

## **Grano Series – America in the Middle East**

*The 2<sup>nd</sup> annual speakers series, held in Toronto at Grano Restaurant, explores the potential and limits of the use of American power in the Middle East and the prospects of democratization for the region.*

May 7, 2006

### **Modernizing the Muslim World**

Bernard Lewis

*The following is an edited transcript of Bernard Lewis's talk at the Grano lecture series last Tuesday on the role of women in the Middle East. Lewis is the Cleveland E. Lodge Professor Emeritus of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University and the author of What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response.*

**M**uslims have been keenly aware of the weakness and relative backwardness of their society for a long time now. This awareness begins, of course, with defeat in the battlefield — that is where the lessons of history are most perspicuously administered — but it has spread to other things, and for a long time now the debate has been going on in the Islamic world. "What did we do wrong? What is the secret of Western success and of our failure?"

Let me begin my discussion of that with a definition: gender. Gender, as you know, is a grammatical term. In Latin, there are three genders: masculine, feminine and neutral. In modern usage it has come to acquire a somewhat different connotation, meaning relations between the sexes other than the purely physical ones.

I would like to begin with two quotations from the very rich Muslim literature commenting on these changes. My first comes from 1593. This is recorded by an imperial historiographer. A new English ambassador arrived in Istanbul sent by Queen Elizabeth. The first thing the historiographer commented on was the ship on which the ambassador arrived. He writes with obvious bewilderment, "This is a ship that travels thousands of miles and carries 83 guns, besides other weapons." English ships were built for the Atlantic, and they are therefore bigger, stronger and more manoeuvrable than the Mediterranean ships of the Muslim world.

His other point is even more astonishing, and he says with palpable bewilderment, "This ambassador comes from a country which is ruled by a woman who rules her inherited realm with complete power." He doesn't draw any inferences from that, nor did anyone else for some time to come.

Then, in 1867, a Turkish writer called Nama Kamal published an article in which he said, "The reason for backwardness is the way we treat our women, treating them only as suitable for producing children and nothing else." As far as I know, he was the first to make that point. From then onwards it becomes more and more of an issue in the Muslim world, and has continued to be to the present day. There are some who see this as the major factor in the relative backwardness of the Muslim world compared with the West. There are others on the opposite side who see this as the major factor of Western dissipation and corruption and evil. I firmly believe that women are our best hope in dealing with the Muslim world, because they have so much to gain from modernization.

Now, there has been a fair amount of change. Let me look very rapidly at certain specific issues.

Islamic law permits polygamy and concubinage. The Qur'an is quite explicit on this. It says a man may have up to four wives and as many concubines as he wishes and can afford. Concubines are female slaves whom it is permitted to use sexually.

Polygamy and concubinage remain legal, in many Muslim countries. But some Muslim countries have actually outlawed polygamy. Some have hedged it with all kinds of restrictions, like requiring the written consent of the first wife to the acquisition of any subsequent wives, which is not impossible to get, by the way, by various means.

In many countries, although polygamy is still legal, it's no longer socially acceptable. In others it's no longer economically possible. I would say that, on the whole, polygamy is in decline, and concubinage has almost disappeared except in the Arabian Peninsula, where it still flourishes.

In other respects, women have made enormous progress in some countries, although by no means all, and that is in education. And here, one of the encouraging features of the situation is that one of the countries where women have done best is in Iraq. Now, don't misunderstand me, I'm not speaking of rights — the word "rights" has no meaning at all in that kind of society — I'm speaking of opportunity, of access. Women in Iraq — and this goes back a long way; it started under the monarchy and continued under the various succeeding regimes — had access to higher education to a degree without parallel in the Arab world, with the possible exception of Tunisia. They could go to university. They could enter the professions.

This, I feel, is a very hopeful sign for the future. Women generally do not receive the brain-deadening indoctrination that passes for education in many of these countries, because they're not thought important enough to be given it.

This does have a beneficial result, and I would say in many respects women are the greatest hope for much of the Islamic world, notably — but by no means exclusively — in Iraq.

I wanted to end with some quotations, if I may. This is from an Egyptian sheik who went to Paris in 1826 as chaplain to the first Egyptian student mission and wrote a fascinating book about it. Talking of the French, he said, "Men among them are the slaves of women and are subject to their commands, whether they be beautiful or not.

"One of them said," the sheik also reported, "Women among the people of the East are like household possessions, while among us they are like spoiled children." The Europeans harbour no evil thoughts about their women, even though the transgressions of these women are very numerous. Fornication among them is a secondary rather than a major sin, especially in the case of the unmarried. The French women excel in beauty and grace and conversation and courtesy. They always display themselves in their adornments and mingle with men at places of entertainment. A ball always includes both men and women, and there are great lights and chairs on which to sit. These are mostly for the women to sit on, and no man may sit until all the women are seated. Women are always treated at these gatherings with more consideration than men."

Can you picture this man's bewilderment at this astonishing spectacle, which he saw in Paris in 1826?

Let me end with a quotation from a Turkish woman writer of the 15th century — she was one of the very few. She was the daughter of a *qadi* and had access to education because she had an enlightened father, and she wrote a few poems, one of which I will read to you in English translation:

"Woman, they say, is deficient in sense, so they ought to pardon her every word, but one female who knows what to do is better than a thousand males who don't."

For info on the Grano Speakers Series, visit <http://www.granoseries.com>.

Copyright Grano Speakers Series

[www.granoseries.com](http://www.granoseries.com)