Forty or fifty years ago, Islam still enjoyed a fairly favorable image in the Western world, marred only marginally by the “oil shaykhs” who had provided, at least for German streets and highways, a series of pleasurably car-free Sundays. Westerners marveled at the ancient civilizations of the Islamic world and cherished the magic of Oriental fairy tales. Educated readers were familiar with Goethe’s *West–Eastern Divan*, and operas occasionally staged *Der Barbier von Bagdad* by Peter Cornelius (without doubt, one of the wittiest German comic operas ever composed). However, there were only a few books in existence that offered a comprehensive account of the Islamic world and its history. Their authors were mostly professors who had devoted at least half their scholarly lives to the study of difficult Arabic, Persian, or Turkish texts, or weather-tanned travelers, diplomats, and journalists who had spent at least half their lives in Islamic countries.

Today the situation is almost entirely reversed. After the collapse of the Eastern bloc, “Islam” has successfully been established (beginning long before September 11, 2001) as a surrogate enemy. Not since the sermons of the Crusades has its image in Europe been as bad as it is today. It is true, of course, that the romantic *Arabian Nights* image also did not depict reality. But that image was closer to reality than the caricature developed in the last few decades.

The establishment of this image is accompanied by a miraculous proliferation of “experts” on Islam. The shelves of bookshops are crammed with books by authors who cannot decipher a single Arabic letter and whose contacts with the Islamic world are limited to an all-inclusive trip to Tunisia, but who feel entitled to explain to their readers “the essence of Islam.” In view of this barrage of
books, the effort expended for this book seems to be quite unfashionable. It was thanks to the initiative of two noble institutions that I was able to write it.

The first is the Institute for Advanced Study, Berlin, which allowed me, during the academic year 2006/2007, to spend the best year of my life, granting me the time to get acquainted with aspects of the Islamic civilizations that had heretofore remained marginal to my work. Here I met friends and colleagues who supplied me with fresh ideas and who put misrouted approaches on the right track; among these were Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, Thomas Hauschild, Almut Höfert, Christoph Möllers, Valeska von Rosen, Alain Schnapp, Suha Taji-Farouki, Muhammad S. Umar, and Andreas Voßkuhle.

The second institution is the Cluster of Excellence “Religion and Politics in the Cultures of Pre-modern and Modern Times” at the University of Münster, which—almost immediately following my year at Berlin’s Institute for Advanced Study—offered me working conditions that allowed me to finish this book without much delay. I should like to name here Barbara Stollberg-Rilinger as a representative of all the colleagues whose encouragement and criticism have animated the completion of this book.

Finally, I would like to mention Hinrich Biesterfeldt, Norbert Oberauer, Thomas Birkel, and, again, Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, who have read the manuscript of my book, partly or entirely, and whose advice I have gratefully accepted (or stubbornly ignored).

At both the Institute for Advanced Study and the Cluster of Excellence, I was able to develop a theory that has its origins in a much older observation of mine. Originally, I had suspected that the contradictions that a reader of classical Islamic texts meets are not contradictions that their authors failed to resolve. Instead, they are contradictions that the authors did not aspire to resolve in the first place. Clearly, there are societies in which norms and values that are hardly compatible with each other may coexist side by side, without anyone insisting on the exclusive legitimacy of their respective norms and values, and sometimes even allowing for a peaceful coexistence of diverging norms and values in one and the same person. Members of such societies face the vague and equivocal aspects of life with equanimity, and do not so much pursue indisputable truths as remain content with seeking probable solutions. In these societies, equivocality is not only willingly accepted, but is even a welcome asset, in the sense that people derive pleasure from creating equivocality in literature and the arts.

In order to describe this phenomenon, I am making use of the concept of tolerance of ambiguity, a concept originally developed in psychology that has not yet found its place in cultural studies—although it must be stated that different societies and epochs are strongly characterized by the way people experience
equivocality, vagueness, complexity, and plurality, and how they deal with these experiences. In certain times and places, people endeavor to obliterate as many ambiguities as possible, and to create a world of definiteness and of absolute truths. In other places and times, they are content merely to domesticate ambiguity. Even in these latter circumstances, the infinite possibilities for understanding and interpreting the world are reduced, but no attempt is made to eliminate them; rather, the goal is only to keep them limited, in order to be able to live with them. The resulting complexity is not distrusted, but gratefully accepted.

The consequences for society of these respective approaches are decisive. Religion, law and politics, literature and the arts, the ways that sex is dealt with, relations with friends, strangers, and minorities—there is scarcely an area of any society that is not significantly informed by the degree of tolerance of ambiguity practiced by its members. Therefore, it is one aim of this book to show that the experience of ambiguity, and the attitudes toward it, constitute a major field of research in cultural studies.

At the same time, this study is also, and primarily, a cultural history of Islam covering various aspects. A major focus is the contrast between the classical Islamic world, as shown by Arabic documents from Egypt to Iran between roughly 900 to 1500 CE, and the modern period, covering the last two centuries. Within this frame, I try to show how, in classical times, the areas of law and religion, language and literature, ideas about politics and sex, and contact with "the stranger" were characterized by an equanimous acceptance of complexity and ambiguity, and often by an exuberant pleasure in them. This high degree of tolerance of ambiguity vanished, however, and yielded to the intolerance of ambiguity that conspicuously marks the present time. Many Western observers of Islamic culture now profess to discern in this intolerance of ambiguity the true face of Islam—although all they see is their own reflection in the mirror. It will be one of the aims of this book to demonstrate that the West had a share in the development of this hostility against ambiguity. Therefore, this book also contains a piece of cultural history of the West and rectifies a number of judgments on "Islam as such" that the West has felt itself entitled to issue.

This account of cultural history builds upon certain theoretical premises; therefore, I have included a theoretical chapter after the introductory one. However, this should not deter the reader who is interested mainly in cultural history. The ensuing chapters move from the religious sphere to the secular; the connecting chapter 6 ("The Islamization of Islam") argues that Islamic cultures are not characterized by an inherently higher degree of religiosity than other cultures possess. If this study on the perception of complexity in the Islamic
world contributes to a more acute understanding of the fact that Islam always signifies complexity, and that “Islam as such” does not exist, then this book has attained an important aim.

Since the first publication of the German original of this book, ten years have passed. During this period, some fields discussed in this book have been the object of intensive research, for example the fields of Islamic law and jurisprudence; other fields, such as Arabic literary history, have met with less interest. However, a consistent incorporation of the relevant publications that have appeared during this time would have resulted in further delay of the publication of this English version without leading to substantial changes in my arguments. Therefore, I have confined my revisions to correcting a few mistakes and updating some references in the notes. I also refrained from an extensive discussion of Shahab Ahmed’s book *What Is Islam?*, with which this book has occasionally been compared, but I should like to refer the reader to Frank Griffel’s detailed critical study of both books. Griffel is also the author of an essay that, in several respects, develops arguments presented in the present book. My recent essay on “Die Vereindeutigung der Welt” (Reducing the world to black and white), which has appeared in the same series as Griffel’s essay, complements the ideas and arguments presented here concerning Western modernity, an aspect that this book addresses only in a rather general manner.