40; problem(s) of, 146-47, 325, 419-20, 437, 450; psychological structure of, 44; religious animal, 4, 186; religious sense of, 5; sick, 415; soil, time, and, 416; solitary, 174; spiritual strength, 134; superman, 189; Third World, 314; townsman, 283; tribesman, 205; unemployed, 146; value of 217
- mankind, v, 4, 38, 87-88, 105-06, 293, 353, 359; essential structure of, 188; history of, 133-34; leadership of, 299; religious history of, 22
- maraboutism*, 399-400, 405, 412
- market, 180; Baghdad, 198; price(s), 197-98; values, 105
- Marxism, 178, 419
- materialism, 353, 412; deism and, 5; deity of, 9; dialectical, 177, 237, 353, 442; historical, 177, 442
- matter, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 86-87, 128, 131, 149; accident of, 8; as absolute, 5; as contingency, 5; as postulate, 5; creation of, 9; deification of, 9; determinism of, 8 evolution of, 8-9; genesis of, 9; initial state of, 86; inorganic, 7; living, 7-8; principle of, 8; thinking, 7; unified primordial, 86
- mechanics, classical, 131; science of, 382
- mechanism(s), 9, 261, 341, 418, 435; psychological, 188; resistance, 328
- medicine, 434-35
- memoirs, xix, xx, xxi, xxviii, xxxix, 174
- memory, 7, 64, 139, 174, 195; collective, 7; human, 97; of Muḥammad and his disciples, 58; of Emir Abdelkader, xxxviii
- mentality, 167; *choséisme*, 414; collective, 275
- message
- metaphor(s), 41, 71, 185, 230; Chinese blueant, 327; in the Qur'an, 35; unconscious, 185
- metaphysical: and spiritual nature, 161; challenge(s), 72; conception, 84; concern, 3; determinism, 9; foundation, xvi, idea, 10; Intelligence, 82; legacy, 268; order of things, 184; preoccupations, 71; problem, 4; realm, 184; roots, 349; system(s), 3, 5, 8, 83, 177
- metaphysics, 83, 349
- mind(s), ix, xxxiv, 42, 63, 72, 174, 215, 225, 226-28, 235, 240-42, 251-52, 266, 275, 299, 340, 343, 374, 385, 391, 433; alert, xvi; American, 238; Cartesian, 17, 342; classical, 234; colonisable, xxix; conscious, 64, 226; creative, 266; frames of, 235; enlightened, xxxvi; great, 281; hands and, 276; human, 9, 82, 227, 275; modern, xvi; Muslim, 153, 353; needs of the, 42; new, 234; Newton's, 253; of the individual, 249; popular, 22; practical, 281; production

Index

- of the, 230; products of, 229;
- quantitative statistical , 238; rules of
- the, 227; scientific, 58; state of, 67, 266;
- unconscious, 254; Westernising frame
- of, xxvi
- mindset, xxxvii, 244; Cartesian, 36;
- critical, xxxiii; foreign, 343; Marxist,
- 240
- miracle, 36, 71, 151, 300-01, 340, 398
- money, xxiv, 151, 281, 305
- monotheism, xvi, 17, 18, 73, 95-96, 113
- moral disarmament, xxxvii
- morality, 87, 95, 273, 294, 314, 390, 447
- movement(s), 8, 71, 129, 131-34, 140,
- 146, 174, 188, 206, 226, 230, 235, 243,
- 245-46, 250, 254, 263-64, 275, 291-92,
- 327, 351, 393, 406, 411-12, 445,
- action and, 282; activity and, 382;
- agent of, 245; and growth, 245; anti-
- colonial, xvii; anti-colonialist, xxxvi;
- concept of, 129; continuous, 188;
- creative, 331; free thinking and, xxiv,
- free thinking and, xxiv; global, 299;
- global decolonisation, xxxii;
- historical, 131-32, 135, 139-40;
- horizontal, 245; ideology and, xxv;
- independence, xxviii; individual's
- actions and, 206; Islamic renaissance,
- 411; *Islāh*, xxxvii, 209, 399, 412;
- Marxist, 132; migration, 120;
- nationalist ,406; of extragalactic
- nebulae, 8; of ideas, xxxii; of the earth,
- 37; phenomenal, 350; prophetic, xvi,
- 17-18, 20, 22-23, 38, 46, 83; reflex,
- 186; reform, 83; religious, 419;
- Renaissance, 270; revolutionary, xxx,
- xxxii; revolutionary spirit and, xxiv;
- scout, 121
- soul(s), 103, 135, 139, 189, 208, 252-53,
- 329, 351, 392, 400, 435-36, 446-47;
- and innate instincts, 297; and
- reason, 162; Bedouin, 72; constraints
- of the soul, 207; disquietude of, 203;
- dominion of the , 161; freshness of,
- 317; immorality of, 85; inner, 253;
- laws of the, 206; 'logic' of the, 207;
- Muslim, xxiv, 398; needs of the mind
- and, 42; of believer and non-believer,
- 81; realm of the, 166; voice of the, 207
- myriapod, 343, 459-64

