

The West and the Middle East

Bernard Lewis

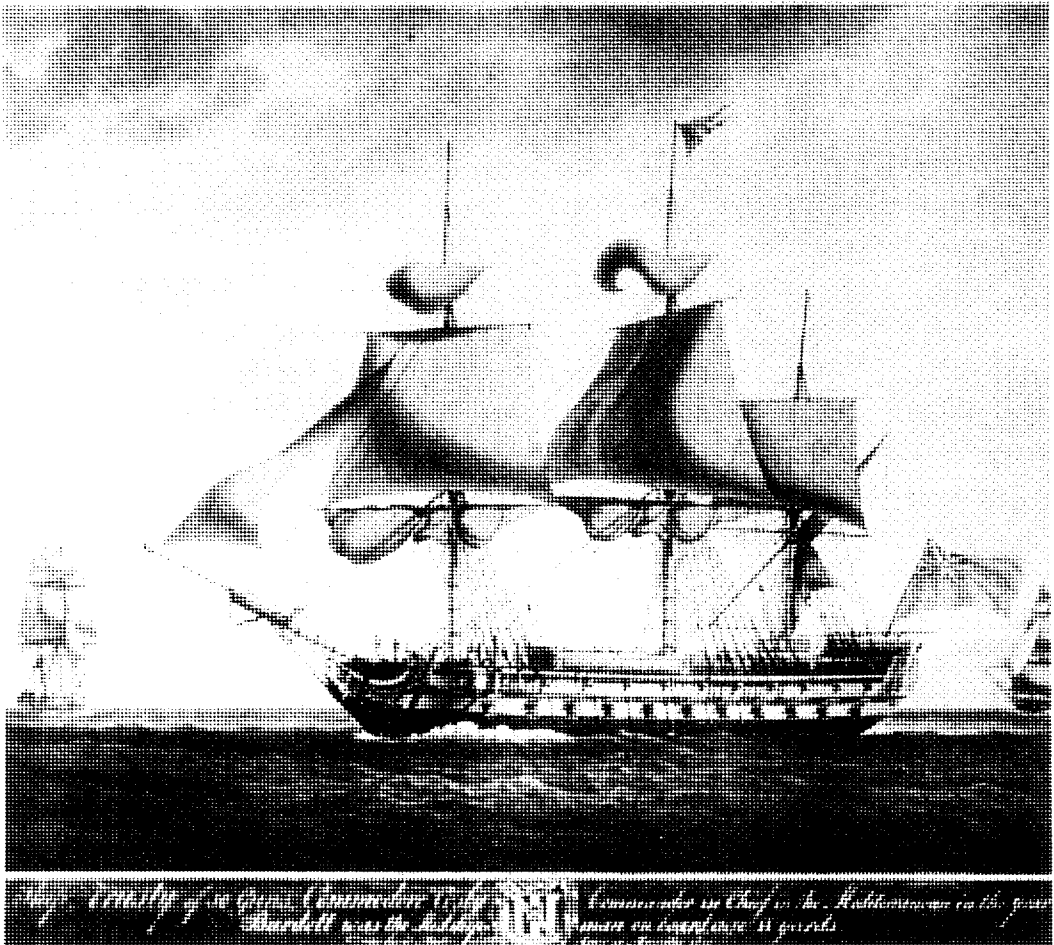
IS MODERNITY WESTERN?

IN 1593 an Ottoman historian, Selaniki Mustafa Efendi, recorded the arrival in Istanbul of an English ambassador. He was not very interested in the ambassador, but he was much struck by the English ship in which the ambassador traveled. "A ship as strange as this has never entered the port of Istanbul," he wrote. "It crossed 3,700 miles of sea and carried 83 guns besides other weapons . . . It was a wonder of the age the like of which has not been seen or recorded."

Why was this sophisticated Istanbul historian so interested in a ship coming from a barely heard of island at what was then the wrong end of Europe? Selaniki Mustafa Efendi's wonderment is not that difficult to understand if one recalls what was happening at the time. The Portuguese had sailed around the Cape of Good Hope and were active in Eastern waters, to be followed not long after by the Dutch and the English. Portugal, one of the smallest and least populous of the nations of Western Europe, was able to establish a maritime and commercial paramountcy in South Asia which three great Muslim empires—the Ottoman, the Persian, and the Mogul Empire in India—were unable to prevent or reverse.

