

Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Western Civilization Through Muslim Eyes* by Sayyid Lari

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Source: *Journal of Third World Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 2, THIRD WORLD POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENTS (FALL, 1996), pp. 348-356

Published by: University Press of Florida

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/45197772>

Accessed: 24-11-2020 10:30 UTC

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ness, and, above all, flexibility. The question that confronts official Washington and the American people is whether we are up to facing a world troubled by multi-faceted problems devoid of the stark ideological dualism characterizing our most intense historic phases of international involvement.

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Lari, Sayyid. *Western Civilization Through Muslim Eyes. Islamic Republic of Iran: Foundation of Islamic Cultural Propagation in the World, 1977.* 146 pp.

The religious movement known to the world as Islam began in Mecca and Medina in the Arabian peninsula by Prophet Mohammed 570-632 AD. Muslim educational interest began formally about 650 AD eighteen years after the Prophet's death, when the Quran, the scriptural revelation of Islam was compiled from the notes of his disciples, since like Socrates and Jesus, Mohammed wrote nothing but had to strive through precept, example, symbolic actions and recitation to engage his hearers in search for a better spiritual life. Indeed, one of the Muslim's cardinal means to this end was the parallel search for knowledge. An Islamic scriptural verse which has perpetually given impetus to Muslims' scholastic pursuit and innovation reads:

“To seek knowledge is a duty for every Muslim man and woman; seek knowledge even though it be in China. The savants or men of great learning are the heirs of the prophet”.

At its peak, the Islamic empire embraced South Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, parts of Europe such as Spain, Sicily and Southern Italy. The territorial expansion was accom-

panied by phenomenal educational, sociocultural scientific and economic development that lasted several centuries.

True to the prophetic inductions of Mohammed, Muslims travelled far and wide, obtaining knowledge from believers and non-believers alike. They took the philosophy and science of the Greeks, grafted them to their own ideas as well as to the ideas borrowed from India and China. The Muslims successfully preserved books and manuscripts, translated and transmitted Greek, Latin and Eastern works of learning for posterity. Through the Islamic educational system and ancillary institutions like libraries, research centers, translation bureaus, observatories, laboratories and research centers, knowledge was transmitted to the Latin West. This development paved way for the birth of European renaissance that revamped the scholastic mood and invigorated the rise of universities during the Medieval period. The book under review is a modern reminder and an amplification of the universal contribution of the Islamic heritage.

This book is a scrutiny of the strengths and serious shortcomings of the Western Civilization as well as Islam's intellectual, religious and cultural contribution to mankind. The main thrust of Sayyid Lari's approach is not so much to show the superiorities of the Occidental civilization but to expose its superficial prejudice and unreasoned attitudes; its materialistic, technocratic spirit and worship of the machine. Besides, the authenticity of the Western Civilization is slammed by the author for its amoral, atheistic, secularist, miscegnative and prodigious pattern of living.

The book is divided into three parts, with the first section giving the physiognomy of the West. It starts with man's ascent from a primitive-animal like-soul dwelling in holes, caves, and rock shelters up to the sophisticated denizen of the Atomic/Nuclear space age and its affluent technocratic society. The negative effects of permissiveness which are lamentably gnawing at the social fabric in the West are identified as: materialistic sensations, hedonistic tendencies, over reliance on alcohol, drug abuse, moral morass, abject urban poverty

and squalor; overstretched domestic care and love for pets and animals; worship of sex, breakdown of family ties, high divorce rates, orphanages for the young and old, child traumas; racial discrimination; school and social drop outs; corruption and wretchedness; structural peripherization of the Third World countries and emptiness in their worship services (pp. 1-52).

The author further examines the reasons for the phenomenal growth of Christianity, its split into sects, the reasons for these schisms and the interface and imbroglio between Christianity and Islam in African settings. In Koranic essence, Jesus is regarded and still cacooned as one of the prophets of Allah but Mohammed is the seal of all prophets, period. (pp. 13-24)

Part two of the book deals with Islam's gifts to the world and what it portends to offer to an otherwise disturbed universe. Included is a political theory and ideology that exalts not the "general will" but the "will of the Lord of this world", the former being classified as the uncontrolled inclinations and short term sentiments of a majority of human beings. Islam is also said to have a legacy that has bequeathed a universal legislative norm which sees the Quran as the fount of law and the "Divine Will of God", which was revealed to and proclaimed through his Apostle Mohammed. (pp. 54-57).

Islamic economics gives joint primacy to both individual and community survival by guaranteeing a free market enterprise, reasonable regulations on property ownership, minimum interest rates and profit margins in business affairs. Islam has legislated for a payment of "Zakat," a tax rate of 20% on capital gains by the rich for the support of the indigent; the governments' right to tax wealth, outlawing of profiteering, embezzlement, malverization, hoarding, miserliness avarice, usury, forcible looting or seizure of other people's property and similar criminal anti social methods of amassing wealth. The faith also condemns the injurious intrusion of modern capitalist practices into the Muslim world and bans the greed, exploitation and avarice which lead to enslavement, war and imperialism world over. (pp. 63-68).

