Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response.*

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I met a Danish journalist in New York a month after the terrible bombings. "I am so sorry I didn't have a chance to read the Koran before I came to see you," she said, "but you know it was sold out in Copenhagen." I failed to see the reason for her strange apology. "I wanted to read it to understand," she immediately explained, which led me directly to ask her what exactly it was that she wanted to understand. "Islam," she said ruefully. "I wanted to understand Islam before I came to New York to interview you about the events of September."

This was the first time it had been explicitly suggested to me that my comments about 9/11 would be illuminated not by whether they made sense, but by whether or not my questioner had read Islam's Holy Book. During the post-September crisis, I had been inundated with requests for interviews or written contributions by every US newspaper and TV channel of note. I had refused to appear or be interviewed in the US because it seemed obvious to me that I was called on because of some subliminal expertise I was supposed to have about Islamic terrorism, even though I have spent the last 50 years in the US, forty of them as a professor of English and Comparative Literature and have always been outspokenly secular in my views. During the present crisis, I didn't want to be tokenized or made to represent the "other" point of view, despite my long involvement as an advocate of Palestinian rights and the many books and articles I have written on cultural misunderstanding, ignorance, and misrepresentations of the Arabs and Islam. What could I know about the crazed fanatics who committed suicide in the slaughter of innocents? And indeed why was there this extraordinary assumption that from my university office I had some special insight into the smoldering Twin Towers? True I was born in the Muslim world, and culturally my upbringing was very different, but we all grew up the same, as every Arab was, in Muslim culture. Arabic (the language of the faith itself) was my native language, but I was asked by my Danish interlocutor by way of analogy, "if you met a Syrian coming to visit Denmark for the first time would you suggest he prepare himself by reading the Bible, or by reading Hans Christian Anderson?" Without hesitation she answered, "Anderson of course." I then suggested that reading great contemporary novelists from the Islamic world like Naguib Mahfouz or El Tayyib Salah or Jabra, Jabra or Yasser Kamal might be more worthwhile than ploughing through the Koran since, I went on to say, you mustn't imagine that Muslims wake up in the morning, reach for their handy Koran, then go out during the rest of the day and do what it says. It's not that kind of book. Nor is there the kind of coherence in the world of Islam that makes everything that takes place in it Islamic.

As a religious idea, Islam goes back to 7th century Arabia, and the Prophet Mohammed, God's Messenger, whose book of divine revelations is collected in the prose-poetic surahs of the Koran. Having said that, however, one is only at the very beginning, and even primitive, level of what Islam is. On the purely scriptural level, along with the Koran there is first of all a vast collection of a hadith, or prophetic sayings, and a massive library of interpretations of those sayings. Together these constitute the Islamic gospel which is expressly granted on with due respect and veneration given them - as a kind of compilation of the Judaeo-Christian monotheistic traditions. Mohammed is the last of the prophets, and to most Muslims he in effect closes the prophetic succession forever. As the religion grew enormously in the century after Mohammed's preaching and teaching, the faith spread into hundreds of different regions and cultures, from China and India in the East to Morocco in the West, to Europe in the north, and Africa in the south. Each region and people who came under its sway developed its own kind of Islam. Thus Islam is a world of many histories, many peoples, many languages, traditions, schools of interpretation, proliferating developments, disputations, cultures, countries. A vast world of over 1.3 billion people stretched out over every continent, north and south including now the Americas, it can't adequately be apprehended or understood simply as "Islam."

The problems facing anyone attempting to say something intelligible, useful or accurate about Islam are legion. One should therefore begin by speaking about Islam rather than Islam (as the scholar Fazlur Rahman does in his excellent book Islam and Modernity), and then go on to specify which kind of Islam during which particular time one is speaking about. In a series of profoundly compelling essays, the brilliant Muslim-Indian philosopher Akhil Bilgrami, a colleague of mine at Columbia, has sketched out the problems that have to be faced whenever one tries to define Muslim identity. What he demonstrates is that far from there being a simple one-to-one correspondence between Islam (whatever construction one may put on it) and every believing or faithful Muslim, there is on the contrary a whole set of profound conflicts at the very heart of one and the other, conflicts between absolutism and tolerance, between the doctrinaire and the liberal, between commitment and skepticism, to mention only a few; and once we add matters of culture, history, politics, community and school of interpretation in all the various parts of the world, the question of Islam and Muslims becomes virtually unapproachable from any simple or summary point of view.