A hundred years later, as the seventeenth century drew to a close, the rulers of the Ottoman Empire—the dominant power in

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CHRISTIE'S

When the West ruled the waves: H.M.S. Trusty, 1787

the Middle East, the shield and sword of Islam pointing toward Europe—were becoming aware of the countries beyond the north-west frontier as something other than an outer darkness of barbarism and unbelief. For a century and a half, the Ottomans and their Christian enemies had been locked in bloody stalemate in Central Europe. This was broken by the second Turkish siege of Vienna in 1683, which ended in failure and retreat. During that war, Ottoman forces for the first time suffered major reverses on the field of battle; the peace treaty of 1699 was the first a victorious enemy imposed on the Ottomans.

The West was now seen in a new light—as a source of danger and therefore, possibly, of inspiration. Ottoman military commanders soon realized that there were some things they had to adopt, adapt,

copy, borrow, beg, buy, or steal in order to keep up with Western armies; weapons, certainly, and perhaps some other devices. The first lessons of civilizational change are most effectively and perspicuously administered on the battlefield. The others follow somewhat later, and often in a more ambiguous form.

What were the Ottoman reformers and other Muslim Middle Eastern rulers who followed their example looking for? What elements of Western modernity did they accept, and to what extent? In the Middle East the debate about this process and the decisions the process requires has been going on for almost three centuries, probably longer than in any other part of the non-Western world.

In his book *Among the Believers*, V.S. Naipaul observes that many present-day Muslim leaders see Western science and technology as a kind of celestial supermarket where they can come and buy, for money, the products they find useful, and reject those they do not want. Here, the word "reject," implying that one has a choice in relation to technological and sociological transfers, is, in part at least, a metaphor. It may mean to consider, evaluate, and refuse something that is offered. It also has a physiological sense, as in the body's acceptance or rejection of an alien transplant. The argument is increasingly heard in the Middle East that what the region's countries need is modernization without westernization—that is to say, accepting, or, rather, acquiring the products of Western material culture, perhaps also the science and technology that produced them, but without the cultural baggage and false values and depraved way of life attached to them.

All scientific method is comparative. To discuss these questions, it is necessary to make some comparisons, however invidious and unacceptable that may be in the last years of the twentieth century. We must compare the West and the Middle East as they were on the eve of modernity, and the Middle East before and after the West's impact. Finally, and in many ways most instructive, we must compare the Middle East with other non-Western regions affected by the West.

THE ASCENT OF THE WEST

THE SHIP that arrived in Istanbul is an early example of the West's characteristic long-range projection of power, and, too, of its spirit of

company established in England for the purpose of trading in the Levant. An English monarch of the late sixteenth century would have been unlikely to go to the trouble and expense of installing an embassy in Istanbul. But the Levant Company wanted one, and stepped in to arrange for this aid to its business. Though nominally the English, later British, embassy, it remained in effect the

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embassy of the Levant Company until the Napoleonic Wars, when the Crown deemed it time to take over.

The great European trading corporations exemplified the harnessing of economic power, in their relations with government, in their structuring and managing of complex operations extending over vast areas, and, in particular, in their mobilization of credit, all on a scale undreamed of in earlier economies. The impact of this mercantilist marriage of government and business was not unlike what present-day Far Eastern powers have achieved, to the West's consternation.

The Levant Company, moreover, was a voluntary association—a group of people who had banded together because of shared beliefs, purposes, policies, interests, or projects. Relations in such associations are different from both the compulsory allegiance the ruled owe the ruler and the involuntary loyalty members owe the clan, the family, the sect, or the tribe. In most Middle Eastern and other non-Western societies this intermediate level did not exist; its emergence was a characteristically, and for a while almost an exclusively, Western phenomenon. Voluntary associations including groups as diverse as business corporations, trade unions, political parties, unestablished churches, independent colleges, clubs, and sports teams formed networks that developed into what is sometimes known as civil society.

