

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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# FOREWORD

HAGGAG ALI'S *Mapping the Secular Mind: Modernity's Quest for a Godless Utopia* critically examines issues of reason, rationality, and secular materialism, to explore how these mental perceptions, or ways of mapping the world, have affected human interaction and sociological development. He does this by comparing and contrasting the ideas of Abdelwahab M. Elmessiri (1938–2008) and Zygmunt Bauman (1925), focusing on similarities and differences in their thinking, what influenced their perspectives (specifically Marxism), and the historical context of their life and work. Bauman for instance, an eminent Jewish scholar, has known war and exile and is strongly anti-Zionist. The dynamics are interesting.

In doing so, Ali is also able to introduce and study some of the most important epistemological metaphors used to describe, analyse and understand society and the human condition. For instance, the analogies of man and society as a machine (the clockwork universe) and of society as an organism were heavily criticised by Elmessiri.

Renowned for their work, both thinkers have been highly influential in their field. Zygmunt Bauman is retired Emeritus Professor at the University of Leeds and one of the world's foremost sociologists. A prolific author, his most famous and compelling publication is arguably *Modernity and the Holocaust* (1989), discussed by Ali at length. In the work Bauman makes the remarkable case that rather than being an example of accidental deviation from modern principles, including rationalism, the Holocaust, as well as the whole Nazi enterprise, were in fact consistent with the very essence of modernity and its worldview, Social Darwinism taken to its logical course. The reasons underpinning the rise of the fascist state are examined in order to warn humanity of the dangers of a modernity that furnishes the "necessary conditions" for its undertaking and for the neatly legitimised disappearance of unwanted people.

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The late Egyptian scholar Abdelwahab M. Elmessiri, one of the foremost intellectuals of his age, was Professor Emeritus of English literature and critical theory at Ain Shams University, Cairo. Also a prolific writer he published many articles and books on various subjects including, Zionism, modernism, postmodernism, secularism, and materialist philosophy. Elmessiri was particularly interested in the issue of bias in the social sciences and how this influenced the way in which reality was perceived, deconstructed and reconstructed.

According to Ali, the various epistemological paradigms that form the foundations of Western thought, whilst challenging religion's function as the route to Ultimate Truth and targeting it as the source of human primitiveness, have in the postmodern era themselves failed to deliver. The many hands that made up Enlightenment philosophers (or *les philosophes* as they are referred to in French) had a grand plan: to fashion an earthly paradise of man's own making, doing away with ignorance, superstition and backwardness. This was to be achieved through the vehicles of science, rationalism, and reason, with Man at the helm – that is at the centre of all discourse and of all that matters, controlling and shaping his destiny, and modeling society under new norms of behaviour.

Some of this was fantasy. Postmodern society is in fact dysfunctional on many levels. It is also a far cry from the utilitarian utopia so enthusiastically envisaged by a philosophy that to this day views the mind as self-sufficient for human progress. Ali points to the delusions of such utopianist thinking.

Written in a clear and lucid style, the book will benefit both general and specialist readers, increasing their awareness of the question of cognitive mapping, and how human beings devise paradigms to form a mental picture of the world around them.

This study is being published to widen discourse, invite scholars to respond, and hopefully pave the way for further research. Readers may agree with some of the issues raised, and disagree with others, but it is hoped that for the most part both general and specialist readers will benefit from the perspective offered and the overall issues examined.

Where dates are cited according to the Islamic calendar (hijrah) they are labelled AH. Otherwise they follow the Gregorian calendar

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and labelled CE where necessary. Arabic words are italicized except for those which have entered common usage. Diacritical marks have been added only to those Arabic names not considered modern. English translations taken from Arabic references are those of the author.

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