N

- nābhi*, 20-22
- narrative, 89, 351, of Genesis on
- Abraham, 96, of humanity, 272; of
- solitude, 351
- nation(s), x, xxv, xxxvi, xxxvii, 3, 25, 88,
- 159, 167, 180, 267, 270, 272, 273, 298,
- 299, 302, 318, 325, 328-30, 332, 419,
- 441
- nature, 5, 9, 81, 104, 146, 183, 186-87,
- 204, 254, 263, 293, 324, 364, 373, 418,
- 443, 445, 447; factors of, 150; forces of,
- 151; human, 66, 122, 129, 207, 446;
- intrinsic, 340; instinctive laws of, 446;
- man's, 4; of creation, 96; metaphysical
- and spiritual, 161; of *quantity*, 5;
- original, 449; physical, 147; purpose of,
- 129; religious, 189; spiritual, 299; state
- of, 120
- nebula, 10

need(s), 42-45, 149, 262, 270, 305, 332-33, 368, 373, 413, 420, 442, 444; and utility, 168; basic, 373; elementary, 449; evolving, 390; fundamental, 442; for Qur'anic exegesis, 95; for salvation, 417; intellectual, 35; normal, 146; of Bedouin life, 71; material, 443; of Muslim society, 60; necessities and, 442; need theory, 449; of the species, 168; social, 330; specific, 333; to survive, 151; unsatisfied, 146

network(s), 160, 162, 195, 343, 360, 405; intellectual, xxxiii; of relations, 140-41, 160, 183-84, 186, 195-98, 377, 381; of internal bonds, 446; personal relations, 162; relational, 165; social, 160-61, 185, 196-97; social relations, 123, 140-42, 159-60, 162, 165, 168, 184, 207, society's relations, 208

noosphere, 249

nothingness, 63, 151-52, 370, 448, 463

O

occupation, German, xxvii; men under, 329-30; Nazi, xxiii; of Algeria, xxi, 419

order, bipolar world, xx; moral, 105, 382; social, 263, 268, 327, 374

organism, 129, 328

Orientalism, xvi, 34-35, Orientalist(s), 34-35; paradigm, xxvi

P

paganism, 210, 397-98; Roman, 382

pantheism, 17

particularism, 83, Jewish, 84

Pax Romana, 301

peace, 307, 314; and coexistence, xxxv; concept of, 307, 314; global movement towards, 299; global, 303; inner, 98; war and, 330; the problem of, 298, 306

peril, yellow, 415; metaphysical, 418

person(s), xxvi, 46, 139, 140, 142, 160, 171, 196, 204, 263, 271, 385, 397, 399-400, 416; Afro-Asian, 330; age of the, 174; civilising, 205; honest, 166; human, 262; ideas and, 398; needy, 353; person's conscience, 392; realm of, 140, 197, 262-63, 361, 364, 381, 384; solitary, 350; world of, 197, 263

persona, 186, meta-, 186

personality, 21, 185-86, 203, 364; African, 303; and behaviour, 183; habits and, x; of Abraham, 96; of the prophet, 19; structure, 185; unity of being and, 204

phenomena, 262, 340, 385, 407, 460; natural, 5; physical, 86, 444; pneumatological, 19; psychic, 19; psychological, 64; social, 119, 436; world of, 342

phenomenon, 4, 6, 8-9, 17-23, 26-27, 41-42, 64-65, 67, 69, 72, 86, 89, 106, 128, 132, 148-49, 173, 179-80, 183, 186, 195, 197-98, 228-29, 242-44, 251, 261-62, 264, 267, 274-77, 280, 292-94, 300, 304, 317, 329, 340, 350, 352, 362-63, 377, 382-83, 385, 397, 400, 407, 409, 414, 418, 441-42, 444, 449-59, 460, 463; aesthetic, 315; biological, 86; Christian, 444; economic, 132; electricity, 416; essential, 326; European, 409; grandeur of the Qur'anic, 82; historical, 264; intermittent, 67; natural, 236, 418; necessary, 326; objective, 18, of animal reproduction, 7; of chaotic accu-