The Levant Company ship illustrates yet another important feature of the Western world, an emphasis on harnessing energy. In traditional societies, Middle Eastern and other, the only source of energy besides human and animal muscle was the mill, using the power of water and, later, of wind. Mills are a tax-gatherer's delight; they are immovable, impossible to disguise, and, so long as they

generate revenue, ripe for the taxing. They are also, for the same reasons, a historian's delight. Those who compile the archives on which historians must rely are primarily interested in money, so we have pretty good documentation on mills. The researches of Charles Issawi of Princeton University reveal that eleventh-century England, not long after the Norman Conquest, had more mills per capita than the central Ottoman lands at the height of the empire's power and glory.

The ambassador's conveyance was a sailing ship, but its rigging, of a far greater complexity than that of a typical Mediterranean coastal trader, enabled it to make better time in a fair wind, to escape a foul, and to find a breeze in a calm; it had to do all these to sail the Atlantic. The West developed other sources of energy, particularly wood, coal, and, later, oil, whose combustion provided power. The Middle East consumed its wood in antiquity and had little coal. It possessed immense quantities of oil, but it did not know how to extract or exploit that fuel until others came and showed it. Oil, I would say in passing, has proved at best a mixed blessing—some might even say a curse—for countries where it is found, in that it has sometimes served as a buttress to tyranny and a barrier to social modernization. It has freed oppressive governments from the need to raise taxes and thereby expose themselves to those pressures that raising taxes engenders; one might even adapt an American slogan for Middle Eastern purposes and say, no representation without taxation. There is worse to come. Western science and technology, which made oil first useful and then necessary, will sooner or later make it obsolete, and those who depend on oil revenues will confront a new reality.

There are some other points to note in this by now perhaps overloaded ship. It was manned not by galley slaves but by free sailors. These sailors both fought and worked the ship, unlike the great galleons of the Spanish Armada, for example, where sailors worked the ship and gentlemen fought. The sailors were not gentlemen and the gentlemen were not sailors, which put them both at a disadvantage in a sea battle. But even a Spanish galleon was far better placed than a galley with banks of oars manned by tiers of slaves. The English ship's crew of free sailors made a striking

contrast at a time when Middle Eastern armed forces relied heavily on Mamelukes and janissaries and other more or less slave elements. Slavery—military, economic, domestic, or sexual—has been part of virtually every civilization known to history. Its abolition was initially, and for a while uniquely, Western. The effects of that change on the family, the economy, the society, and the polity were surely immense.

Perhaps most astonishing of all, and contemporary Turkish writers commented on it, is that the monarch who sent the embassy to the sultan was a woman, a reigning queen—a strange and disturbing innovation. The position of women in the West was

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very far from equality with men, but it was incomparably superior to the position of women in most non-Western societies. Almost every Muslim traveler to Europe before the modern era noted what was for them the astonishing freedom, even deference, accorded women. The nuclear family based on monogamous marriage was an

important factor in the emergence of Western individualism, and, therefore, in the rise and spread of Western civilization. The difference for society between the Western norm and the harem was well understood by Kemal Atatürk, the first president of the Turkish Republic, who in speeches in the mid-1920s began to talk about rights for women. With characteristic clarity and brevity Atatürk declared, "Our task now is to catch up with the modern world. We will not catch up with the modern world if we only modernize half the population."

Elizabeth was not only a queen; she was a queen with a parliament. This, again, was something new and strange. It does not seem to have been noted at the time in Turkey, and Parliament under Elizabeth did not have much power. But its power was increasing, and not very long afterward it established once and for all that supremacy lay with the elected representatives and not with the Crown.

