from childhood onward. She pays a good deal of attention to his students and the controversies that his and their work began to stir up a few generations after his death. She is much more concerned than Hirtenstein to situate him in his Islamic context and to suggest that the hostility that he has met with in the modern Islamic world has little to do with his teachings and much to do with ideology.

Addas’s book is not as “reader-friendly” as Hirtenstein’s, but it will have more appeal to those familiar with Islamic history and interested in Ibn ‘Arabi’s role in the development of the tradition. Those wishing for a sense of the actual content of his writings, however, will find the text much too terse to satisfy. Even her Quest for the Red Sulphur is too brief to do that.

William C. Chittick

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In his new book, Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies in Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History, Ibrahim Abu-Rabi’ presents a comprehensive and detailed exposition of the reasons for the failure of Arab intellectuals to come to terms with modernity and its contemporary step-children, capitalism and globalization. His discussion centres on the social and economic changes that have occurred in the Arab world since the eclipse of colonialism and dawn of the nation-state, and the challenges that such changes have brought. Two events dramatically accentuated these challenges in the Muslim world in the late twentieth century, the Arab-Israeli War of 1967 and the defeat of Iraq by United Nations forces in 1991. According to the author, these events contributed to the globalization of capitalism and domination of contemporary Arab society, precipitating an identity crisis in the Arab-Muslim world. Abu-Rabi’ sees this as a time of intellectual confusion for the Arab intelligentsia, who alone are capable of acting as legitimators of power and its system of values.

In his methodical evaluation of this problem, the author presents his study in two parts, “Themes” and “Thinkers.” The first part is dedicated to a
historical and philosophical survey of Arab thought in the last two hundred years, and the relationship between colonialism, capitalism, and religion as it impacted the underdeveloped Middle East. The second part is a detailed study of some of the most influential and representative Arab thinkers of diverse ideological and philosophical consciousness. The complexity of the issues surrounding the problem, stated simply as “Who speaks for the Arab world today?” is addressed masterfully by Abu-Rabi’. His analytical exposition of the social, political, religious, and economic factors that have impacted and diminished Arab society is an impassioned response to the current state of affairs.

Historically, modern Arab thought was the product of two eras, the rise of Islam and the Western expansion and colonialism of the nineteenth century. The Islamic body of knowledge is based on divine revelation with the Qur’an as its central force and is thus religious, while Western knowledge, a product of the Enlightenment, is specifically rational and thus secular. Both of these theories of knowledge continue to factor to a greater or lesser degree into the battle for hegemony today. For the Arab world, colonialism meant the end of a self-contained and somewhat autonomous ideological and religious system. The Muslim world has reacted to this loss in the past two centuries with the creation of Islamism, or fundamentalism, which has functioned as a vehicle for protest against political and social failures in the Arab states. As might be expected, Islamism has grown exponentially against the Westernization and economic modernization of certain classes in Arab society, indicating the depth of distrust and distaste for secularism that abounds among Muslims. And, as Abu-Rabi’ points out, the attack on Iraq served to solidify the Islamic movement and give it a new ideology, leading to a resurgence in religious nationalism in the Arab world.

Because Arab society and its economy were basically tribal and rural in the nineteenth century, it rapidly fell victim to European colonialism. Equipped with the Industrial Age’s ability to exploit and export, the West was able to spread their hegemony around the world. Abu-Rabi’ comments, “Colonized Arabs and their intellectual elites were bewildered by the progress of their colonizers and at the same time were alerted to their own outdated modes of structure and thought” (p. 11). As a result, modern Arab thought became an ideological discourse, creatively unique because of the questions and problems posed by colonialism. The impact of Western modernity and secularism on Islamic thought and tradition continues as a major arena of conflict today, as Muslims try to recapture the pivotal societal role of Qur’anic ethics and teachings.
In identifying the two cataclysmic moments in contemporary history that today challenge the Arab intelligentsia, the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, and the Iraqi defeat of 1991, Abu-Rabi’ describes the latter as a “return of colonialism” (p. 79). He suggests that there are now two main paradigms contending for authority in the Arab world, one represented by globalization (Americanization), and the other represented by Arab and Muslim values. Because the defeat of Iraq signaled the demise of the last bastion of nationalism in the region, the authoritarian regimes in the Arab world have lost their nationalist enemies. For the intelligentsia, the burden of defeat became a “collective critique” of society, the individual, tradition, and socialism. But intellectuals in the Arab world are not a homogeneous group; they are both religious and secular, and while there exists no clear-cut demarcation between them, there is polarization in contemporary Muslim society.