Index

- mulation, 417; of civilisation, 444; of colonialism, 179; of enculturation, 245-46; of prophethood, 19; of pornography, 375; of "syncretism", 83; permanent, 26; pervasive, 151; prophetic, 5, 21, 63; physiological, 72; psychological, 23, 242; Qur'anic, 5, 33, 57, 64, 67, 72-73, 82; recurrence of, 18; religious, 3-5, 17-18, 46, 349; revolutionary, 216; social, 230; 242, 292; sociological, 316; static, 343; subjective, 18, 21; universal, 274; universality of, 18-19
- philosophy, xxi, xxii, 185, 233, 314, 330; aesthetic, 333; and the world, 178; Bennabi's, x, xiv-xv; Ibn Rushd's, 268; individual's, 270; Islamic theology and, ix; logic and, 39; moral, 263, 330; of man, 269; of science, xv; of society, 269-70; theological, 84; world of, 178-79
- physics, 389; history and, 382
- pluralism, Christian, 84
- polarisation, 390-91
- politics, x, xxxi, xxxiv, xl, 35, 63, 147, 177, 179, 298, 385, 399, 407
- polytheism, 17
- positivism, 36, 246, 352
- power(s), xxii, xxxiii, xxxviii, 25, 43, 135, 152, 187, 203, 207-08, 217, 227, 273, 300-01, 314, 340-41, 368-69, 374-75, 377, 382, 398, 409-10, 447; God's absolute, 83, cohesive, 273; colonial, 343; competition for, 302; conditioning, 376-77; creative, 82, 145, 327-28, 364; cult of, 189; deductive, 25; economic, 409; great, great, 180, 414; human conscience and, 133; idol and, 399; imperialist, xx, xxxii, xxxiii; Japanese, xxv; major, 329; of the idols, 4000; ordering, 67, political, 216; productive, 332; supernatural, 20; will and, 367-68, 413, 415; willpower, 281; wind, 149
- presence, xxi, 9, 70, 96, 226, 228, 271, 304, 361; Bennabi's, xxx, xxxviii, constant, 3; French, xx; of ideas, 266; of motivations and operational modalities, 171; of others, 294; of the Hypocrites, 69; of the object, 227; of the Prophet, 69; uncomfortable, 299
- production(s), 198, 262, 410; and consumption, 407; economic, 146; industrial, 352; literary, 280; means of, 442; needs and, 443; of goods, 104; of the land, 230; of the mind, 230; rhythm of, 146; water, 437
- progress, x, 129, 168, 233, 246-47, 267, 271, 360, 382, 406, 420; civilisational, x; concept of, 246; development and, 187; historical, 433; human, 10, 162; levels of, 269; man's, 40; material, 268; moral, 37, 187; social, 247; social and technological, 359
- prophecies, 20, 23-25; apocalyptic, 20; enigma of, 25; Jeremiah's, 26
- prophet(s), 18-27, 38, 42, 44-45, 67, 81, 83, 89, 279, 349; normal behaviour of, 24; pseudo-, 22-23
- prophethood, xvi, xxvi, 18, 21, 27; pseudo-, 19, 22-23
- prophetism: nature of, 22; pseudo-, 20
- protection, of homeless children, 274, 276
- p(P)rovidence, 37, 114; Divine, 113

psyche, 185, 263, 276, 447; African, 301; European, 229; human, 64; individual's, 186, 208; minds and, xxxiv; Muslim, 184
 psychoanalysis, 206, 441, Freudian, 445
 psychology, 45, 183-84, 189, 197, 233, 242, 298, 300, 307, 390; collective, 449; experimental, 184; Freudian, 206; Jung's, 361; of the European man, 230; of the prophet, 22; social relations and, xvi
 purpose(s), xxvii, xxxix, 39, 58, 69, 141, 198, 234, 265, 269-70, 341, 351-52, 408, 435, 448; -oriented, 135; and direction, 129; distinctive, 22; final, 449; of history, 129; intention and, 418; of life, 150; of movement, 131; of nature, 129; of the conditioning process of the conditioning process, 445; order and, 206; sense, of, 265; significance and, 187; ultimate, 3; unity of, 265

Q

qualities, xxii, 58, 123, 139, 161, 270, 293, 305
 quality, xxiv, 4, 45, 129, 160, 196, 229, 236, 253, 275, 281, 315, 354, 392, 435
quantity, 5, 7, 10, 159, 228, 306, 416, 435-36

R

race, 443; human, 13, 189
 rationalism, 272
 raw materials, 180, 416
 realism, 85, 293

reality, xi, 21, 41-42, 45, 63-64, 229, 233-34, 241, 292-93, 333, 367, 449, 459; alternative, 249; complex, 359; concrete, 393; Eternal, 135; historical, 103, 444; irrefutable, 36; objective, 226; of individuals, 368; of religion, 44; of shared civilisation, 326; psychological, 184; quantifiable, 409; social, 166, 178, 226-28, 233-34, 237, 240-41, 244, 261, 263, 328, 436, 438, 442; submission to, 292
 realm: of civilisation, 448; of human beings, 174, 361-62, of ideas, 140, 159, 174, 197-98, 246, 248, 343, 351, 359, 361-64, 368, 381, 384, 389, 392, 415, 462; of light, 135; of material things, 298; of objects, 140, 159, 173-74, 245-46, 249, 361, 364, 374, 381, 384, 390; of persons, 140, 197, 262-63, 361, 364, 381, 384; of the soul, 166; of things, 159, 236, 264; of universals, 235
 reason, 18, 19, 86, 207, 263, 447; age of, 208; and the intellect, 161; discursive, 84; judgement of, 207; path of, 400; phase of, 447 role of, 252; the soul and, 162, 207; thrust of, 84; voice of, 207, 446
 reflection(s), xxiv, xxx, xxxv, xlix, 33, 67, 70, 167, 173, 237, 241-42, 276, 280, 293, 298, 323-25, 339, 342, 352, 391, 418, 434, 442; informed, 70; insightful, xvii; of self-indulgence, 352; profound, xxi, 106, 349
 reform(s), x-xi, 33, 147, 268, 399; agrarian, 420; movement, 83; political, x; social, 122, 148

