

Western Columnists, Please do your Homework when Writing on Islam!

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Some readers may recall that I wrote an article recently with the title, **Western Intellectuals Need to Study Islam before Making Comments on the Subject**. It was prompted by William Buckley's comments on Islam in the aftermath of the destructive riots in France in November 2005.

I visit the topic again, after reading an editorial in *The Wall Street Journal* of February 11, 2006, "**Clash of Civilization: The dictators behind those Muslim cartoon protests.**" The article began with comments on the violent riots that were going on in the Muslim world over the cartoons that had portrayed Muhammad in a Danish newspaper.

First, I begin with some very worthwhile quotes:

"The Western philosophical tradition is founded on the belief that the execution of Socrates for blaspheming the gods of Athens was an injustice. When British Muslims carry placards reading "Butcher those who mock Islam," they are making their differences with that tradition depressingly plain.

"Yet mass demonstrations almost never represent mainstream public sentiment in the West. Why then should we take it as given that they do among Muslims? Every society has its silent majorities, but it's only in democracies that those majorities exercise a decisive influence. If Islamic societies seem premodern and violent, this surely has something to do with the fact that most Muslim countries today are places where there is no democracy; where silent majorities stay silent; where, to adapt W.H. Auden, 'only the man behind the rifle has free speech.'

"Put simply, what we have witnessed isn't the proverbial rage of the Arab street. It's an orchestrated effort by illiberal regimes, colluding with fundamentalist clerics, to conjure the illusion of Muslim rage for their own political purposes. The Iranian mullahs seek to discredit Denmark as it assumes the rotating presidency of the U.N. Security Council, where Iran's nuclear program is being discussed. The secular Allawite regime in Syria wants to shore up its ties with the Sunni religious establishment, especially now that Bashar Assad's former vice president has declared a government in exile. The Saudis want to put behind them the latest stampede at the annual Hajj, where some 350 pilgrims were killed.

"There's a lesson in this for those who would have us believe that what this cartoon conflagration represents is a conflict of civilizations. There is a conflict all right, not between civilizations, but within one, and it pits those who would make Islam barbaric and those who would keep it civilized. In that struggle, the heirs of Socrates and the heirs of al-Farabi must make common cause."

This closing paragraph ignored the undeniable historical fact that a clash between Islam and the Western world, has been going on for the last 1400 years. An almost monotonous denial of this subject has increased ever since the publication in 1966, of Samuel P. Huntington's **The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order**. However, ignoring or simply wishing it away does not make it disappear. Thus, two weeks after reading the WSJ editorial, I noticed in the Kuwaiti online journal, **Tanweer (Enlightenment)**, an article about the late Egyptian Islamist, Sayyid Qutb and his contribution to the intensity of the clash between Islam and the West! So when an informed Arab source acknowledges this historical fact, why not recognize it!?

I would like to remind Western columnists that of all the major world's religions, Islam has always been, and is still **far more than a religion**. One may conjecture that had its founder's mission been accepted in Mecca, Islam may have remained a purely local Arabian religion. But the **Hijra** (Migration) to Mecca in 622 A.D. allowed Muhammad an opportunity to become the founder and legislator of a new Commonwealth, the Umma of Islam. After his death in 632, his successors, the Caliphs launched the **futuh**, the conquests of the world, impelled by a **firm belief in the divine right of conquest!** Thus from the early years of the seventh century, Islamic imperialism continued to expand in three continents: Asia, Africa, and Europe! It was finally checked in Europe at the gates of Vienna in 1683, when the Ottoman Turks failed for the second time, to conquer the capital of the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. Thus, to ignore that aspect of the history of Islam, and its fundamental ideology of world conquest, does not help us face the global challenge of jihadism during the twenty-first century.

The closing sentence of the editorial merits some further comments. *"In that struggle, (i.e. between "those who would make Islam barbaric and those who would keep it civilized") the heirs of Socrates and the heirs of al-Farabi must make common cause."* These words imply that there is a similarity or equivalence between the historical journeys of Western and Islamic civilizations. But this is definitely not the case. Whereas Western civilization was formed by the appropriation and assimilation of the Greek philosophical tradition, the Roman law, and the Judeo-Christian heritage; Greek philosophy had only a passing and a minimal impact on Islam. Unfortunately, the heirs of the Muslim philosopher, al-Farabi (870-950 A.D.) have been dormant for almost an entire millennium!

This is not to deny that in the early years of the ninth century A.D., Baghdad became the center of learning and the cultural life of the Arab-Muslim Umma reached its zenith. There was a great deal of freedom for the airing of various theological and philosophical views. Both Muslim and Christian scholars participated in this movement. The impact of Greek culture was great, but according to Dr. Mahmoud, an Egyptian scholar who wrote a great deal on the subject of Arab-Islamic civilization, *"only a small group of intellectual elite felt this impact; the masses in Baghdad, and throughout the vast empire, were not influenced by Hellenism."*

For example, a group of intellectuals known as **"Ikhwan al-Safa,"** freely discussed in their letters some fundamental theological and philosophical topics. We may regard them

as Muslim rationalists who sought to reconcile the tenets of Islam with Greek philosophy. With respect to the date of the Qur'an, they posited the doctrine that it was a historical record of Allah's revelation. This did not meet with the approval of the great legal scholar, imam **Ahmad Ibn Hanbal** who championed the doctrine that the Qur'an was uncreated, therefore eternal! Several Caliphs who were in power at the time, sided with the rationalists, by persecuting and imprisoning **Ibn Hanbal**. This event in the history of orthodox Islam is known as the "**Ordeal of the Qur'an**." Later on, a new caliph sided with the orthodox view, the Imam was rehabilitated, and his teaching about the eternal nature of the Qur'an has prevailed to this day.

The tenth century A.D. proved to be the age of the "**Closing of the Muslim Mind**." The person responsible for that "closing" was **Al-Ghazzali** (died in 1111 A.D.) This great Muslim thinker represents a powerful reactionary force in the history of Islamic thought. His influence on the Arab-Muslim mind and culture was to freeze them in a mold that led to stagnation. In his book, **Ihya' 'Uloom al-Deen (The Revival of Religious Knowledge)**, "*Al-Ghazzali defined every utterance a Muslim makes and every step he must take in order to guarantee the orthodoxy of his Islam. Everything is spelled out for the Muslim: how to eat, sleep, travel, fellowship with one's wife and child, etc. No room was left for any spontaneity in the Muslim's life. Al-Ghazzali closed the door of philosophy on the Muslims and it has remained closed for eight hundred years!*"*

There were strong attempts early in the last century to "**re-open the door of Ijtihad**," but they have all failed. And here we are, one hundred years later, the heirs of **al-Farabi** do not seem to be much alive or of influence in the world of Islam. On the contrary, it is the orthodoxy of **al-Ghazzali** that is marching on. And whenever that I notice any attempt of some brave Arab intellectuals to champion the cause of democracy and free speech, the reactionary **Salafists**** rise up to silence them by speaking of the dire consequences of "**kufir**" (unbelief) within the Islamic Umma.

So, I plead with Western columnists: you owe it to your readers to do better homework when writing on this very complex subject of Islam and the West.

*A quotation from the Arabic text of "**The Rational & the Irrational in our Cultural Heritage**" by Dr. Zaki Naguib Mahmoud. No specific publication date is mentioned in the book; most likely it belongs to the late 1970s.

****Salafist**, an Arabic word based on the root **salaf**, i.e. ancestors. **Salafists** are those who champion a total commitment to Islamic orthodoxy as defined by the great teachers of the early years of Islam.