*Contemporary Arab Thought* is most concerned with the issue of power in the Arab world, who holds it, who are the “power elite”, and predominantly, on what side do the intelligentsia stand in terms of power-holders. Simply identifying where the power lies in the Muslim world can be problematic, since, traditionally in Islam, authority is religious, based on the Qur’ān and its revelations. But what happens to religious authority in the twenty-first century, where power has been intermeshed with secularism? This is especially troublesome in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states where traditional and modernizing elements exist side-by-side, and the latter’s fast-paced expansion has led to a questioning of religious values. This dichotomy between Islam and Western values is most obvious in Saudi Arabia, the home of Mecca and Medina, Islam’s holiest sites, and the enormous wealth-producing oil fields that fuel a Western ultra-modern urban environment and society. Here, tribalism plays a major role in modern and contemporary Islam, and the Saudi tribe is the power elite in modern Muslim society. In recognizing this duality, Abu-Rabi’ says, “The state claimed adherence to Islamic identity and the modernization of society” (p. 70). However, he goes on to point out that peaceful coexistence between the religious and political power centers is waning, and there is growing criticism of this alliance by religious revolutionaries.

The predominant sociological feature of this modernization has been the migration of homeless peasantry to the cities, swelling the numbers of urban poor, and emphasizing the great disparity between the rich and the poor, a disparity that increases daily under the impact of globalization. The major question that must be asked in this transformed urban environment is, what happens to religious people? A twentieth century example of what occurs in such a situation is Iran, where the Muslim poor supported the religious
intelligentsia against the Shah, representing the power elite. Because power is all-pervasive in Muslim society, intermingled with business, politics, the military, and intellectuals, contests for it are intermeshed with religion and secularism. Thus, any change in the societal power equation requires a movement propelled by a unifying event or idea that causes cohesion among disparate groups. Such an event occurred on September 11, 2001, and its impact is still being felt among the Muslim power elites and the Islamic movement.

Contemporary Arab Thought draws particular attention to the state of education in Arab countries. Historically, Muslim culture has been literate from the beginning, as evidenced by the Qur’ān, genealogies of history and religion, and encyclopedias in many languages. But today, for the most part, the peasantry is un-schooled and illiterate, a situation that lends itself to societal turmoil when Islamic fundamentalist revolutionaries arouse the tensions inherent in a society like Saudi Arabia’s as described above. Furthermore, in the Muslim world, governments interfere directly in education, regimenting courses and choosing their instructors. Because finding ways to confine Islam is important to political authorities, only schools and universities with scientific curricula are allowed to operate. The social sciences may not be taught, as they are seen as dangerous to the political status quo. The weakest students are admitted to religious schools in the Muslim world, where their education is strictly limited, and most of their studies involve memorization of the Qur’ān. Affairs of state and society are, generally, beyond their narrowed vision, a circumstance that suits governments that fear educated ‘ulamā’.