Index

- relation(s), 140-41, 160, 184, 250, 445;
 cultural, 326; indispensable, 160;
 internal, 127, 278, 280; international,
 ix; necessary social, 140; network of
 social, 159, 184, 377, order of, 128;
 personal, 161-62; psychosomatic, 363;
 social, xvi, 139, 142, 162, 165, 183, 196,
 197, 329, 377, 442
- relationship(s), 64, 82-83, 107, 141, 160,
 184, 196-97, 264, 266, 270, 275, 278-79,
 282, 332, 384, 389, 397, 399, 418, 435,
 441; aesthetic-ethical, 280; bet. ideas
 and persons, 398; bet. *i'jāz* and reli-
 gion, 43; bet. revelation and
 Muḥammad's self, 68; cooperative, 449;
 corrupt, 197; female, 69; functional,
 206, 445; gravitational, 6; idea-idol, 398;
 idea-person, 398; logical, 385; mathe-
 matical, 266; organic, 142, 264, 445;
 quantitative, 202, sacred, 398; social,
 165, 184, 354; sociological, 278
- relativity, 416
- religion(s), xi, xxvii, xl, 5, 33, 38, 42-46, 57,
 63, 86, 106, 183, 186, 189, 235-36, 328,
 441, 447, 449; Abrahamic, 89; advent
 of, 273; and technology, 147; a cosmic
 fact, 5; final, 45; *i'jāz* and, 43; impact of,
 187; Judaic, Christian and Muslim
 branches of, 96; "manly", 390;
 monotheistic, 38; new, 44-45, 207, 446;
 of Islam, 82; of the Book, 38; proofs of,
 38; reality of, 44; revealed, 43, 46, 81;
 role of, xvi, 188, 441, 449; secret of, 17;
 science and, 10; social function of, 447;
 study of, xxvi; tenets of, 9;
 transmission and propagation of, 43;
 truth of, 43
- religiosity, xxvii, 186
- renaissance, 267, 270, 398, 411, 412, 433;
 Algerian, 406; and reconstruction,
 204; culture of, 332; efforts of, 206;
 Islamic, 205, Japanese, 414; Muslim,
 34, 411, 414, 417, 419; of Vedic
 thought, 369; social, 204
- renewal, x, 95, 268, civilisational, ix-x,
 intellectual, x; negative, 268; of culture,
 269; positive, 268-69; process of, 268
- repression, 187, 206, 445, 462
- reproduction, animal, 7; of the species, 8
- resources, 71, 172, 196, 203, 301, 377, 390,
 462; accumulation of, 414; available,
 281, 414; collective intellectual, 159;
 financial, xxii; 436 invaluable, 317; lack
 of, 266; limited, 415; material, 350, 360,
 390, 414; meagre, 462; moderate, 283;
 necessary, 298, 406; new, 172; of men,
 150; of the Muslim soul, 398
- responsibility, xxx, 271, 318, 329, 464,
 common, 329; flight from, 292; for the
 future, 239; of education, 329
- revelation(s), xvi, 18, 38, 40, 58, 65-68, 83,
 97, 113, 390, 392, 419; amplitude of,
 67-68; chain of divine, 45;
 characteristics of, 69; cyclic, 17;
 decisive, 65; earlier, 83; esoteric, 17;
 flash of, 69; instant, 65; intermittent,
 65-66; of the Qur'an, 166; Qur'anic, 67,
 97, 374; single, 66, 68; successive, 65;
 supernatural value of, 70; unit of, 67-
 68

revolution(s), xxx, xxxi, 179, 215, 216, 217, 228, 292, 343, 381, 385, 392, 406, 420; Agricultural, 120; Algerian, xxx, xxxi, xxxii, xxxv, xxxvi, 215, 313, 385, 400, 419; betrayal of, 217; Chinese, 327; cultural, 292, 342, 369, 381, 460; French, 10, 382; Iranian, xxviii; Islamic, 390; political, xvii; pseudo-, 215; radical, 269; stage of, 343; violent, 292; Young Turks', 412

right(s), xxxix, 87, 98, 104, 105, 291-92, 307, 313, 353, 399-400; and wrong, 435; of the poor, 369

revival, Islamic, 268; literary, 36-37; Muslim emnicipation and, xxv, of the religious ideal, 208; Muslim society's, 419

rule(s), 8, 127, 186, 228, 266, 272, 360, 390, 435; administrative, 183; biological, 168; colonial, 303; ethical, 278; in sociology, 435; mathematical, 435; moral, 168; of conduct, 187; of conventional logic, 411; of honour, 374; of logic, 280; of the mind, 227

