

What's Wrong with Moderate Muslims?

[Jacob Thomas](#)

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Judging by the proliferation of Arabic web sites, one can hardly avoid the conclusion that a great deal of ferment is going on among Arab writers and intellectuals. Early this year, I was pleased to discover on the Internet two Kuwaiti sites, one giving us an online edition of the monthly journal, *Al-Arabi*, and the other site with a very intriguing name: *Tanweer*, i.e. *Enlightenment*. I hope to share with you my comments on the various subjects being discussed on these sites which will give us a sample of the many concerns of the rising Arab generation.

In the meantime, I go back to a familiar source I usually consult about the current preoccupations of the Arab mind. My eyes were caught by an article in the January 18, 2006, issue of *Al-Sharq al-Awsat*, with this rather shocking title: **Those Savage and Barbarian Westerners?!**

I am sure the writer did not mean these words to be taken literally, since his article contained strong criticisms levelled at the Arab-Muslim civilization. With tongue in cheek, he resorted to sarcasm to drive a point about the lack of openness and honesty in the way many Arab writers engage in their critique of the West. I must add though, that not long ago, Muslims in general actually looked down on Europeans, and regarded them as barbarians. For example, in his **Preface** to "*The Muslim Discovery of Europe*:" (W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1982,) Bernard Lewis wrote:

*"In the Western tradition of history, the term discovery is commonly used to describe the process by which, from the fifteenth century onwards, Europe and more especially Western Europe set about discovering the rest of the world. **The theme of this book is another and parallel discovery, similar in some ways, different in others ... in which the European is not the explorer discovering barbaric peoples in strange and remoter places, but is himself an exotic barbarian discovered and observed by enquirers from the lands of Islam.**"*

p. 11 [Emphasis is mine, JT]

The author of the article in *Al-Sharq al-Awsat* proceeded to contrast the Arabs' critiques of the West, with their unwillingness to apply the same standards of criticism to their own history and civilization. He began by stating:

The Arab press is full of analysis and critique of the Western world, its peoples, traditions and history. It is normal that colonialism, the slavery in the United States, the violence and savagery that accompanied the occupation of various countries, and specifically the organization of the State of Israel; all these are topics that question the validity of Western morality.

He went on to describe the extremely negative attitude of several Arab writers vis-à-vis the West:

Both nationalists and Islamists are convinced that Western democracies are a sham. These perceptions are not only widespread, but have become standard rituals that precede every mention of the subject of democracy. In fact [this critique of Western democracies] has become as necessary as the ritual ablution without which a [Muslim's] prayer is not valid!

One of the Western virtues is that criticisms of the social or political order form an integral part of their cultural heritage. If it were not for this Western tradition, it would have been impossible to expose the infractions of basic human rights that took place at Abu Ghraib. In fact, it was the existence of these basic democratic institutions that led eventually to the abolition of slavery in the United States . This same democratic impulse brought about an end to colonialism. And it is this very spirit that will bring an end to the policies that prevailed at Abu Ghraib, at Guantanamo , the occupation of Iraq , and President Bush's "Homeland Security" law.

What Arabs write about the West and Westerners is very important both for themselves and for Americans and Europeans. But the real problem surfaces instantly when such writings become justifications for questioning the very idea of democracy, and an excuse for authoritarian and totalitarian views. The argument then is framed in the following manner: if both European and Americans versions of democracy are a sham, there is no guarantee for the Arab version of democracy to be any better. Therefore there is no need for Westerners to lecture us about a democracy that does not really exist.

But is it not rather shocking that [while these criticisms of the West are going on,] hardly any mention has been made of the many prisons that are scattered throughout the Arab world, such as Mazza (near Damascus), or Abu Zaabal (near Cairo)? Compare that with the continuing mention of Abu Ghraib!

The real question is not whether there should be a critique of the West, since such a critique is salutary and necessary. However its moral rectitude is not validated unless and until there is a parallel critique of our societies and our sates, both in the past and at present. It is not right to critically examine every aspect of Western history, while not engaging in anything similar with respect to the history of Arab societies. Neither is it fair to learn everything about slavery in the Unites States, and ignore the slavery that existed in the Arab world. Have we ever reflected on the fact that the Ottoman Caliphate never developed into a democracy? Do we ever give a thought as to why the Kurds desire to secede from Iraq , and why the Southern Sudanese do not trust a unified Sudan ? [Have we ever pondered the fact] that while the Arab world occupies the same amount of territory as the United States and possesses a similar number of people, it shows no progress at all? Do we realize that our exports, with exception of petroleum, do not exceed those of Finland !?