However, even among the intellectual elite in the Arab world, most scholars of Islam speak and read only Arabic, and thus, are cut off from all Western scholarship on Islam. Perhaps only three to four percent of these scholars speak another language. The main reasons for this state of affairs are twofold: blind nationalism and its emphasis on individual language and culture, so that Arabic or Islamic studies can only take place in Arabic; and a certain reading of Islam by Muslims, who believe that the sacred language of the Qur’ān, Arabic, is the only language proscribed by the Prophet Muhammad. The point of this discussion is that it encapsulates what is wrong with modern, contemporary society in Arab countries, where the power dynamics are controlled by a select few to the detriment of the Muslim proletariat. Abu-Rabi’ makes clear that the most important ingredient for societal change is critical, independent schooling to encourage the institution of democratic structures and free Islam from the strictures imposed by self-serving autocrats: “Because of the progressive privatization, elitization,
Westernization, and Americanization of education in numerous Muslim countries, common people have been stripped of their traditional pride, and a new consciousness based on a class education distinction and social-economic segregation has been promulgated” (p. 168–9). Additionally, the exodus of trained professionals and intellectuals from the Muslim world to the West has taken its toll on underdeveloped countries, and left them unable to compete in technological development and modernization. Abu-Rabi’ summarizes: “As a consequence of this unfortunate state of affairs, the Muslim world and the rest of the Third World countries suffer from the following interdependent problems: illiteracy; an absence of rigorous scientific research, and a lack of democratic values” (p. 184).

Bearing great responsibility for this crisis is the domination of Third World economies by global capitalism. Because its end result is the personal accumulation of wealth and power, the power elite of these countries have cooperated and colluded with Western hegemony, thus betraying the traditional ethical foundations of Islam. But who is able to halt this tidal wave of globalization that threatens to engulf the Arab world? Unfortunately, the list is short. The military have the power to change things, but lack the will. Some intellectuals have the will, but lack the power. What Abu-Rabi’ is positive about is that any solution must revive the Islamic communal ethic that “commands the good and prohibits the evil” (p. 200).

Part Two of Contemporary Arab Thought is entitled “Thinkers” and is a compendium of philosophical and ideological movements in Arab consciousness in the twentieth century. In reflecting on this work and the frustration and impotence that Muslim intellectuals suffer, Abu-Rabi’ comments “The critical writings of contemporary Islamists are more than a mere exercise in intellectual futility. They are bitter, piercing, passionate, and revolutionary” (p. 221).

The first Arab thinker presented, Rashid al-Ghannushi, is a Tunisian Islamist, known for his scholarship regarding Islam in the context of Western colonialism and the rise of the nation-state. One of the primary positions that he has espoused, in advocating a new understanding of Islam, is the reform of Shari‘ah rules in order to meet the demands of the modern age. Ghannushi rejects the imposition of an Islamist political system to achieve the objectives of the Islamic movement. “Instead, he posits that the Islamic movement should actively enhance the foundations of civil society and promote democracy. In this regard, Ghannushi rejects violence as a means of solving intractable problems between the Islamic movement and the ruling secular political elite” (p. 207). He argues for an indigenous and “authentic modernist perspective...(that will) infuse all aspects and levels of society with real
democratic spirit” (p. 209). Suffering imprisonment and exile for his views, Ghannushi represents the contemporary Islamist intellectuals who envision a Muslim society free of repression and injustice.

Shaykh Muhammad al-Ghazali (1916–1996) represents another line of contemporary Islamist thought in criticizing the relationship between religion and power in the Arab world. Abu-Rabi’ credits him with using critical Islamic thought in his approaches to contemporary issues, and describes him as being concerned with “the decline of Muslim culture in the present, ways of reconstructing this culture, and ways of solving other predicaments of modern Islam” (p. 224). Ghazali was most alarmed by the Qur’anic principles’ loss of vitality and validity for Muslim life, which insured social justice and gave meaning to everyday existence. To rectify this situation, he called for new ways of thinking that would enable Muslims, both in theory and practice, to “emancipate Muslim reason from blind imitation, reductionism and atomism, expose it to the recent scientific contributions of mankind, and facilitate its access to a well-rounded critical theory aided by the most advanced tools of social and humanistic criticism” (p. 227). Claiming that Muslims, particularly in the Gulf States, were preoccupied with materialism and dependent on corrupt political systems, Ghazali noted their lack of a future philosophy with any relevance to the modern world. Thus, he believed that a strong religious movement was key for Islamic revivalism, and that an Islamic state, ruling in the name of the Shari’ah, was imperative.