S

science(s), 4-5, 10, 63, 95, 149, 177, 233, 264, 274, 306, 340-42, 447-48; and arts, 447; and religion, 10; applied, 282; authority of, 10; Bennabi's philosophy of, xv; culture and, 341; engineering, xvi; exotic, 317-318; guise of, 400; human, 9, 317; livelihood, 448; men of, 9, 39; military, 342; natural, xxii, 119, 447; of civilisation, xvii; of language, 41; of mechanics, 382; of time, 152;

philosophy of science, xv; physical, ix; positive, 4, 177; quantum, 152; Qur'anic exegetical, 36; social, xxii, xli, 119; social science disciplines, xlii

scientism, 4

scripture(s), 59, 331; Hebrew, 83, 85; Holy, 46; Judaeo-Christian, 89, 96, 113

self, x, 22, 26, 27, 64, 82, 139, 185, 187, 188, 197, 226, 330; accidental, 26; atrophied, 67; authentic, 204; Bilāl bin Rabāh's, 207; conscious, 64, 188; human, 18, 21, 27, 197, 342; internal, 226; Muḥammad's, 64, 67-68, 70; of Jeremiah, 24; own, 361, 416; prophet(s)', 22, 26; real, 63; second, 26, 63; unconscious, 226; unreal, 63; whole, 188

self-: aggrandisement, xxxi; appointed, xxxviii; conceit, 282; discovery, 350; edification, xxiii; education, xxii; fulfillment, 367; importance, 196; indulgence, 352; preservation, 25, 151, 449; styled, xxxi; worth, 104

senility, 271, 364

shadow, 3, 186, 254, 314-15, 462

slavery, 88, 104-05, 417

snobbery, 60

socialism, 177, 242

societies, xx, 34, 120-21, 162, 177, 239, 252, 269, 279-80, 297, 316, 362, 370, 375-77, 383, 393, 405, 410, 414; advanced, 278; Afro-Asian, 297; ancient, 88; civilised, 159; contemporary, 168, 172; creation of, 205; defunct, 105; extinct, 184; Gallic and Carthaginian, 120, historical,

Index

- 120-21, 184, 369; human, 171;
Islamic, xi; lending, 120; Muslim, xi,
xxxiv, xxxv, 195, 279, 376, 393;
nascent, 369; previous, 300; primitive,
127; 184, 228, 234, 398; Soviet and
Chinese, 121
society, xl, 37, 88, 97, 103, 120-23, 127-29,
131, 133-35, 140-42, 159-62, 165-68,
171-74, 183-86, 189, 195-97, 202, 205,
207-08, 210, 228, 235-37, 239-50, 252,
261-64, 268-69, 271-73, 275-76, 278-
79, 282-83, 291-92, 293-94, 297, 300,
305, 318, 341-42, 359-61, 364, 367,
369-70, 373-77, 381-82, 384-85, 389-
90, 392, 397, 405-06, 409-11, 413, 415,
418, 446, 447, 449; age of, 184,
Algerian, 343; American, 120, 376-77;
and the individual, 292; Athenian, 179;
backward, 292; birth of human, 129;
birth of, 132, 185; British, 247;
Buddhist, 369; capitalist, 423; Chinese,
123; Christian, 160, 375, 410; civilised,
120, 134, 172, 272, 277, 374, 410, 417;
classes of, 271; classless, 161; collective
action of, 360; concept of, 127, 131;
concerted action of, 188, 205;
consumer, 173, 353; contemporary,
275; cultural life of, 235-36;
democratic, 122; destruction of, 374;
developed, 173, 409-10, 414-15; fixed,
173; of diseases of, 197; disintegration
of, 196; dynamic, 120, early Islamic,
161, 202, 206; efficiency of, 274;
Egyptian, 120; Eskimo, 120; ethical
structure of, 447; European, 120-22;
evolution of (human), xli, 171;
expanding, 390; formation of, 271;
genesis of (human), 121-22; genuis of,
280; Gallic, 122; global, 128; historical,
119-21, 172; historical task, 141;
human, xxxviii, xli, 123, 129, 140, 145,
168, 188, 201-02, 204, 293; ideological,
121; individual and, 184, 208, 248, 270,
291, 447; Islamic, 121-22, 141, 160,
184, 203, 207, 248, 250, 274-75, 282,
446; *Jāhili* (Arab), 165-68, 174, 374;
just, 406; life of, 139; life-affirming,
268; lifestyle of, 244, 264, 278, 291;
man and, xxii, xli; Marxist, 262;
material life of, 236; material
conditions of, 237; members of, 123,
271, 273, 297; mind and, 235; mission
of, 123; modern, 105, 152, 228;
monotheistic, 85, 88; moral edifice,
208; multi-layered, 122; Muslim, xxvi,
41, 60, 159, 162, 174-75, 178, 195, 197-
98, 202, 204, 247-48, 279, 353-54, 369-
70, 375, 377, 385, 389, 393, 411-12,
419, 433, 435; nascent (Muslim), 317,
368, 376, 382, 418, 446; natural, 119;
needs of (Muslim), 60, 413; nature
and, 364; new, xix, 120, 174, 274, 382;
nucleus of, 128; objectives of, 272; one-
layer, 121; origin of, 119; original, 120;
philosophy of, 269-70; psychological
conditions of, 447; political, 246; post-
civilised, 172-73; power of, 368; pre-
civilised, 172, 367, primitive, 119, 278;
374; progress of, 359; reconstruction
of, 159; rise of Islamic, 134; Roman,
120; Sino-Mongolian, 120; species
and, 127; spiritual boundaries of, 250;

