

with a hopeful tone, yearning for *Muslims* to join in the ongoing dialogues already happening across the continent in which Africans are seeking to more deeply understand and develop their indigenous African heritage and self-understanding. These dialogues with the multiple religious and cultural influences that Africans have received and must understand are helping Africans develop a healthy engagement with outside, non-African influences including those that come from Christianity and Islam.

So, what does one make of this book? First, I come away with profound appreciation for John Azumah's deep love for his African identity and people. Secondly, I have been immensely educated about centuries of African Muslim heritage, of which I had only had a cursory understanding prior to reading this book. Thirdly, my understanding of the complexities and of the urgent need for honest, self-critical dialogue has been significantly shaped. The tone in which Azumah writes communicates far more optimism than I am able to feel as to the potential for Muslims to reform themselves in positive ways through being *critically faithful* to their Islamic traditions. I must say that, for the sake of human flourishing in Africa and beyond, I sincerely hope that I am wrong and that John Azumah has the more accurate read on the capacity of Muslims to reform from within, in dialogue with non-Muslims.

I consider *The Legacy of Arab-Islam in Africa* a *must* read for all who desire to understand African Islam.

Reviewed by Don Little

What's Really Wrong with the Middle East

By Brian Whitaker

Westbourne Grove, London: Saqi 2009. 384 pages

Introduction

This is the kind of book I have always wanted to read, even write, on the Middle East. Brian Whitaker's analysis of the Arab world blends cultural perspectives like those found in Margaret Nydell's *Understanding Arabs* (1987), with the elements of historical classics like Gerald Butt's *The Arabs*.

Whitaker has been a journalist for the British newspaper *The Guardian*¹⁹ since 1987 and was its Middle East editor between 2000 and 2007. He is currently an editor on the paper's 'Comment is free'. He also writes articles for

¹⁹ The Guardian is a politically left of centre British newspaper.

Guardian Unlimited, the internet edition of the paper. He runs a personal, non-Guardian-related website, Al-Bab.com, about politics in the Arab world.²⁰ He is a prolific columnist and his on-line articles are consistent with his views expressed in this book. His other major publication was, *Unspeakable Love: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East* (2006).

As Whitaker wrote *What's Really Wrong with the Middle East* prior to the 'Arab Spring' every one of the nine chapters could be described as having an element of déjà vu. In his introduction Whitaker states his two aims. The first is to highlight the debate among Arabs themselves about change and the second is to address the debate concerning western policy towards the Middle East. He wrote at the beginning of President Obama's first term when there was much optimism heralding a new approach which augured well for 'a more constructive and less confrontational approach' (13). Although the book predates the events with which the reader is now all too familiar the text remains germane.

Shaping a review is always interesting and in this instance the creativeness of the chapter headings and insightful quotes guide my reviewing scalpel.



Chapter I – Thinking inside the box

Whitaker begins with education in the Middle East. Quoting Arab students and specialists we are reminded of the fact that memorization is the primary pedagogical method of learning in the region at every academic level. 'Education in the Arab countries is where the paternalism of the traditional family structure, the authoritarianism of the state and the dogmatism of religion all meet, discouraging critical thought and analysis, stifling creativity and instilling submissiveness' (19).

There is a good section on Islam and Darwinism with special reference to the recent influence of Islamic fundamentalism on the debate. The chapter includes supporting references from international bodies to emphasise that without educational reform in the Arab world, these countries will continue to lag behind the rest of the world.

²⁰ Wikipedia

Chapter 2 – The gilded cage

‘Power comes from the father’s genes’ (48). Whitaker devotes a whole chapter to the pervasive and persuasive influence of the family as a fundamental building block of Middle Eastern society. Several young people recount their experiences of challenging their parental preferences, especially marriage choices, and talk of their ‘secret lives’ and the all too familiar issues of honour and shame. The chapter contains one of the best descriptions of ‘marriage’ options in Islam that I have ever read.

Chapter 3 – States without citizens

In this chapter Whitaker underlines the (pre-Arab Spring) resilience of regimes and the political longevity of their leaders. There are hints of change in his writing when he quotes from the 2004 Arab Human Development Report that Arab governments are facing a ‘chronic crisis of legitimacy, often relying on inducements and intimidation in dealing with citizens’ (84).

There is an interesting description of how the emirates and kingdoms of the Arabian Peninsula handle succession. He then considers presidential states including Algeria, Egypt, Iraq, Libya, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen – all of which, with the exception of Algeria, are now in varying states of tumultuous political and social change.

He writes, ‘The typical Arab regime is both authoritarian and autocratic... highly centralised and concentrated around the head of state’ (93). The result is that statesmen and businessmen are often the same players and those who know Lebanon well will enjoy his description of the Solidere reconstruction project in the heart of Beirut which is inseparable from Rafik Hariri, ‘Mr. Lebanon’ (100). The chapter includes sections on taxes, ‘rentier’²¹ income (oil, Suez Canal and foreign aid), elections and superficial reforms to appease world opinion. However, all are manipulated to control their populations and corruption is endemic.

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Chapter 4 – The politics of God

This is a relatively short chapter in which Whitaker makes the point that religion, i.e. Islam, provides Arab states with a clear identity, continuity and legitimacy. Secularising Muslims like Abu Zayd in the mid-1990’s, were hounded out of the region for challenging the foundations of the state. He concludes, ‘The debate is not about secularism and the relationship between religion and the state but also about the religion practiced by Muslims’ (147).

²¹ A person [institution or state] living on income from property or investments - The New Oxford Dictionary of English – Clarendon Press 1998

Chapter 5 – Vitamin W

‘W’ stands for *‘wasta’* which Whitaker defines as ‘the magical lubricant that smoothes the way to jobs, promotions, university places and much else besides. In fact, with the right connections, it can solve almost any kind of problem’ (165).