This ship's place of origin was the England of Queen Elizabeth and the Levant Company. It was also the country of Shakespeare

and Bacon and, a little later, of Isaac Newton; of the Renaissance and the Reformation and, a little later, the parliamentary revolution. All these, too, are surely central to what is specifically Western about the West.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

WHEN PEOPLE realize things are going wrong, there are two questions they can ask. One is, "What did we do wrong?" and the other is, "Who did this to us?" The latter leads to conspiracy theories and paranoia. The first question leads to another line of thinking: "How do we put it right?" There is a very extensive literature in the Middle East from the early eighteenth century on how to put it right, how to save this state, how to protect this community against the waxing power of the infidel. All kinds of solutions were offered, most involving some imitation or adoption of at least the military methods of the enemy—that is, of the modern West.

From quite an early date, Ottomans and other Middle Eastern rulers took up a conscious policy of reform. They didn't call it westernization, of course. They rejected that idea, and a number of terms were used to denigrate the very notion: the Arabic *Tafarnuj*, or "aping the ways of the Franks," the Persian *Gharbzadagi*, which has been imaginatively translated as "Westoxication." More and more people, however, evinced a growing awareness that extensive changes were needed over an ever wider range.

The defeat in Vienna began a new phase. Recognition of the military superiority of the Western states was immediately followed by plans and attempts to "modernize." Early reformers conceived of that process as the adoption of European weaponry and warfare, through the employment of foreign mercenaries as teachers and sometimes even field commanders, and through the purchase of European weapons. Europe had long been willing to provide such services. In the time of the Crusades, European Christian merchants did a flourishing business selling arms to the Saracens for use against the Crusaders. During the Ottoman advance into Europe in the sixteenth century, there was an English gunshop in Istanbul where military supplies could be bought. Other European

states eagerly joined in this traffic, and European bankers were willing to finance Ottoman purchases. "Constructive engagement" has a long history.

But Middle Eastern governments eventually realized that all the weaponry they could afford still did not give them a modern army capable of meeting a Western army on its own terms. The Ottoman reformers and others after them drew the necessary inferences. They needed new weapons of the Frankish kind, and it was not safe to depend on imports. Therefore they required a modern armaments industry. They needed officers to lead these new armies and could not rely indefinitely on adventurers and mercenaries. Therefore they had to reform the educational system so that it could turn out suitably trained officers. They needed roads and other communications to move their armies, so they had to build—usually with Western help—what is nowadays called infrastructure.

By the nineteenth century the recognition of Western military superiority and of the need to westernize the armed forces acquired a cultural aspect. What matters primarily in war is weaponry and military organization. The changes of the eighteenth century proving insufficient, in the nineteenth we find Middle Eastern commanders dressing their armies in European-style uniforms with tunics and trousers and Sam Browne belts, and organizing them in European-style formations—platoons, companies, battalions, brigades, and divisions—themselves ordered by means of the European hierarchy of ranks from private to field marshal. These clearly were cultural more than practical choices, and they continue to this day. Middle Eastern armies, even those of the most anti-Western states, still wear European-style uniforms.¹

The military reforms may have delayed but they did not prevent the establishment of Western domination. Even after the departure of the Western imperial powers, they have not sufficed to restore even a semblance of parity in the effective use of military power. The

¹Similarly among civilians, outside the Arabian Peninsula Western dress remains the norm for men, although not for women. (Men, not women, of course, make these choices.) Even the diplomatic representatives of the Islamic Republic of Iran wear suits like the Europeans. Only the missing necktie symbolizes their rejection of the trammels of Western civilization.

efforts of some states to acquire weapons of mass destruction—Western inventions all—are attempts to remedy this disparity. Such attempts may achieve mutual destruction; they will not achieve victory or even parity.

THE SECRET TALISMAN

THERE WERE many who tried to find the secret talisman of Western power. Some located it not in the military realm specifically but in the Industrial Revolution, and economic development more generally; some in the science and technology that powered them. Some saw it as enshrined in that most extraordinary and exotic of Western institutions, constitutional and representative government.