- stationary, 119; structural variation of human, 122; sociological definition of, 129; Soviet, 370; Soviet communist, 353; structure of, 121, 291, 447; structured, 185; tribal, 173; types of human, 279; types of, 119; underdeveloped, 410; unit of, 184; vocation of, 279; wealth of, 159-60; Western, 178, 279, 352, 410-11, 413
- sociologist(s), 4, 139, 172, 208, 240, 374; French, 342; historians and, 447; Iranian, 462
- sociology, xxxiv, 129, 139, 178-79, 186, 201, 233, 298, 339, 352, 407, 435; fundamental laws of, 399; Islamic-Arabic, 225; normative, xxxix; of the Third World, 407; theology and, ix
- soil, 142, 145-47, 149-51, 198, 248, 250-51, 301, 416-20, 437
- soul(s), 81, 103, 135, 139, 161, 189, 207-08, 252-53, 329, 341, 351, 392, 400, 435-36, 446-47; and reason, 162, Bedouin, 71-72, child's, 276, constraints of the, 207, disquietude of, 203, freshness of, 317, immortality of the, 85, 351, inner, 253, laws of the, 206, logic of the, 207, Muslim, xxiv, 398, realm of the, 166, needs of the mind and, 42; voice of the, 207
- species, 129, 142, 168, 171, 186-87, 304, 307, 368; and society, 127; autonomous, 8; extinct, 405; human, 185, 298, 359, 375; development of the, 187; needs of the, 168; preservation of the, 187; reproduction of the, 8; survival of the, 205; unity of the, 7; man, 8; woman, 8
- spirit, 33, 73, 84, 202, 237-38, 249, 273, 275, 300, 306, 389, 419-20, 446, 448; centripetal, 298; Christian, 443; classical, 234, 237; collective, 151, 153; collective mentality and, 275; culture as product of the, 235; form and, xli; free, xxxii; German, 340; Holy, 73; human, 104; *Islāhist*, 398; *Jāhili*, 229; law of the, 446; monotheistic, 74; modern European, 419; moral, 273; new, 268; noble, xxix; of Adam, 107; of Bandung, 313; of decline, 146; of Geneva, 313-14; of Islam, 274; of the community, 269; of the pre-Qur'anic language, 71; poetic, 315; purity of, xxxvi; revolutionary, xxiv, xxviii, 216; transparent, xxi
- spiritualism, 272
- spirituality, xvi, Islamic, xi
- stage(s), 6, 9, 40, 45, 133, 141, 145-46, 149, 160-62, 172-73, 178, 206, 225, 230, 239, 245, 248, 253, 267, 274, 293, 298, 307, 314-15, 328, 343, 351, 360-61, 364, 374-77, 381, 393, 397, 399, 410, 444, 448; advanced, 3; bygone, 127; civilised, 369; dynamic, 245; embryonic, 341; experimental, 152; final, 161; first, 248; formative, 142, 160, 162, 185, 369; historical, 174, 261; initial, 128, 207-08, 377, 446; intermediate, 444; morphological, 171; new, 208, 390; object, 173; of development, 171-72; of "existence", 228; of "presence", 228; original, 161;

Index

post-civilisation, 369; pre-civilisation, 129, 173, 434, 437, 448; pre-civilised, 381; primitive, 304; primitive dialectal, 72; psychological, 364, 375; second, 161, 248, 382; societal, 171; static, 245; third, 208, 248, 377

stagnation, xi, 131, 146; intellectual, 266; rigidity and, xi

struggle(s), xxxvii, 179, 330, 415; anti-colonialist, xxxvii, 376; ideological, 172; for liberation, 330; political, xxxvi, 412

subconscious, (the), 64, 252

subjectivity, 252, 263, 384, 390; enrichment of, 254; of the ego, 187

survival, 300, 330, 359, 464; and existence, 301; and well-being of all, xxi; conditions of, 326; instinct of self-preservation and, 151; of the fittest, 374; of the species, 205

symbolism, 230, 331

syncretism, 20, 83, 329, 343; abusive, 325

synthesis, 132, 147, 165, 187, 261-64, 267, 280, 291, 303, 306, 323-25, 328, 416-17, 437; artificial, 329; bio-historical, 441; Buddhist, 324; general, 261, 263, 265; grand synthesis, 263; historical, 419; human, 303; of civilisation, 419, 438, 441; of history, 147; of man, soil, and time, 301, 418-20; of social realms, 140; of the Christian spirit and Germanic traditions, 443; of universal culture, 324; partial, 263; pedagogical, 263-64; perspective of, 264; psychological, 261; psychosynthesis, 261; logical, social, 183;

system(s), xxxiv, 4-5, 8-9, 35-36, 177-78, 331, 362; basic, 315; belief, 9; caste, 183; coherent, 9, 412; colonial, xix, xxiv, xxvi, xxvii; colonial epistemic, xxvi; economic, 216; exegetical, 36-37; geometric, 4; Hegelian, 178; hydrographic and hygrometric, 150; ideological, 362; intellectual, 268; legal, 127; materialistic, 5, 8; metaphysical, 3, 8, 83, 177; nervous, 463; North African flora, 150; of classical exegesis, 35-36; of conditioned reflexes, 184-85; of ideas, 367; of social reflexes, 187; of values, xxiii; philosophical, 5, 178; physical, 7; political, 413; religious, 83, 171; religious, 83, 171; secular, 87; socio-cultural, 413; theological, 83-84