A representative of contemporary Arab nationalist thought, Muhammad ‘Abid al-Jabiri, is the subject of the chapter entitled, “Towards a Critical Reason.” Abu-Rabi’ cites Jabiri’s historic “first ambitious attempt to create an independent nationalist cultural project in the post-colonial era, ...a plan of modern Arab renaissance which can be achieved with the power of reason” (p. 258). To accomplish this, Jabiri preaches the necessity for reclaiming the vast Arab and Muslim philosophical heritage, to uncover its most fundamental components, concepts, tools, and objectives, thus recognizing Arab Rationalism as a living reality that renews itself over time. On reflecting on the early foundations of the Islamic state, Jabiri makes a series of remarkable assertions. He says that tribe, doctrine, and booty were essential factors in the building of a multiglot, multiethnic Islamic empire; thus, tribal solidarity, enhanced by booty captured from Meccan commercial caravans, motivated and excited the imaginations of Muslim individuals. Islam’s progressive phase, after the conquest of Mecca, began “when Muslims with the aid of the Qur’an were able to see that the notion of the ummah was far from parochial, (and) they were challenged to think of it in universal terms” (p. 272). Furthermore, Jabiri treats Muḥammad as a charismatic politician with a vision for the
unification of Arabia, and says that the formation of the religious elite was contingent on their acquiescence to political authority (p. 275). Even more damaging to the claims of modern Islamic fundamentalism is Jabiri’s belief that the ‘ulamā’ were uninterested in applying the *Sharī'ah* because, as a metaphysical authority, they felt it was unnecessary. Jabiri claims that the modern call to implement the *Sharī'ah* was a direct result of Western intervention in the Muslim world, and has no historical precedence in Islamic history. Abu-Rabi’ sums up Jabiri’s basic contention, saying “the logic of the contemporary Arab state does not much differ from that of the medieval Muslim state; the political elite still rely on a combination of different factors: the tribe, army, ideology, and religion” (p. 276). However, Jabiri’s final goal in this discourse is to reconstruct Arab reason for the modern period, in a way that conveys the true meaning of Arab reality. To this point, he supports an enlightened society that values both democratic and nationalist values, and sees this as a solution to political authoritarianism in the Muslim world.

Under the banner of Arab nationalism, Abu-Rabi’ introduces his readers to Constantine Zurayk, a Syrian Arab nationalist thinker whose passion for the ideals of Arab unity led him to favour a secularized and totally modernized Arab world. Never afraid to confront the major problems of modern Arab life, Zurayk argued that “the general failure of the Arab intelligentsia reflects the stagnation of the masses of the Arab world” (p. 301). Like Jabiri, Zurayk sees the democratization of the Arab world as a precondition for the success of Arab unity. However, he further advocates the total assimilation of Western philosophical and scientific spirit, seeking “to transform the Third World into the image of the technologically triumphant West” (p. 303). In doing so, Zurayk relegated religion to a secondary status, usurped by the Enlightenment’s progressive human and technological project. For Arab transformation to happen, Zurayk said, the Arab world must search for reasons for its “backwardness” with a spirit of self-honesty and self-criticism: “What is needed to improve the *status quo* is a real revolution, an authentic mental transformation and commitment from every citizen” (p. 313).