It is indeed refreshing to read these lines and think about their impact on a young Arab person who has the ability to access the Internet, and read similar articles that appear at the *Al-Sharq*

Al-Awsat site. Some of these young people may live in Syria and would be fully aware of the existence of the notorious *Sijn al-Mazza*. They may even wonder why the article failed to refer to the concentration camps at *Tadmor (Palmyra)* in the Syrian Desert ! As for an Egyptian reader, he may even know someone who had spent time at the notorious *Abu Zaabal* jail.

Here is another sentence worth quoting:

It is not proper to critically examine every aspect of Western history, while not engaging in anything similar with respect to the history of Arab societies.

These are very strong words. I don't remember hearing anything like them when growing up in the Levant during the French presence there, between 1918 and 1946. At that time, as Arab nationalism was rising, fuelled by the Allies' failing to fulfill their promises for independence made during WWI, it was not difficult to regard Western democracy as a sham. But after more than half a century of independence from Britain and France after WWII, the Middle East was riddled with military coups and dictatorial regimes that embarked on dangerous adventures, both at home and abroad. Strong feelings of disillusionment have been growing for more than twenty five years; and here at last, a writer expresses himself boldly by speaking out against the sham and hypocrisy in the Arab camp!

Great as these sentiments were by pointing to the shortcomings of Arab-Muslim civilization,

I noticed the usual mantras against the West, and specifically against the USA . Thus, a major flaw in the thinking of our "moderate" writer is that while critiquing various aspect of European colonialism, he fails to mention or even recognize Arab colonialism. To merely utter these words would bring astonishment to Arab intellectuals; as it is an unthinkable and unjustified charge.

Arabs and Muslims tend to ignore the utterly unique nature of their own colonialism. For unlike European colonialism which came to an end during the past century, the results of Islamic conquests and colonialism have been almost irreversible. While several European countries managed to shake up Islamic imperialism beginning with Spain in 1492, and ending with nations in the Balkans after WWI, Islamic colonialism in Africa and Asia has been final. Not a word about this tragic aspect of world history is ever mentioned in the history textbooks of the Arab world. ***The underlying thought has always been that Islam possessed a divine right of conquest.***

As V. S. Naipaul put it in his book, ***Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions among the Converted Peoples***, (New York: Random House, 1998):

Islam is in its origins an Arab religion. Everyone not an Arab who is a Muslim is a convert. Islam is not simply a matter of conscience or private belief. It makes imperial demands. A convert's worldview alters. His holy places are in Arab lands; his language is Arabic. His idea of history alters. He rejects his own; he becomes, whether he likes it or not, a part of the Arab story. The convert has to turn away from everything that is his. The disturbance for societies is immense, and even after a thousand years can remain unresolved; the turning away has to be done again and again. People develop fantasies about who and what they are; and in the Islam of the converted countries there is an element of neurosis and nihilism. These countries can be easily set on the boil. P. xi

Another quotation, sad to say, showed that our "moderate" writer manifested his inability or unwillingness to engage in genuine self-criticism:

The violence and savagery that accompanied the occupation of various countries, and specifically the organization of the State of Israel ; all these are topics that question the validity of Western morality.

There is no doubt that violent acts took place during European colonialism. I remember a course on French History that I took in which we studied the coming of the French to Algeria in 1830, and their subduing the country by 1848. Who can forget the legendary Emir Abdel-Kader and his fierce opposition to the French occupation of his land? And please don't gloss over the killings by the thousands that took place in India during centuries of Islamic presence. And how about the pillage and atrocities committed by the Ottoman Turks in 1453 after the fall of Constantinople ?

As usual, the subject of the birth of Israel in 1948 is dragged in as an example of the perfidy of the West. But what about the role of Islam in the partition of India ? Have we forgotten the tragic events that accompanied the birth of Pakistan , and the mass killings that took place in the Indian subcontinent as a result of that partition?

Finally, the article showed the inability of a "moderate" Arab-Muslim writer to transcend his deep-rooted prejudices. He waxed eloquent as he mentioned the "*democratic impulse [that] brought an end to colonialism,*" and that would do the same to the policies that prevailed at Abu Ghraib, at Guantanamo, the occupation of Iraq, and President Bush's "Homeland Security" law." He packed so many subjects together and put them in one basket. And please notice how he described the liberation of Iraq from Saddam Hussein as an "occupation." Some injustices were done at Abu Ghraib, but they were not the norm, and he knew that. Why, oh why drag that subject again, and why keep chanting Guantanamo ? Does that make him feel purer than Americans? Furthermore, I was very offended when he railed against President Bush, and the Homeland Security Law that was passed by Congress the 19 Islamic terrorists attacked us on September 11, 2001 .

Unless and until I read lines that show a genuine birth of a liberated Arab-Muslim mind, freed from the age-long shackles of prejudice against the "Others," I cannot vouch for the existence of "Moderate Islam." I sound very pessimistic, but judging by the history of the last 1400 years, no real self-criticism has taken place within Islam. Until that happens, the phrase "Moderate Islam" remains an ever elusive hope.