T

tajdid, x

take-off, economic, 172; of the Soviet Union, 369

takwīn, 86

teaching(s), 43, 95, 210, 270; method, 369; moral, 81; of the Gospel, 419; of the Marxist school, 139; of the Qur'an, xli, xli; process, 269, Qur'anic, 66, 178, 369; religious, 44

technique(s), xxxvi, 235, 264-65, 340, 349, 381; Cartesian, 35; dramatic, 251; human intellectual, 58; industrial, 442; literary, 397; manufacturing, 306; new, 73, 149; social, 177, 381

technology, 274, 294, 381; reforestation, 150; religion and, 147

- testimony, xv, 18, 19, 21, 59, 104, 107;
 Bennabi's xx, xxi; collective, 19;
 credible, 107; direct, 165; of Che
 Guevara, 215; of miracles, 43; of the
 prophet, 18; supreme, 113
thaqāfah, 225, 229, 230
 theology, 37; Islamic, ix, 393
 thesis, 17, 23, 132, 236, 243, 302; and
 anti-thesis, 132; Marxist, 442; on
 Asianism, xxv; on prophethood, 22;
 on religion, xxvi, xxxvii
 thought(s), x, xvi, xxvi, xxxvi, 35, 67, 70,
 72, 185-86, 229, 239-40, 247, 272, 343,
 354, 360, 362, 389, 460; and action,
 152, 171, 411; and ideas, 266; and
 politics, 177; and work of Ibn
 Khaldūn, 318; Bennabi's, x, xiii-xvii,
 xlii; Buddhist, 106, 418; Cartesian, 36,
 63; Christian, 83-84; consoling, xxiv;
 creative, xiv; currents of, 21, 234; dead,
 66; empirical, 105; fertilisation of,
 240; independent, 460; Islamic
 economic, xxxix; Islamic thought, xvii,
 xxxv, xlii, 96, 104, 353; Marxist, 105,
 132, 177, 236, 240, 269; modes of, 390;
 monotheistic, 22, 46, 83-85, 95-97,
 113; monotheistic stream of, 73;
 movements of, 250; Muslim scientific,
 37; Muslim, xvi, xvii, 34-36, 400;
 nature of, 233; new, 177; of Gobineau,
 304; Qur'anic, 84; rabbinical thought,
 83; religious, 3, 10, 17, 22-23, 71, 73,
 96; rigour of, 370; schools of, xxii, 132,
 235, 244; scientific, 10, 105; structure
 of, 329; theological, 84; universal, 72;
 Vedic, 369; Western, 352-53
 time, xi, xv, xvii, xix, xxi-xxii, xxvi-xxx,
 xxxiii, xxxix-xlii, 3, 6, 17, 20, 23, 26, 35-
 36, 38, 42, 45, 57-59, 64-66, 68, 70-71,
 82, 85, 88-89, 98, 104-07, 122-23, 127-
 28, 139, 141-42, 145-46, 150-53, 159,
 167, 174, 183, 195, 197, 204, 206, 227-
 28, 239-40, 246-48, 264-65, 268, 274,
 278-80, 301, 315, 323, 327, 329, 331-
 32, 343, 350-52, 359, 361, 374, 383,
 389-91, 393, 399-400, 411-12, 415-20,
 436-37, 442, 446, 448, 460, 462-63
 totemism, 3
 trade, 331; illicit, 376
 tradition(s), xvii, xxi, xxxii, xxxv, xxxvii,
 xli, 3, 20, 35, 60, 72, 103, 113, 141, 183,
 189, 210, 234-36, 252, 268, 278, 327,
 330, 332; Abrahamic, 113; Afro-Asian,
 330-31; Arab-Islamic, xvii; artistic,
 279; Christian, 57; classical, 238;
 cultural, 279; established customs and,
 104; Germanic, 443; Jewish, 83; liberal,
 105; millennial-long, 275;
 monotheistic, 82; moral, 189; Muslim
 legal, 3; norms and, 123; of the
 Renaissance, 237; Orientalist, 35;
 Prophetic, 121; religious, 45;
 Renaissance, 235; Roman, 304; social,
 248; societal, 252; spiritual, 82; values
 and, 340
 transformation(s), x, xx, 7, 41, 44, 64, 73,
 87, 103, 119, 140, 161, 167, 215, 217,
 236, 238, 274, 331-32, 363, 374, 381-
 82, 400, 446; cultural, 327;
 fundamental, 448; gradual, 364;
 historical, 120; law of energy, 382; of
 culture, 238; of soil, 417; period of, 167;

Index

process of, 120, 128; profound, 381;
psychological, 208, 362; radical, 207,
381; sudden, 121, 167, 217; visible, 363
transgression, 392, of moral rules, 168
tropism(s), 239; cultural, 243
truth, 39, 42-44, 66, 71, 83, 86, 88, 106-07,
128, 134, 141, 145, 184, 201, 206, 210,
227, 279, 292, 329, 331, 343, 349, 435;
Absolute, 18