The point I am trying to make is that on intellectual and historical grounds, Islam is not a subject at all, but (at best) a series of interpretations that are so divergent in nearly every case as to make a mockery of the enterprise conceived of by the interpreter as one monolithic whole called "Islam." The most ironic thing of all is that only fundamentalists and
anti-fundamentalists agree that what they are discussing is the single object they both call "Islam." For anyone with any clarity of thought and common sense ideas about the complexity and variety of concrete human experience, it is much more sensible to try to talk about different kinds of Islam, at different moments, for different people, in different fields such as 13th century Arab-Muslim philosophers of history, or 11th century Islamic-Andalusian architecture, or 16th century Yemeni religious controversy, or political, economic, cultural and religious developments in one or another Islamic country, although how "Islamic" a country or group is requires laborious effort at trying to specify it to begin with.

Once one gets a tiny step beyond the core beliefs (since even those are very hard to reduce to a simple set of doctrinal rules) and the centrality of the Koran, one has entered an astonishingly complicated world whose enormous, and I would say unthinkable collective history alone has yet to be written. I would strongly recommend as a rudimentary but very useful beginning Tarif Khalidi's book Classical Arab Islam: The Culture and Heritage of the Golden Age (Darwin Press, 1985). Perhaps, given the hitherto strikingly unsuccessful attempts in European languages so far, it would be better not even to try to go beyond what Khalidi does so well and so modestly. But for various ideological and even commercial reasons, his book remains a summary of Islam continue to be confected, using the extremely fictitious premise that "Islam" can be discussed as if all of it hung together coherently like the Hapsburg empire, for example, or music from Bach to Beethoven, or the history of Philadelphia. The point to be made over and over is that Islam's diversity is much more compelling and real than its pretended monocultural unity, and that the real subject is not "Islam" but the divergences from it. Besides, in their efforts to understand and contribute to Islam, Muslims too can be seen not only as giving voice to this diversity, but also as part of the ongoing interpretive fabric of a faith and a way of life and history which is always dynamic, always in a state of transformation, deformation, and reformation, rather than stable, inert, unchanging. I shall come back to the value of listening carefully to individual Muslims voices a little later.

Within this diversity, however, there has been a constant effort on the part of Muslims, from the Prophet's immediate successors, the caliphs, to Usama Bin Laden, to try to speak on behalf of the true faith. All religions contain this babbled of competitive claims. But the clamor of rival interpretations, dynasties and cultures within the Islamic domain has, I think, vacillated between providing the various Islamic communities with heat or light, or a combination of both. It depends how you read such works as the Koran, what you consider to be the truth tradition, what aspects of the Islamic past are important, what aspects claimed, what rejected, and so on. In this, as I said above, Islam is like any other religion, especially Christianity and Judaism. They are all in a state of flux and contested turbulence. So I believe Islam must not be treated any differently from the way Christianity and Judaism are treated, as vast complexities that are neither all inclusive nor completely deterministic in how they affect their adherents.

One question to be kept in mind is why continue to try to write about Islam at all? This is an especially pertinent issue after September 11, as millions of words have been spilled in the United States trying to characterize "Islam" in the aftermath of the terror attacks. American public discourse has been grappling most energetically with our enemies, Islamic fundamentalism, terrorism, the axis of evil, and so on, but not with any particularly useful results that I know of. Obviously introspective disinterested research on delicate matters of faith or history is not what seems to be required by the market. The context and framework of discussion and writing about Islam is too inflected, too urgent, too locked up in questions of defense, war, the clash of civilizations (to say nothing of such equally fraught issues as American values, freedom, and righteousness, and the crusade on behalf of the "West") for anything that could be considered an adequate understanding of Islam's huge complexity and its basic resistance to reductive formulas. That obviously doesn't mean that writers will not try, or will not attempt simplifications to answer the need for quick pseudo-understanding, of the sort my befuddled Danish journalist was looking for. But it helps a great deal to know that such an embattled context as ours now is, rather than "Islam" itself, ends up by determining the kind of account of Islam that we're going to get.

