

BOOK REVIEW FOR *MIDDLE EAST AFFAIRS JOURNAL*

Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong?* New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. viii + 180 pp. including index. Hardcover.

Reviewed by Imad-ad-Dean Ahmad

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When Bernard Lewis, the most highly regarded of the living orientalist, chooses to address the question that all students of Muslim history love to ask, it is incumbent on us to give him a hearing. A careful reading of this book, however, poses difficulties. The book is plagued with small errors that if committed in such abundance by a Muslim writer would inhibit the academic community from according an equally important book its due respect. This is unfortunate because the author has some important, even profound, insights into the subject of why the Muslim civilization, which once the pre-eminent civilization of the world is now in a pathetic state of backwardness.

The first three chapters of this book, originating in three lectures the author gave in Vienna, suffer the most from his bias as a Western observer. It is interesting, for example, how the arrogance he attributes to the leaders of the Muslim world during its apex is reminiscent of the arrogance attributed to America today in a recently reported poll of public attitudes in the Muslim world. Replace “Europe” with “the Muslim world” and “slaves” with “oil and other” in the following sentence from p. 4 and you’ll see what I mean: “The remoter lands of Europe were seen in much the same light as the remoter lands of Africa—as an outer darkness of barbarism and unbelief from which there was nothing to learn and little even to be imported, except slaves and raw materials.”

Consider also this example. The author asserts that a certain Ottoman document comparing “Christian and Muslim methods of warfare ... to the advantage of the latter” advances a “previously unthinkable suggestion” that “true believers should follow the infidels in military organization and the conduct of warfare.” It is difficult to understand how the author could overlook Muhammad’s adoption of the Persian technique of trench warfare in his defense of Medina and the influence of that precedent in Islamic law.

Similarly, Lewis refers to other “innovations” by the Ottomans that, to the contrary, have precedents from the earliest Islamic era. He mentions using “infidel teachers” with “Muslim pupils.” He has forgotten the polytheist captives of the early Medinans who were given their freedom in exchange for teaching the Muslims how to read. He mentions the Ottoman employment of Christian auxiliaries as a “change ... to accept infidel allies in wars against other infidels.” He has forgotten the Jews who by the compact of Medina were to defend the Muslims from the Quraish.

Despite these problems, there are a number of insights in the book from which both the Muslim states and the Western states would benefit. One is the author's notion of "diplomatic mistranslation." He claims that the alliance between the Ottomans and the English against their common Spanish enemy relied on mistranslating the sultan's indications that the queen must follow a "path of vassalage and obedience" and "manifest loyalty and subservience" to the sultan was conveniently mistranslated into the intermediary Italian as "*sincera amicizia*" [p. 22]. One cannot help but be reminded how the definite article in the French version of U.N. resolution 242 requiring Israeli withdrawal from "*the* Occupied Territories" is "diplomatically mistranslated" into simply "Occupied Territories" in the English translation, giving American newspaper columnists the opportunity to claim that Israel is under no obligation to return all of the lands occupied on 1967.

The first three chapters conclude with the observation that while Muslims continued to make some practical advancements in medical science in the modern era (for example incubators were invented in Egypt and smallpox vaccination in Turkey [p. 79]), "the underlying philosophy and sociopolitical context of these scientific achievements proved more difficult to accept or even to recognize" [p. 81]. Yet the proposed "cultural barriers" considered by the author in this part of the book are unconvincing.

While acknowledging the general egalitarianism of Islamic society, the author professes that there are three exceptions: slaves, non-Muslims, and women [p. 67]. While the author concedes that the status of slaves in Islam was better than in the West (Muslim slaves are granted rights by Islamic law and in any case slavery in Islam was domestic rather than economic, providing slaves with a "place in family and home life" [p. 84]), nonetheless, it was not until the rise of the West that slavery was abolished in the Muslim world, although the abolition movement was not solely a reaction to Western pressure [p. 88].

The role of Western powers in the equalization of the rights of non-Muslims was demonstrable, and met with opposition not only from many Muslims but from some of the non-Muslims with vested interests [p. 93]. The author speaks of the *millat* system as if it were a matter of "Muslim's rights," [p. 93] rather than a system, at least in part, of protecting minority rights. Equalization of rights has its ups and downs. For example, the removal of the *jizya* also meant the imposition of the military duty for which payment of the *jizya* had substituted.

When the Ottomans sought to ban the slave trade and grant equality to non-Muslims, the Wahhabis strongly objected that this was a violation of the *shari'a* (p. 92). The Ottomans backed down to the degree of exempting the Hijaz from the reforms (p. 93).

In contrast to their pressure for an end to the slave trade and equality for non-Muslims, the "position of women does not seem to figure in the concerns of Western critics of Ottoman and other Muslim institutions" [p. 94]. Yet, the claim that women had

a higher status in the West than in the Muslims world in the 16th-19th centuries is a highly debatable issue. The fact that women mixed much more freely with men in the West (and its corollary that they were not veiled) seems to be the main measure (apart from the Muslim toleration of polygyny) by which the author assesses the status of women in the two cultures. The fact that Muslim women had superior property rights is given only a passing nod. (The assertion that waqf is “the only area in the traditional Muslim society in which [women] approach equality with men” [p. 111] ignores the role of women in family affairs at the same time that it underestimates the importance of waqf in Muslim society.) That Muslim women retained their own names after marriage rates not even a mention. That the mixing of the sexes might have some costs for women is inconceivable.