This last has given rise to a whole modern school of thought that associates the nature of Western society with individual freedom, human rights, limited government—in a word, citizenship, the right of the citizen to participate in the formation, conduct, and, if necessary, dismissal of government. Nowadays some form of constitutional and representative government is usually taken to be an essential part of the Western way of life and, therefore, of westernizing modernity. It has not always been so, and the recent history of, for example, much of the European mainland demonstrates that a state can be both Western and modern, at least for a time, under an autocratic and repressive regime. Surely it is unreasonable to expect newcomers to Western modernity to install this Western institution faster or operate it better than some major Western nations. At the same time, the success of some of the “Asian tigers” shows that a country can modernize effectively without democracy and human rights as impediments to action. While it may not be possible to have democracy today without modernity, it is certainly possible to have modernity without democracy.

In contrast, the idea of limited government is inherent and essential in Islam. The principle that the ruler is not above the law, but subject to the law no less than the humblest of his underlings, is central to classical Islamic teaching on the state. The unbridled autocracy that prevails in much of the Islamic world today is in large measure a byproduct of modernization, which has often abrogated intermediate

powers and reinforced the sovereign power so that the most insignificant tinpot dictator wields a despotic authority beyond the wildest imaginings of the caliphs and sultans of the past.

More persuasive but still not entirely convincing is the attribution of Western modernity's success to the separation of church and state. Separation in the two senses, between political and ecclesiastical institutions and between scientific and religious thought, is now commonly accepted as an essential part of Western modernity. Certainly some of the most successful modern Western states have achieved such separation either by constitutional enactment, as in the United States and France, or by tacit agreement on both sides, as in the United Kingdom and the Scandinavian monarchies. But in the latter group this *de facto* separation came late in the development of both democracy and modernity, while in other successful Western states religion and even religious-based parties still play a significant role. The experience of Israel, a modern democratic state with an important religious component to its very identity, is too new and brief to serve as a basis of argument. Perhaps the same may be said of the religious-based parties in the democracies established after World War II in former Axis countries. This much is certain: the role of religion in relation to both democracy and modernity may vary considerably from religion to religion and country to country. The historical roles of Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox Christianity are very different, and all of them differ from those of Judaism and Islam. What is clearly incompatible with both Western civilization and its distinctive brand of modernity is the subordination of the state and of science to religious control, whichever religion it may be.

WESTERNIZING THE MASSES

TO DISCOVER how the West affected ordinary people in the Middle East, one may examine the inventories of estates before the distribution among heirs. Many hundreds of thousands of such inventories survive from the centuries of Ottoman rule. A young Turkish historian, Müge Göcek, had the idea of going through the registers of inventories of people who died in eighteenth-century Istanbul,

taking soundings at intervals, among different elements in society, and looking for Western artifacts and objects. What she found included telescopes and eyeglasses, a European import already attested in Iran in the fifteenth century; chairs and other furniture; maps and books. The largest groups of items by far were muskets, pistols, clocks, and watches.

The measurement of time in the Middle East goes back to ancient Babylonia, but the clock and the watch—portable, personal time-pieces—introduced a precision previously unknown. It became possible to have schedules and office hours and to make appointments—a new way of life still imperfectly assimilated in the region. The calendar is another change of specifically Western origin. All civilizations devise their own ways of measuring the days, the months, and the years, but in our own age the Western Christian, or Gregorian, calendar and the division of time into Christian and pre-Christian eras have gained almost universal acceptance.

A parallel innovation was in the measurement of space. The European practice, inherited from the Greeks, was to divide the eastern hemisphere into three artificially defined continents assigned the names Europe, Asia, and Africa; European cartographers later added America. Asians, Africans, and pre-Columbian Americans had been quite unaware of these identities which Europe had assigned to them, but starting in the seventeenth century the Ottomans and other Middle Easterners began to accept these European classifications.

More important than the naming of continents was the demarcation of frontiers. Before, a realm extended as far as its ruler could collect taxes. Now came the European notion of a precisely demarcated border between states, and that, of course, had a considerable effect on the very notion of the state and on the shared identity and allegiance of those who lived within its frontiers.