This is a delightful chapter on corruption in the raw; through *‘wasta’* to *‘baksheesh’*, which is exercised by the highest and the lowest in the Arab world, from minor employees to government ministers. The sad thing is that western companies and governments have sometimes been compliant and complicit in such practices. He writes, ‘In practical terms corruption has many harmful effects. It is intrinsically unfair; it undermines democratic processes, distorts free markets, denies people equality of opportunity and in general creates obstacles to progress’ (158).

Chapter 6 – The urge to control

Chapter three provided the framework for control and in this chapter Whitaker provides a detailed analysis of the means. It is about the legal licensing of control rods which are imposed on every institution from publishers through charitable organisations to opposition parties. In recent times, this draconian control has been demonstrated in Egypt through the forcible closure of foreign-registered NGOs that might be considered a threat to the security of the country.

He writes, ‘Although freedom of association is enshrined in international law, many Arabs share their rulers’ view that it is not a natural entitlement’ (182). NGOs are often under the strong patronage of national leadership and can hardly be described as independent. Civil society associations are restricted to such an extent that there is very limited ‘free speech’ in the Arab world.

There is an interesting reference to Tunisian and Egyptian bloggers and the rise of the use of camera phones to circumvent the restrictions imposed upon state controlled media; a foretelling of what was to come. He takes up the role of the Internet towards the end of the chapter. ‘The Egyptian bloggers have one foot in cyberspace and the other foot is in the street’ (228).

Chapter 7 – A sea of victims

In this chapter Whitaker considers all the minority groups in the Middle East, including refugee and migrant worker groups. It is a catalogue of despair from the abuse of domestic Filipino maids in the Arabian Peninsula to stateless Kurds in Syria to Baha’is and Christian believers from Muslim roots in Egypt. He writes, ‘Recognition of equal rights is one of the keys to change in Arab societies’ (259).

Chapter 8 – Alien tomatoes

Why tomatoes? Because one of the Arabic words for tomatoes is *‘banadura’* and this is a corruption of the Italian word for tomato, *‘pomodoro’*. This is a chapter on

globalisation which is viewed as a threat by Arab states. It comes at them in many disguises, primarily ‘Americanisation’.

Whitaker provides many illustrations but here is just one: ‘Abdel-Ilah Balqaziz (Morocco): Globalisation is an act of cultural rape and symbolic aggression’ (263). Innovation is implicitly resisted by Arab states even though, ironically, the wealthy states of the Arabian Peninsula fuel globalisation through Sovereign Wealth Funds. In addition, Islam has embraced globalisation in the form of the Internet, e.g., IslamOnline (285).

There is a valuable discussion on the interpretation and implementation (or lack of) ‘human rights’ within the Arab League, the UN and the EU. It may not be new to many but the way he writes is magnetic. Inevitably Islamic theology features strongly in the debate.

Chapter 9 – Escape from history

Whitaker ends where many would begin with the historical burden Arabs consider themselves to be carrying. ‘This tendency to blame others, justified as it may be in many cases, has now become a problem in itself, allowing Arabs to absolve themselves from responsibility’ (290). The victim and conspiracy mentality is ubiquitous in the region. In a recent Bible study I had with a young Arab believer, he blamed the Arab Spring and its ensuing chaos on Israel and the CIA.

There are pithy passages on the naive US neoconservative concept of ‘total’ war, the rallying cry of a ‘war on terror’ and the generic ‘campaign for democracy’. He notes that sadly political convenience often contaminates the freedom principle, especially outcomes that have favoured Islamic fundamentalist parties.

In his closing remarks Whitaker restates his thesis that what’s really wrong with the Middle East is that it suffers from a ‘freedom deficit’ (‘freedom in depth’). The issues of ‘human rights’, ‘freedom of religion’, and ‘equality’ are high on his change factor requirements.

However, it is all rather depressing, especially when we reflect that the complexity of replacing autocratic systems is compounded by their being no viable alternatives only, seemingly, Islamic fundamentalism with its mosque-based constituency of the frustrated powerless.

He wisely says that the critique of fundamentalist Islamic dogma and practice has to come from inside the Muslim community using its own authoritative sources (319). It is axiomatic that critical analysis of Islam is better exercised by Believers from a Muslim background than non-Muslims.

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Finally, he pronounces that the West's ability to politically influence the Arab world is very limited. Such analysis reminds the Christian reader, however well equipped for the task, that any spiritual breakthrough in the Arab world is all the work of our Triune God.

Conclusion

Whitaker's analysis is accurate and has been borne out by subsequent events in the Arab world which have become the background of our daily news. The prognosis is bleak. There is no doubt in my mind that the challenge is not a conflict of civilizations but a conflict of cultures, 'collectivist' versus 'individualist'. Conservative religious dogma, especially Islam, contributes but it is not the whole story. It took hundreds of years via the Reformation, the Enlightenment/The Age of Reason, and the Industrial Revolution to arrive at what we describe as the 'individualist' Western society. It is going to take time for freedom, especially of religion (314) and association, human rights, equality, and choice to be accommodated by the 'collectivist' world. May I even suggest that since the 'individualist' world is in the minority and currently in crisis we may have to rediscover and accommodate many of the Biblical 'collectivist' characteristics into our behaviour? It is certainly imperative for us to persevere in focusing our missionary zeal on Christ-centred transforming movements from within the communities of the Arab world.

This book is a must read for anyone who has a passion for the Arab world. However, anyone with an interest in the region would be educated by Whitaker's analysis and, though my knowledge of the wider Islamic world is limited, I expect other Muslim communities exhibit many of the same defining characteristics with attendant challenges.

Reviewed by Keith Fraser-Smith

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