The history of trying to come to terms with this somewhat fictionalized (or at least constructed) Islam in Europe and later the United States has always been marked by crisis and conflict, rather than by calm, mutual exchange. There is the added factor now of commercial publishing, even on the lookout for a quick bestseller by some adept expert that will tell us all we need to know about "Islam," its problems, dangers, and prospects. In my book Orientalism, I argued that the original reason for European attempts to deal with Islam as if it were one big thing was polemical, that is, Islam was considered a threat to Christian Europe and had to be fixed ideologically, the way Dante fixes Mohammed in one of the lower circles of hell. Later on the European empires developed over time, knowledge of Islam was associated with control, with power, and with the need to understand the "mind" and ultimate nature of a rebellious and somehow resistant Islam as a way of dealing administratively with an alien being at the heart of the expanding empires, especially those of Britain and France.
During the Cold War, as the US vied with the Soviet Union for dominance, Islam quickly became a subject of national security concern in America, although until the Iranian revolution (and even after it during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan), the US followed a path of encouraging and actually supporting Islamic political groups, which by definition were also anti-communist and tended to be useful in opposing radical nationalist movements supported by Soviet help. When after the Cold War ended and the US became the world’s only superpower, it soon became evident that in the search for new world-scale, outside enemies, Islam was a prime candidate, thus quickly revising all the old religiously-based clichés about violent, anti-modernist, and monotheistic Islam. These clichés were useful to Israel and its US political and academic supporters, particularly because of the emergence of Islamic resistance movements to Israel’s military occupation policies in the Palestinian territories and Lebanon. Suddenly a flood of what appeared to be respectfully expert material sprouted up all over the periodical press, most of it purporting to link “Islam” as a whole to such ugly reductive passions as rage, anti-semitism, anti-Americanism, anti-nationalism, violence, terror. Quite unsurprisingly, when Samuel Huntington’s vasty overrated article on the clash of civilizations appeared in 1993, the core of its belligerent (and dishearteningly ignorant) thesis was the battle between the “West” and “Islam” which he sagely warned would become even more dangerous when it was allied with “Confucianism”.

What wasn’t immediately noted at the time was how Huntington’s title and theme were repurposed from a phrase in an essay by an energetically self-repeating and self-winding British academic in 1990 entitled “The Roots of Muslim Rage.” Bernard Lewis, its author, originally made his name almost 50 years ago as an expert on modern Turkey, but came to the US in the middle seventies and was quickly drafted into service as a cold warrior, applying his traditional Orientalist training to vaster and vaster questions that had as their immediate aim an ideological portrait of “Islam” and the strata that suited dominant pre-imperial and pro-Zionist strands in US foreign policy. It should be noted that Orientalist learning itself was premised on the silence of the native representative by an occidental expert who spoke ex cathedra on the native’s behalf, describing that unfortunate creature as undeveloped, deficient and uncivilized being who couldn’t represent himself. But just as it has now become inappropriate for white scholars to speak on behalf of “Negroes,” it has since the end of classical European colonialism stopped being fashionable, or even acceptable, to pontificate about the Oriental’s (i.e. the Muslim’s, or the Indian’s, or the Japanese”) mentality.”

Except for anachronisms like Lewis, in a stream of repetitious, tartly phrased books and articles that resolutely ignored any of the recent advances of knowledge in anthropology, history, social theory, and cultural studies, he persisted in such “philological” tricks as deriving an aspect of the predilection in contemporary Arab Islam for revolutionary violence from Bedouin descriptions of a camel rising. For this reader, however, there was no surprise, no discovery to be made from anything Lewis wrote since it all added up in his view to confirmations of the Islamic tendency to violence, anger, anti-modernism, as well as Islam’s (and especially the Arabs’) closed-mindedness, fondness for slavery, inability to be concerned with anything but themselves, and the like. From his perch at Princeton (he is now retired but in his late eighties he tirelessly pounds out the same polemical bile on what seems like a daily basis), he seems unaffected by new ideas or insights, even though among most Middle East experts his work has been both bypassed and discounted by the many new advances in knowledge about particular forms of Islamic experience.