No less important was the abridgment of both time and space by such new devices in communication as the train, the car, the plane, and printing and then newspapers. Printing is an interesting example of rejection. It was not a European invention, but was introduced to Europe from the Far East. In 1294 the Mongol ruler of Iran printed and issued Chinese-style paper currency. But the market refused it, the economy ground to a standstill, and after two months

the paper was withdrawn and hard money—i.e., coins—returned. The printing of books was known and rejected. When the Spanish Jews came to Turkey in 1492 after their expulsion from Spain, they requested permission to set up printing presses to produce books for their own use. Permission was granted on condition that they did not print in Turkish or Arabic, or in Arabic characters. The usual explanation is that this was seen as a desecration of the Holy Script; perhaps the guilds of calligraphers and scribes also had something to do with it. Printing in Muslim languages was not permitted until the eighteenth century, when a Hungarian seminarist converted to Islam introduced it. The experiment was of brief duration and limited effect. And for a while, printing in the Middle East continued to be limited to religious minorities—first Jews, later various Christian denominations. At the end of the eighteenth century and more actively during the nineteenth, printing was reintroduced, initially through the agency of foreign governments and Christian missions. By the mid-1800s it was extensively used for texts in Turkish, Arabic, and other Middle Eastern languages.

The other, perhaps more important, change in communications was in their speed, beginning with the telegraph. That invention was introduced in 1855 during the Crimean War, like so many other major changes due to war and the needs of war. The first telegram transmitted from the Middle East was a military communiqué announcing, "Allied troops have entered Sevastopol." A combination of the war, telegraphy, and the presence of foreign correspondents endowed the Middle East with another potent vehicle for westernization and modernization—the daily newspaper—where before there had been only official gazettes and some rather sporadic private publications. The advent of the paper and its daily fix of news and comment radically transformed Middle Easterners' view of the world and of themselves.

WHO DECIDES MODERNITY

THREE ATTITUDES have emerged among Middle Easterners faced with the alien civilization from the West. One is expressed in Naipaul's image of the supermarket: we take what we can adapt and

use, without allowing ourselves to be infected by a superseded religion and an inferior civilization. This view comes in an extreme form nowadays in the writings and utterances of the so-called Islamic fundamentalists, who see Western civilization, and particularly American popular culture, as immoral and dangerously corrupting. In this strain is the Ayatollah Khomeini's denunciation, taken up by his successors in Iran, of the United States as the Great Satan.²

Others have talked hopefully of a marriage of the best elements of both civilizations. When civilizations meet and clash, however, what all too often results is not a marriage of the best but a promiscuous cohabitation of the worst.

The third attitude could be summed up in this way: The world has seen many civilizations. Each has grown and flourished in its day, then passed away. At this moment in history only one is still alive. We must join it or be uncivilized. This was the line that Kemal Atatürk and his ideological predecessors in the Young Turk Movement pursued.

The modern process of change was undoubtedly initiated by the West, but is it Western in its origins? The West was not born like Aphrodite from the seafoam, and much of it is of non-Western origin, distinct from the Greco-Roman and Judaeo-Christian roots of Western civilization.

It is the habit in the Western world, now followed in many other regions, to divide history into three main periods: ancient, medieval, and modern. In this system, medieval Europe marks the transition between antiquity, that is, Greece, Rome, and the ancient civilizations of the Middle East, and modernity, that is, ourselves. But there were three routes from antiquity to modernity thus defined, of which medieval Western Christendom was only one. The other two were Greek Orthodox Christendom and—by far the most important of the three—the world of Islam. The Islamic world, like the two

²No intelligence service is needed to interpret this epithet—just a copy of the Koran. The last verses, the best known along with the first, talk about Satan, describing him as “the insidious tempter who whispers in the hearts of men.” Satan is not a conqueror, not an imperialist, not a capitalist, not an exploiter. He is a seducer. He comes with Barbie dolls and cocktails and provocative TV programs and movies and, worst of all, emancipated women.

Christendoms, accepted the heritage of antiquity, and it made far better use of that heritage than either of them. Greek philosophy and a wide range of Greek sciences were preserved, translated, and studied in the Islamic world long before they became known in Europe.