In the author's opinion, Islam is set to imprint its distinguishing legacy on human communities through its emphasis on reason, rather than emotion; the illumination of intellect, scientific research and thought. The Islamic intellectual heritage to the world covers key innovative breakthroughs in chemistry, philosophy, agriculture, chronometry, pharmacy, industry, horoscope, astronomy, geography, fine art and architecture. (pp. 70-85).

Part three of the book dwells on Islam's way of dealing with social problems related to alcoholism, family life, racial hatred, class war and world peace. The role of Islam today is depicted as one of providing the recurring marvels of renaissance in mankind's history through knowledge of and faith in Allah; belief in the universal brotherhood of all men, daily prayers for guidance and an optimism of a sure hope and a better tomorrow here and hereafter. (pp. 86-142).

After the chapterly niceties, the book is hereby passed through ten tier pier like stages of purgatory.

The first salvo is fired at the book's weak theoretical base resulting in a poor analysis of the social changes which juxtapose Western civilization against the Islamic one. The cultural interaction theory simply states that when two cultures interact, there is a tendency for an acceleration of cultural change and synthesis through the combination, fusion and hybridization of cultural items, social relations and institutions. Devoid of a theoretical prism, Lari's book fails to answer a basic question: Can Western civilization be explained wholesomely through the eyes of Islamic technology, economics, astronomy and science without taking stock of the adaptation, borrowing of cultural interaction matrixes through time? Indeed, the isolated samples of Islamic contributions in the field of agriculture, animal husbandry, medicine, chemistry and mathematics cannot be sufficient grounds for overstating the presumed indebtedness of the West to the Muslims. And what has the Islamic world been doing with the rich store of knowledge after the West left it alone? Nobody is talking about a Muslim supersonic jet, the sputnik, the Apollo II; not even an

oil drill pump.

The U.N. sponsored Cairo Conference on Population and Development (September, 1994) sent ripples around the globe over a number of contentious issues that have a bearing on Lari's book. These include the legal constitutional position of women in modern society vis-a-vis polygamy, concubinage, temporary marriage, pre-arranged marriage, girl-child marriages, divorce and single parenthood. (pp. 96-118). The customs of clitoridectomy infibulation and cicatrization for females still persists. Most Muslim women are still subjected to a further handicap of the veil, and along the lower part of Saudi Arabia, girls at puberty put on a leather mask, which makes them look like birds of prey and which they wear constantly until their death. In what ways has Islam paved the way for their emancipation? Sayyid Lari's explanation that "Conferences, agencies and idealist slogans begets no peace in the home or state, East or West in matters of the heart," (pp. 137) merely begs the question.

Furthermore, despite the cosmetic gestures towards equality in provision of educational opportunities at elementary levels, the Muslim subordination of girls never gave them the freedom to patronize institutions of higher learning such as universities, "jamis", "houses of wisdom" and the "Baltulul Hikmats" which were sprinkled around the Arabic world. (pp. 70-85). In this context, how else could one regard the veiled womenfolk in Islamic countries without a gender blindfold?

Sayyid Lari raises up another issue with what he terms the "Western nations infatuation, even to the point of madness, with their domestic pets, especially dogs". Reasons for the author's incense with the practice are multiple: it is a harmful hobby to health due to the danger posed by hydated cysts infections; the crediting of the beasts with spiritual personalities by way of mourning and over expenditure on the carnivore's needs whilst million human souls suffer neglect world over. (pp. 45-46). One is confounded by the author's selective criticism: why dogs and not cats? What about the greater humane and philanthropic and magnanimous work that the West has rendered to

mankind world wide via food aid, grants, clothing, scholarships, asylum and other tender hearted gestures unheard of in Muslim lands? The concern of the Western man for his dogs is shown as an ill-fitting example of what the author terms "the tragedies of misused intoxicating material affluence that makes the European unwilling to renounce his flood of lust for gain and fun; hedonism for peace of heart; priceless spiritual treasures as found in the "Zakat" for economic affluence". (pp. 50-51).

Undoubtedly, one uncharitable activity that is associated with Islam, yet is little understood is that of the "Jihad", the "holy war" or "fatwa." The Jihad is regarded as a just religious duty for all free adult male Muslims if called by a sovereign Imam when the land or religion is under attack by non-believers. The aim of this Jihadic activity is to change Dar ill Harb or abode of war into Dar ul Islam or abode of peace with God. (pp. 129-142).

Is there a more rational approach, call it a middle way, that is in tune with the modern geopolitical and ecumeno-politan world guided by the principles of international protocol, peace and understanding that can guide one Saddam Hussein, a Muamar Gaddafi or the Somali desert war lord Farrah Aideed? Can Islam live without such war mongers and merchants of death who thrive on brewing dangerous concoctions which they term "mothers of all battles"? The rights to life, express one's opinion, move freely, are inalienable, no man has the preserve to take them away.