U

ummah, xiii, xxxix, 128, 203; Muslim,
xvi, 204
unconscious, the, 26-67, 186, 226, 251,
254, 270; realm of the, 185
unconsciousness, 67, 253
underdevelopment, 172, 313, 316, 406,
407, 408, 410, 413-15, 420; concept of,
409; culture of, 316; sociology of, 463
unemployment, 407, 414
unity, xli, 7, 84, 140, 150, 204-05, 261, 265,
326
universe(s), 4, 8, 86, 96, 262, 349, 352;
Greek, 367; of ideas, 385; of persons,
262; of things, 352
usury (*ribā*), 105

V

value(s), x, 33, 43, 106, 147, 151, 160, 168,
177, 202, 209-10, 292, 299, 316, 368,
461; aesthetic, 280, 331; and concepts,
xxxviii; and traditions, 340; binding,
274; Christian, 274; constructive, 343;
cultural, 247, 249, 262-63, 294, 317,
325, 328, 333; diminished, 113; dynamic,
131-32; economic, 316; educational,

65; enduring, 317; ethical, xxxii, 165,
280, 377, 381; extreme, 407;
fundamental, 145; human, 341; ideals
and, 209-10; intellectual, 248; intrinsic,
400, 435; Islamic, xxxix, 268, 412;
Islamic ideal and, 209; judgement, 184;
liberal, xxvii; market, 105; materialistic,
377; moral, 60, 105, 165-68, 87, 183,
189, 198; new, 391; norms and, 269;
objective, 177, 253; of argument, 36; of
civilisation, 420; of positive facts, 19; of
time, 151; human effort and soil
products, 145; original, 113; principles
and, 254; psycho-temporal, 368;
psycho-temporal, 368, 445; rational, 5;
realm of ideas and, x; redemptive, 217;
relative, 5; religious, 87; sacred, 382;
social, x, 147, 270, 182, 294, 315, 326,
331; spiritual and historical, 330;
supernatural, 70; symbolic, 331;
system of, xxiii; technical, 341;
traditional, 267
vision(s), xxvi, 21, 85, 342, 406; clarity of,
406; coherent, xxxix; comprehensive,
xxxix; ecumenical, xxxii; epistemic,
442; intellectual, xxi, xxxiii;
monolithic, 145; moral, xxvi; of God,
351; philosophical, xxi, xli; profound,
25

W

Wahhabism, xxv
war, xxiii, xxiv, xxx, 10, 71, 159, 180, 196,
198, 245, 306, 307, 330, 340, 417;
machinery, xxix; War of
Independence, xxv, xxix; Russo-

- Japanese, 414; Arab-Israeli Six-Day, xvii; spirit and means of, 306
- wealth, xvi, xxxv, 21, 151, 159-60, 205, 281, 331, 369, 414; capital and, 129; of ideas, 442; material, 171; social, 159
- will, 24, 64, 70, 83, 188, 324, 368, 369, 409, 410, 419; and potential, 417; and power, 367-68, 413, 415; civilisational, x; collective, 368, 418; divine, 450; efforts and, 151; free, 22, 24; God's will, xlv; imperial, 301; individual's, 367; lack of, 131; man's, 150; Muḥammad's, 67; of civilisation, 368; of God, 44, 95; of individuals, 236; of men, 323; power and, 410; prescriptive, 67; self's, 188; thought and, 460; unwavering, 343; willpower, 281
- wisdom, 44, 463; and pragmatism, xi; conventional, xxvi; divine, 44 God's, 39; intrinsic, xxiii; Qur'anic, 134
- work(s), 301, 307, 350-51, 359, 412, 414, 460-62; efficacy of, 147; instruments of, 236; loss of motivation, 149; of culture, 325; of Islam, 206; of the classical spirit, 234; values of, 316
- world(s), xiii-xv, 3, 83, 132-33, 141, 151-52, 173, 177, 247, 277, 302-06, 313-15, 317, 329, 333, 390, 446; African vocation in the, 318; ancient, 104, 301; and history, 174; Arab, 225, 235, 239, 280, 414, 438; Arab-Muslim, xvii, 261, 299; Arab and Muslim, 239-40; contemporary, xl, 306; end of the, 85, 113; human, 201, 305, 415; ideological map of the, 369; interpretation of the, 177; Judaeo-Christian, 84; love of the, 141, 195; modern, xiv, xli, 210; museums, 40, 45; Muslim, xvii, xxi, xxv, xxxii, xxxvii, 33, 37-38, 146-47, 152, 172-74, 247, 268, 299, 352, 411-12, 414-15, 433-38; Muslim and Western, xvi; of fashion and industry, 254; of human beings, 397; of people, 384; of phenomena, 342; of the twentieth century, 405; of things, 384, 415; philosophical development and becoming of the, 178-79; richest libraries in the, 159; superficial engagement with the, 248; the richest in the, 417; *ummah* and the, xxxix
- worldview, Islamic, xxiii, xli; secular atheistic, 9; Semitic, 349

Z

- za'im*, 174
- zakāh*, 103, 203, 369, 410
- zaouias*, 37, 398
- zeal, revolutionary, xxxvii
- zerdas*, 398-99