And that is not all. The ancient civilizations of the Mediterranean and the Middle East, of Europe, India, and China were all local, at best regional. Christendom and Islam both claimed a universal mission, but the Islamic oecumene extending over large parts of Asia, Africa, and Europe was the first to create a civilization that was multiracial, multicultural, in a sense intercontinental. Islamic civilization extended far beyond the uttermost limits of Roman and Hellenistic culture, and was thus able to borrow, adapt, and incorporate significant elements from the remoter civilizations of Asia.³ To these, Middle Easterners added their own rich contribution, which helped to form the nascent civilization of the West. A late medieval Indian, African, or European might well have asked—is modernity Islamic?

A few examples may suffice to show they would have asked with good reason. Experimental science, Westerners like to persuade themselves, is peculiarly and exclusively Western. In fact, it was developed in medieval Islam much more than in the ancient world. The Greek genius lay in theory and philosophy. The Muslims developed experimental science and bequeathed a rich legacy which helped to start the modernization of the West.

In the economic realm, too, notably in commerce and banking, there is a considerable heritage from the Islamic world and beyond. The extent to which European traders learned from their more advanced Muslim colleagues is attested by the many Middle Eastern loan words in Western languages. Check comes from Persian, tariff from Arabic, and the names of a variety of sophisticated foodstuffs

³Nowadays, we Westerners claim diversity as a characteristic merit of our Western societies. This is a fairly recent development, as Western societies for most of their history were totally intolerant of diversity. The Islamic societies of the Middle East, on the other hand, were enormously diverse, and people of different religions, races, and ways of life developed the capacity to live side by side, I will not say in full equality, but in reasonable, mutual tolerance. That has changed for the worse in the Middle East, as the strains grew greater and the opportunities fewer. It is much more difficult to be tolerant when you are under threat than when you feel yourself to be on top of the world. Meanwhile, in the Western world, tolerance of diversity has increased markedly.

and commodities reveal their Middle Eastern origin: caviar and orange are Persian, while damask and muslin preserve the names of Arab cities. On another level, a range of mathematical and astronomical terms from algebra to zenith document the Islamic contribution to mathematics and astronomy. Double-entry book-keeping was a great European invention, but it would hardly have been possible without the zero and positional numbering, which the Muslims brought to Europe from India, or paper and papermaking, which they brought from China.

Western influences in art and architecture appeared very early and spread very fast. The westernization of literature came later, but was also rapid. Much of the literary output in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish today is in form and, to a significant extent, in content no more alien than any other regional variant of the common Western culture. In music, however, there seems to be a hiatus—one of the more striking cultural differences between the Middle East and other parts of the non-Western world. Western-style art music is appreciated and performed in Japan, in China, to some extent in India, while it remains alien in most of the Islamic world.

The same must be said of science. Scientists in the Far East and Southeast and South Asia are actively participating in what is no longer a Western but a worldwide scientific enterprise. Indeed, the science and technology of modern communications would be far less advanced without the Far Eastern contribution. But the Middle East's contribution compares poorly with that of its non-Western contemporaries and, even more dramatically, with its own past. This should lead Middle Easterners to ask themselves not why are they different from the West and how the West is to blame for this, but why their societies have fared so differently from those of South Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Far East.

This may perhaps help provide a practical, if not theoretical, definition of modernity. In every era of human history, modernity, or some equivalent term, has meant the ways, norms, and standards of the dominant and expanding civilization. Every dominant civilization has imposed its own modernity in its prime. The Hellenistic kingdoms,

The standards of the dominant civilization always define modernity.

the Roman Empire, the medieval Christendoms, and Islam, as well as the ancient civilizations of India and China, all imposed their norms over a wide area and radiated their influence over a much broader one still, far beyond their imperial frontiers. Islam was the first to make significant progress toward what it perceived as its universal mission, but modern Western civilization is the first to embrace the whole planet. Today, for the time being, as Atatürk recognized and as Indian computer scientists and Japanese high-tech companies appreciate, the dominant civilization is Western, and Western standards, therefore, define modernity.

There have been other dominant civilizations in the past; there will no doubt be others in the future. Western civilization incorporates many previous modernities—that is to say, it is enriched by the contributions and influences of other cultures which preceded it in leadership. It will itself bequeath a Western cultural legacy to other cultures yet to come. 🌐