

Nehls, Gerhard.

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FROM THE ARABIC LANGUAGE PRESS

[The following is a sampling from 12 pages of extracts collected by an Arab Christian brother who wishes to remain anonymous. He reads widely in Arabic language publications to keep abreast of developments in the Arab World in his ministry, and has translated and collected extracts which he has sent to SEEDBED with the idea that others may also find them useful. They give an "'inside' view of the Arab mind." We decided not to publish the entire document for various reasons, but will be happy to send a copy to any reader requesting one (if you are able to send a \$1 for postage and photocopying it would be appreciated). Besides those reproduced here, other extracts criticize the policy of "Informational Security" (censorship) in the Gulf states, and the lack of democracy in the AW in general, and critique several contemporary Arab plays and books, etc. Most of the extracts are from al-Mostakbal, published in Paris. The remarks in brackets below are by the translator. Ed.]

On the Bleak Economic Prospects of the Arab World (Keywords: Future, Pessimism, Hopelessness), by Ibrahim Salameh, in al-Mostakbal, 14 June 1986.

At the beginning of 1986, the number of Arabic speaking people reached 202 million people according to the United Nations. More than 2/3 of them live in Africa (143 million): in Egypt and the Sudan (75 million) and in the Maghribi states (68 million only!). The illiteracy rate is still between 70% and 72% of the above mentioned number. According to FAO, 35 million of the Arabs living in Africa suffer from malnutrition and may reach the stage of the "Ethiopian Famine."

At the same time, those Arab countries with large populations are in debt and are suffering from economic depression. They owe only 70 billion dollars! The level of education at the universities of these countries is about 30 years behind the world level.

Let us not keep blaming the big powers for the ills of the Arab countries. Are the big powers to blame for the fact that Khartoum has not been linked to the countryside with proper roads which would have helped bring food to the capital? Have the big powers stopped the electrification of the streets of Cairo which remain dark for these ten years?

[After lamenting the backwardness of the Arabs of today, the author makes the following comment]: BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE AND IGNORANCE THERE

IS NO SUCH THING AS A THIRD OR FOURTH WAY. A SURGICAL OPERATION AT A HOSPITAL IS SUBJECT TO ONE SCIENCE WHICH REMAINS THE SAME WHETHER IT TAKES PLACE IN MOSCOW OR IN WASHINGTON.

On Differing Arab Views of their Cultural Heritage (Keywords: Heritage, Objectivity, Neutrality), anonymous author, in Huna London, August 1986.

There is a great deal of controversy in the intellectual circles of Morocco about the way to deal with the cultural heritage. Some, who cling to it greatly, have gone to the extreme of glorifying this heritage, claiming that everything can be found within it. This approach had led to some grave mistakes of horrible dimensions! In order to rectify such a distorted vision of the past, Prof. Muhammad "Abed El-Jabiri of the University of Rabat in Morocco, published a valuable book under the title of: "We and our Tradition." He recognizes that the basic motive of the contemporary Arab for self-authentication is known and recognized by all, as the modern Arab faces cultural challenges of all types and dimensions. And as it happens on the individual or on the societal level, self-authentication takes the form of a return to past positions as a point of refuge from which to launch the defense of the heritage.

We are thus dealing with the Fundamentalist wave or current of modern and contemporary Arab thought. This current has busied itself with the revival of the cultural heritage and its utilization within the framework of an ideological reading of Arab history which claims that what has been achieved in the past can also be accomplished in the future! But one cannot help noticing that most modern and contemporary Arab thought lacks objectivity. It is simply overwhelmed by the problems of the present. And as a result, what is conceived as the heritage is being duplicated in a wrong way.

Realistically speaking, we Arabs of the twentieth century should strive for objectivity and assume a position of neutrality in our attempt to understand our heritage. We should seek to develop a progressive outlook by which we seek to underline the true value of the various aspects of our heritage: cultural, literary, scientific and sociological. We must study Arab history on the basis of a dialectical relationship between several cultural and social stages which deal with the past, the present and the future.

What we need therefore is a change in the way we deal with the past. This will not happen unless we bring the past to the same level as our ordinary life. Then we may borrow from it what is useful for a specific period of time. We must engage in a dialogue with our heritage and seek to find in it the needed resources of information and points of departure for our thoughts. Without this kind of a digesting process, the past remains a great burden on our shoulders and will not contribute to the solution of our problems. This is why we believe that our cultural renaissance must be based on a trinity of cooperating activities: a love and complete knowledge of our heritage, a successful analysis of the present reality, and a total determination for the conquest of our future horizons.