A literary exposition worth its salt must unravel the nature of man rooted in a specific cultural milieu amidst a host of institutions that he has developed. One would want to know today, how Islam has transformed the nomadic desert bedouin into a cultural urbane convert. Is he any different from the conservative figure depicted by E.C. Hodgkin (1966, pp. 12-22) as one who was:

obedient to his own laws and customs; proud,
dignified aristocratic, eloquent, gossipous, sim-

ple, generous, religious, quick tempered, industrious and doomed? Arabs admire bigness of gesture - great generosity, great heroism and great sacrifice. Meanness of pocket or of spirit, is in their eyes contemptible. Their hospitality is legendary but can overflow into wastefulness and ostentation. They are exuberant, quick tempered and emotional, while respecting reticence, dignity and age as admirable. They are a race of hypochondriacs and fatalists - afraid of the cold in the nose but not afraid to die. They have an acute feeling for the spoken word but little for the visual arts. Learning is more respected than money making, but far more energy goes into money making than in acquiring knowledge. They can be extremely humorous but also ridiculous.

Barbs have often been thrown at the Muslims lack of originality and their heavy dependence on the productive creativity of their neighbours. In educational pedagogy, Lari glosses over several smudges in the ink of Islamic learning. From the elementary "Madrassahs" to the secondary schools, Islamic education suffered a top heavy religious emphasis which was made none the worse by methods of instruction that utilized memorization drilling, imitation and mute silence by the students under the towering, smothering, unquestionable, authoritarian figure heads of the "Ulama." The sad consequence of this certified "banking" system of Islamic education was that Muslims appear to have been great assimilators or copycats, rather than creators, who churned knowledge from more cultured and learned people with whom they came into contact by way of travel, trade or conquest. For instance, they borrowed wholesomely from the Greek mathematical and philosophical lore, the production skills of Hindus and the scientific inventions of the Chinese and Egyptians.

Lari's failure to highlight that Muslims offered training

in architecture, beautification of textiles, ceramics, metal work, carpet work and leatherwork, (pp. 84), is a major shortcoming of his book. Their weakness lies in the sphere of art, whereby the Islamic faith forbade the representation of human form with the consequence that Muslims provided no art education for sculptors and painters. Moreover, in the literacy sphere, although the Muslim poetical productions embraced modern forms and types such as elegies, odes and satires, they never really produced a great epic or tragedy in the Greek and Shakespearean sense.

Sayyid Lari has argued that Islamic culture could be a fitting panacea and an antidote to the decadence and social decline of the European culture. The atheistic and poor standards of socialization of the West have left society crippled with many social deviants and dropouts: alcoholics, homosexuals, lunatics, street beggars, discarded oldies, drug addicts, sex labourers, widows, orphans, kleptomaniacs, megalomaniacs and the nonchalant rich. (pp. 86-128). According to the malintegration theory of change, conflicting pressures of different sectors of a culture pave way for alternative complex arrangements in the social structure due to the inconsistencies and incompatibilities within the social system. It sounds outrightly simplistic and unconvincing that the direction for social change in the West and elsewhere need be the Islamic religion and Muslim civilization.

Despite Lari's euphemism about Islamic racial equality and tolerance, freedom and justice, and the human treatment that African slaves received from their Muslim masters, the African brothers and African lands from which these captives were expatriated to the Middle East, Far East, Europe and America are still owed bountiful treasures by way of payment of reparations and damages. Time has come when such arrangements can no longer be dismissed by what the author terms as "the poisonous, fabricated, distortous and anti-Islamic propaganda." (pp. 22-24).

One would expect to read in the book an unravelling and clarification of some popular misconceptions or what the

translator F.J. Goulding terms "fantastic farrago of ignorances and incomprehension about Islam." (pp. xi-xii) He cites the case in which "a reverend Mullah in Tehran had complained that a Western general had behaved insultingly, even obscenely, by conveying food to his mouth with his left hand." Indeed, the most perturbing issue, which the author hardly addresses, is the contextual fact that, like the Chinese, the Arab Muslims were able to produce paper with which they expended and recorded their scholarly energies. In spite of this early scientific advantage coupled with the Westerners popularization of toilet paper, the Muslim ablutionary practices preclude them from its usage in preference of water to tissue paper in an irksome religious rite irrespective of any constrainingly unhygienic circumstances.

In the ecumeno-politan world today, which is marked by trans-continental inventions, globalization of culture, multi-pluralism in religion and democracy it sounds fairly pedestrian and mundane for one to mount an uncritical, selective and subjective offensive against a particular civilization. It is for this reason that the index-less book, *Western Civilization Through Muslim Eyes* makes interesting and sound reading with sprinkly tinges of chest thumping dogmatism, but offers poor lessons in historical continuum, logic, geo-politics, world peace and honest scholarship.

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Young, William A. *The Rashaayda Bedouin: Arab Pastoralists of Eastern Sudan*. Fort Worth, TX: Harcourt Brace, 1996.

From January 1978 to December 1980, William Young, then a graduate student in anthropology at UCLA, lived with and carried out research on the Rashaayda Bedouin, a pastoral-nomadic people engaged in goat, sheep and camel hus-