The author is aware of the distinction between modernization and Westernization, but sometimes overlooks the obvious. Aware of the power of symbols, he writes, “For men to wear Western clothes, it would seem, is modernization; for women to wear them is Westernization, to be welcomed or punished accordingly” [p. 76]. This phrase “welcomed or punished” is prejudicial (suggesting an attitude of encouragement on the part of the Westernizers and one of coercion on the part of the traditionalists). Why not “welcomed or deplored” or “mandated or prohibited?” It is the wearing of the headscarf that was punished by the Shah of Iran (and is punished by the Turkish government to this day).

At the same time the author is puzzled by the perception that the necktie as the symbol of Western imperialism in men’s fashions. He suggests Muslim antipathy to the necktie may be due to “its vaguely cruciform shape.” Rather, the necktie—whose shape is more reminiscent of a hangman’s noose than a cross—has been the symbol of submission to Western imperial power because (at least until recently) no man could get a position in the Western establishment without wearing it.

The strongest chapter is the chapter on “Secularism and Civil Society.” The author argues that initially the French Revolution (one should say the French Enlightenment) was perceived by Muslims not as a secularizing event but as a de-Christianizing event. This is profound, for to this day many Muslims erroneously conceive Western culture as a Christian phenomenon rather than as the product of secularization. Although some warned these ideas threatened Islam as well “they had little influence” [p. 104]. The Turks and Persians adapted the French term *laïque* for the secularization process, while the Arabs coined an original term *`alamâni* (worldly) which later was misvocalized as *`ilmâni* (“misunderstood to denote the doctrine of those who presume to pit human science against divine revelation” [p. 105]). Defining secularism as the mere absence of an established religion [p. 108] overlooks the at least as important element of the free exercise of religion and also misses the dark side of *laicism*—the forcible exclusion of religion from public life. The claim that “the primary meaning of civil [in civil society] is non-religious,” is merely a reflection of the bias of a particular strain of Western culture reflecting a French influence that, not only ideologically, but by force of arms [p. 112], has imposed changes on Muslim society against which the Islamic resurgence is in part a reaction.

The Christian element in Ottoman environment made it easy for the Turks to adopt a pattern reflecting an ecclesiastical order that was alien to Islam [p. 108]. In the face of the challenge of the West's successes, this "Christianization" of Islam left people of the Ottoman Empire at a crossroads, confronted with a choice between Islamization or secularization. (Yet, ironically, the Iranian Revolution is "Christianizing Islam in an institutional sense," endowing "Iran with the functional equivalents of a pontificate, a college of cardinals, a bench of bishops, and, especially, an inquisition, all previously alien to Islam" [p. 109].)

The author notes the relationship of tolerance to civility and the basis for it found in the Qur'an [p. 113], but says that Islamic history has fallen short of the West's recent history of "emancipation, acceptance and integration of other-believers and non-believers" [p. 114].

A chapter on "Time, Space and Modernity" is extremely interesting, but plagued with annoying errors. Lewis tries to explain the peculiar Middle-Eastern sense of time. Although Muslims quickly adopted clocks and watches for government and private use, they never adopted public clocks as are found in town squares. On the authority of Ogier Ghiselen de Busbecq, he attributes this to a Muslim fear that public clocks would diminish "the authority of their muezzins and other ancient rites" [p. 118]. Unfortunately, Busbecq's reliability as an observer is suspect as he misreports the times of the five daily prayers, replacing Isha prayer with a mid-morning prayer [p. 117].

The existence of a characteristic and often frustrating Middle-Eastern sense of time is well-known. Lewis' arguments about space are more debatable. Again interesting points are undermined by errors. For example, the assertion that the Arabic mile is one hundred fathoms appears to be due to a typographical error [p. 122]. Did he mean one thousand fathoms? The reference to Fajr as a "predawn" prayer [p. 122] is baffling.

Lewis raises the fascinating question as to why Muslims have so resisted Western classical music when they have musical traditions of their own. His effort to account for it because of the discrepant perceptions of time is plausible, but it seems to me that the issues like the presence of micro-tonality in Muslim music would be a more promising line of inquiry.

In his conclusion, Lewis rejects the question "What has Islam done to the Muslims?" He notes that blaming Islam for the status of Muslims is not plausible since both science and freedom flourished in the Muslim world for centuries to a degree "that led persecuted Jews and even dissident Christians to flee for refuge from Christendom to Islam" [p. 156]. He quotes unnamed sources that ask the more pertinent question: "What have the Muslims done to Islam?" and identifies four different categories of answers [pp. 156 ff.]. One category attributes the decline to the adoption of alien ideas. Another attributes the decline to a fanatical retention of obsolete ways. Another category lays the blame on particular religious problems (e.g., failure to separate church and state or the

legacy of sexism). The last category is the asymmetry of factors between East and West (e.g., precious metals, inbreeding, environmental degradation). The two most popular answers are the abandonment of the divine heritage of Islam and the failure to adopt secular democracy [p. 158]. To Lewis these appear to be alternative answers, but I would suggest that a return to *ijtihad* and to Qur'anic principles would provide the opportunity to return to religious pluralism in the form of secular (in the American, not French) sense of the word Constitutional democracy, a religious Republicanism. Such an attempt will not be successful, however, unless it reckons with the kind of critique offered by this book.

Notwithstanding its errors and biases, this book demonstrates how an erudite outside observer of a culture can provide important insights into the decline of that culture. Lewis correctly notes in his conclusion that whether or not the Middle East once again assumes a role as a major center of civilization in the world is its own choice. Muslims who desire to be leaders of civilization again must take into account his analysis, taking advantage of its insights and correcting its shortcomings.

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