We notice that contemporary Maghribi [i.e. North African] thought is preoccupied with the attempt to formulate a proper outlook for the study of modern Arab history. Some Arabs claim that it has been written in a wrong or distorted way by the European historians. These did their work according to their own perspectives, looking upon Arab societies from the standpoint of a secular worldview and classifying them at the lowest levels of civilization. But Prof. 'Abdallah el-'Arawi, who is well known for his research and his sociological studies, has a different view. He considers that what Arabs write about themselves is very weak. He does not repeat the same charge that modern Arab history has been written in a wrong way; according to him, it has been written in a deficient manner. He summarizes his objections to the historiography of several contemporary Arab historians under four points.

1- The Provincial Disease. Every Arab historian writes from within the circumstances prevailing in his own area and thus remains captive to this narrow view.

2- The Political Disease. Those writing Arab history are preoccupied with political matters and pay hardly any attention to the history of the total society such as the history of family relations, of Arab women, economics, folklore, and popular literature. In other words, these subjects receive scant attention in Arab history books.

3- The Leaders' [bosses] Disease. This means that even when political matters are considered in the history books, these are approached on the basis of the history of the leaders.

4- The Justification Disease. Often, when Arabs are against a certain point of view, they write from their own perspective with the specific aim of justifying their own positions. Their all-consuming concern for self-justification results in their loss of credibility.

More Discussion on the Arab Heritage (Keywords: Heritage, Fundamentalism, Freedom), by Jihad Fadel, in al-Hawadess, 2 Nov. 1984.

"Our Heritage and the Challenges of Our Age in the Arab Fatherland" was the theme of the conference which was organized by the Center for the Study of Arab Unity in Cairo from September 24 to 27, 1984. This is a topic which people are ready to discuss in the Arab world anywhere and at any time, which is both its strong and weak point. But there was a specific factor which gave a special flavor, both in point of time and place, and this is the fact that it was held at Cairo. It has been a long time since Arabs have come to Cairo from all over the Arab world, and with such great eagerness. The secret of this eagerness lies somewhere between the attractiveness of the topic of discussion and the Egyptian lectern which enables Arab intellectuals to speak to their fellow Arabs. There were Moroccans and Algerians, Iraqis and some from the Gulf, Sudanese, Lebanese, and Syrians, Tunisians and even some from India....

It appeared as if there were two cultural and political parties which gathered in Cairo in order to "duel" which one another: the party of

the Present Age and that of the Glorious Past! Those in the Fundamentalist camp regarded the other side almost as if they were foreigners, experts from that world which had threatened the Arabs and conquered them. On the other hand, those in the party of the Present Age looked upon those who spoke of Fundamentalism as if they were the guardians of backwardness. But really, things were far more serious than this superficial way of describing these people. It was not simply a gathering of those concerned about the past and those concerned about the present, but rather of two schools of thought concerned about how to face the challenge of our times. ...

Dr. Muhammad Arkoun (an Algerian from Kabylia) spoke of two trends in the Arab heritage: one trend fundamentalist and mythological, and the other creative and rational. He added that those generations which were educated by the West have offered some great works which were intended to resurrect this heritage from its sleep and to have it studied and taught in the schools and the universities. But in order for it to continue, it needs a liberal political system that allows complete freedom of research, of publication and of thought, without being subservient to any ideological ends.

Dr. William Suleyman Qalada, the deputy of the Council of State in Egypt lectured on: Organizational Changes in the Arab World in the Light of Western Thought and the Situation in Egypt. He called for a secular (laicized) state which binds every citizen with the goal of total progress for the country. On this basis, a national consensus is formed which binds everyone within the country. He went on to say that Arab society must become pluralistic, and not a society of one voice. He reminded the conference of the first constitutional document in the history of Islam which came out of Medina after the Hejira, and which organized the relationship between the Muhajiroon (Meccan "immigrants") and the Ansar (Medinan "partisans") on one side, and the Jews on the other side.

This lecture precipitated a great debate, as one participant felt that what lay behind the paper was the anxieties of non-Muslims in Egypt and in other parts of the Arab world vis-a-vis Islam. The response reminded Dr. Qalada that Islam, throughout all its history, has been a government of justice and equity, and within it non-Muslims enjoyed (privileges or rights) which others never enjoyed under other religions. The dhimmi status or law was a progressive one in its day, since Islam protected those classified as dhimmis, while Christians persecuted their enemies and annihilated them. Dr. Qalada answered that neither he nor non-Muslims in Egypt are anxious about their status. ...

[It is unbelievable how an Eastern Christian is "silenced" whenever he voices his fears about his second-class or third-class status within the contemporaneous Arab-Muslim world. It is as if the dhimmi status were so glorious and so fair! What a sad commentary on the inability of Arab-Muslim intellectuals to sympathize with their fellow citizens who happen not to share with them their religious faith.]