Among traditionally educated scholars in the Islamic world there is much disagreement on the crises that afflict modern Muslim societies and how best to deal with them, and the debates have grown more urgent since 9/11. Through an analysis of the work of Muhammad Rashid Rida and Yusuf al-Qaradawi in the Arab Middle East and a number of scholars belonging to the Deobandi orientation in colonial and contemporary South Asia, this book examines some of the most important issues facing the Muslim world since the late nineteenth century. These include the challenges to the binding claims of a long-established scholarly consensus, evolving conceptions of the common good, and discourses on religious education, the legal rights of women, social and economic justice, and violence and terrorism. The debates, marked by extensive engagement with Islam’s foundational texts and legal tradition, afford vital insights into the ongoing contestations on religious authority and on evolving conceptions of Islam in the Muslim public sphere. This wide-ranging study by a leading scholar of Islamic intellectual history provides the depth and the comparative perspective necessary for an understanding of the ferment that characterizes contemporary Islam.

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Modern Islamic Thought in a Radical Age

Religious Authority and Internal Criticism

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Acknowledgments

It would not have been possible for me to begin, let alone to complete, this book without the financial support of several institutions. These include the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton, both of which awarded me generous fellowships to work on this project, as well as Brown University and Princeton University, which provided additional funding in the form of research leaves. I am especially grateful to Patricia Rosenfield at the Carnegie Corporation and to Patricia Crone at the Institute for Advanced Study for their support and encouragement.

I have incurred many debts of gratitude in the course of my work on this project. For their much appreciated help, comments, advice, and encouragement, I would like to mention, in particular, Lisa Anderson, Zafar Ishaq Ansari, Khalid Aziz, Thomas Biersteker, Dale F. Eickelman, Tarek Elgawhary, David Gilmartin, M. Şükrü Hanioğlu, Robert W. Hefner, Vinod K. Jairath, Gudrun Krämer, Naheed Lateef, Waris Mazhari, Farina Mir, Ebrahim Moosa, Fahim Akhtar Nadwi, Madawi al-Rasheed, Armando Salvatore, Andrew Shryock, Amin Usmani, and Amin Venjara. I would also like to thank my students, undergraduate as well as graduate, for opportunities to clarify some of the ideas set forth in this book and for helping me make them more accessible. Above all, I am grateful to Michael Cook for a sensitive reading of an earlier draft. His vast erudition and his astute and unfailingly constructive comments have helped make this a better book. I also thank Marigold Acland, my editor at Cambridge University Press, for her interest in this book and her support. Working with her has been a privilege and a pleasure. Sarika Narula and Shana Meyer oversaw various stages of the book’s production and Susan Kauffman of PETT Fox, Inc. copyedited the manuscript. I am deeply appreciative of all their assistance.

I have received a great deal of support from library staff at several institutions. In particular, the librarians and the interlibrary loan and Borrow Direct offices at Brown University, the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton University, as well as at the Islamic Research Institute, Islamabad, have been crucial to this research. At Princeton’s Firestone Library, I would especially like to thank David Magier and Gary Hausman for their help with some hard-to-find materials.

I was privileged to present earlier iterations of some portions of this book at a number of venues. These include Dartmouth College; Harvard University; the
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World, Leiden; the Islamic Research Institute, Islamabad; Lehigh University; Lahore University of Management Sciences; Yale Law School’s Middle East Legal Studies Seminar; Oxford University; Princeton University; the Theology Faculty of Ankara University; University of California Los Angeles; University of Hyderabad; and the University of Michigan.

I thank the organizers of these lectures and conferences for inviting me, and their audiences for their interest, questions, and comments. With grateful acknowledgment to the publishers, I draw here on some of the material published or forthcoming as articles in Armando Salvatore and Dale F. Eickelman, eds., Public Islam and the Common Good (Leiden: Brill, 2004); Gudrun Kramer and Sabine Schmidtke, eds., Speaking for Islam (Leiden: Brill, 2006); Andrew Shryock, ed., Islamophobia/Islamophilia (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010); Islamic Studies (Islamabad), 49 (2010); and David Gilmartin and Usha Sanyal, eds., Muslim Voices (Delhi: Yoda Press, forthcoming).

This book has long been in the making. I thank Shaista Azizalam, Zaynab Zaman, and Mustafa Zaman for their forbearance during these years, and for their companionship.
A Note on Transliteration, Spelling, and Other Conventions

With the exception of the ` to signify the Arabic letter `ayn (as in `Umar or shari`a) and ’ to represent the hamza (as in Qur’an), diacritics are not used in this book. The hamza itself is only used when it occurs within a word (as in Qur’an) but not when it occurs at the end (thus `ulama rather than `ulama’). With the notable exception of the term `ulama (singular: `alim), the plural forms are usually indicated by adding an “s” to the word in the singular, as in madrasas (rather than madaris) or fatwas (rather than fatawa). In the interest of consistency, the spellings of Arabic and Urdu words, and of Muslim names, follow the convention used for Arabic consonants by the International Journal of Middle East Studies.

Certain terms that occur repeatedly in the book, such as shari`a and `ulama, are not italicized. Other Arabic and Urdu words are italicized at their first occurrence, but usually not afterwards. When the fuller version of an Arab name is not being used, I also dispense with the Arabic definite article al- (e.g., Yusuf al-Qaradawi but subsequently Qaradawi).

This map identifies the principal places referred to in the book. Since it is not limited to a single period, some of the place names and what they denote have changed.