Contemporary Lebanese Marxist thought is represented by Mahdi ‘Amil in *Contemporary Arab Thought*. Seeking to uncover the reasons behind economic and social domination in the Arab world, ‘Amil turned to a study of the “cultural and intellectual aspects of the Arab world in relation to the dominant mode of production and class in power, namely the bourgeoisie” (p. 320). He found that individual, religious and nationalist identities only develop in relation to the dominant mode of production. And because of the imperialist intrusion on the Arab world in the nineteenth century, there arose
in the Arab world a structural economic dependency on the advanced imperialist capitalist structure. What this effectively did was collapse the traditional indigenous economic structures, and thus cause the loss of nationalist identity. The Arab bourgeoisie had allied themselves with imperialism to secure their own economic fortunes, thus costing Arab society a further loss. In discussing why the Arab world has not developed industrially, ‘Amil claims that Western capitalism only allowed the indigenous bourgeoisie to deal with commerce, thus barring Third World nations from developing the infrastructure for industrialization. Responding to this state of affairs, ‘Amil warns that the Communist Party is the only true representative of the working class, and the only means by which drastic changes can occur. Although ‘Amil’s work is mainly philosophical in orientation, thematized throughout it is his “primary concern for the liberation of the masses, the poor and downtrodden from the domination of the bourgeoisie, which to his mind controls the state and its various ideological apparatuses” (p. 335).

“From Objective Marxism to Liberal Etatism” is the title of the chapter that introduces Abdullah Laroui, a leading Moroccan intellectual, who advocates Arab total immersion in the culture of the West to affect political transformation. In rejecting the efficacy of Islamism, Laroui argues that it has failed miserably to effect radical change in its world-view, because its “philosophy is under girded and dominated by an anachronistic text” (p. 349). He notes that the religious intelligentsia, after independence, has been excluded deliberately by technocrats in the modernizing of the state. This is an indication, Laroui says, of the status of Arab culture that “reflects the inner alienation of the modern Arab individual from modern civilization” (p. 352). However, he does acknowledge that rigid traditional religious thought, more aggressive in the twentieth century, is here to stay, even in the independent liberal state. And while Laroui views the modern Arab state as an agent of modernization, that justifies its existence by appealing to notions of public good, he also insists that “the concept of citizenry must be the guiding philosophy of the contemporary Arab state” (p. 363). Abu-Rabi’ is critical of Laroui’s attack on the intelligentsia, whom he accused of failing to diagnose and provide solutions to the central problems facing Arab society: “Laroui completely ignores increasing social and economic gaps in contemporary Moroccan society, the entrenchment of the old guard, and increasing corruption among the ruling elite...His thought is the child of theoretical idealism nourished by a well-paid government position” (p. 367). Laroui’s intellectual project suffers from his failure to provide practical solutions to contemporary Arab problems that exist in a culture he has condemned.
Abu-Rabi’ concludes *Contemporary Arab Thought* with a restatement of many of the issues brought forward in the preceding chapters. Among the most glaring problems facing the Arab world today are repressive regimes that use modernization as a source of legitimization, the concentration of power in the hands of the few, use of militarism to support the *status quo*, the unequal distribution of wealth, and societal domination by the ruling elite. External forces also have played havoc with the stability of the Arab world, among them being Zionism and the globalization of capitalism through Western imperialism. The creation of a new Islamic order will require a democratic arena for its implementation, an unlikely scenario given the Arab regimes currently in power. Even within the Arab world itself, there is little unity or understanding among nation-states when it comes to the political and economic problems that engulf all of them.

This survey of modern Arab consciousness is encyclopedic in its breadth, and thorough in its content. The reader is led through the maze of Arab history and culture, all the while clutching the thread of Islam, from which all is suspended. On the journey, what becomes obvious to the reader is the vitality of Arab thought, hitherto unknown in the West, and the torturous array of problems unique to Muslim society that must be addressed. In his preface, Abu-Rabi’ speaks with great passion of the need for Muslim intelligentsia to become “a leading light to the downtrodden Muslim masses.” This tone reverberates with Western audiences who may have long wondered when the autocracies of the Arab Middle East would taste the bitterness that they have inflicted on their people. It is my great hope that *Contemporary Arab Thought* accomplishes its goal of reinvigorating Islamic revolutionary discourse so that real progress in the democratization of the Arab world can begin.

*Jamie Dance*

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Orientalism by definition is an innocent and innocuous field of learning, embodying the fruits of Western scholars’ specialized study of the Orient,