With his vanguard of English sophistication and perfect readiness never to reflect on or doubt what he is saying, Lewis has been an appropriate participant in post-September 11th discussion, relishing his crude simplifications in The New Yorker and the National Review, as well as on The Charlie Rose Show, where his jolly presence seems to delight his interlocutors and editors with his trenchant, if widely unprovable but eagerly received epitomes of Islamic backwardness and anti-modernism. His view of history is a crudely Darwinian one in which powers and cultures vie for dominance, some rising, some sinking. Lewis’s notions (they are scarcely ideas) seem also to have a vague Spenglerian cast to them, but he hasn’t got Spengler’s philic ambition or scope. There doesn’t seem to be much else to what he says, therefore, than to measure cultures in the most appallingly simplified terms (my culture is stronger, i.e. has better trains, guns, symphony orchestras, than yours!). For obvious reasons then, his last book which was written before but published after September 11th, What Went Wrong?, has been on various best-seller lists since it tells an obvious need for Americans to have it confirmed for them why “Islam” attacked them so violently and so wantonly on September 11th, and why what is wrong with Islam deserves unrelied opprobrium and revulsion. I think the books’ real theme, however, is what’s wrong with Lewis himself, an actual, rather than a made-up subject.

For in fact, the book is an intellectual and moral disaster, the terribly faded rasp of a pretentious academic voice, completely removed from any direct experience of Islam, rehashing and re-cycling tired old Orientalist hall (or less than half) truths with increasing incoherence and sheer empty repetition as it grinds on to the end. Remember that Lewis claims to be
discussing all of "Islam," not just the mad militants of Afghanistan or Egypt or Iran. All of Islam. He tries to argue that it all went "wrong," as if the whole thing — people, languages, cultures — could really be pronounced upon categorically by some god-like creature who seems never to have been anywhere in the Islamic world or read or experienced a single live human Muslim (except for a small handful of Turkish authors), as if history was a simple matar or right as defined by having power, or wrong, not having it. You can just hear him saying over a gin and tonic, "you know, old chap, those wogs never really got it right, did they?" But it's really worse than that. With one exception, every one of Lewis's footnotes and concrete sources (that is on the rare occasion that he actually refers to something concrete that you could look up and read for yourself) is Turkish. All of them, except for one or two Arabic ones. How this allows him to imply that his descriptions have relevance, for instance, to all twenty-plus Arab countries, or to Indonesia or Pakistan or Morocco or to the 60 million Chinese Muslims, all of them integral parts of Islam, is never looked into; and indeed he never mentions them as he bangs on about Islam's tendency to do this, that, or the other with his tiny group of Turkish sources.

While it is true that he protects himself at first by saying that his polemic "especially but not exclusively" concerns an area he vaguely calls the Middle East, he throws restraint to the winds in all of what follows. Announcement for the world is that "only America's" "for a long time" been asking "what went wrong?" he then proceeds to tell us what they say and mean, rarely citing a single name, episode, or period except in the most general ways. One would never allow an undergraduate to write so casually as he does that during the nineteenth century Muslims were "concerned" about the art of warfare, or that in the twentieth, it "became abundantly clear in the Middle East and indeed all over the lands of Islam that things had indeed gone badly wrong." How he imposes non-expert Americans with generalities that would never pass in any other field or for any other religion, country or people is a sign of how degraded general knowledge is about the world of Islam, and how unscrupulously Lewis trades on that ignorance, feeds it in fact. That any sensible reader could accept such nonsensical sentences as these (if chosen at random) defies common sense: "For the whole of the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century the search for the hidden talisman [an invention of Lewis's, this is the supposed Muslim predilection for trying to find a simple key to "Western" power] concentrated on two aspects of the West — economics and politics, or to put it differently, wealth and power" (p. 46). And what proof is offered of this "search" for two centuries in the whole of Islam? Only one statement made in 1863 by the Ottoman ambassador in Paris.

Or, this equally precise and elegant generalization: "During the 1930s, Italy and then, far more, Germany offered new ideological and political models, with the added attraction of being opposed to the Western powers. [Never mind the dangling "being opposed" — Lewis doesn't bother to tell us to whom the models were offered, in what way, and with what proof. He trudges on anyway.] These won widespread support, and even after their military defeat in World War Two, they continued to serve as unawed models in both ideology and statecraft" (p. 62). Merely, since they are "unawed models," one doesn't need to offer any proof of their existence as models. Naturally Lewis offers none.

Or, even more sublime, this nugget which is supposed to prove that even when they translated books from European languages the wretched Muslims didn't do it seriously or well. Note the brilliant preamble: "A translation requires a translator, and a translator has to know both languages, the language from which he is translating and the language into which he is translating. [It is difficult for me to believe that Lewis was awake when he wrote this peculiarly acute tautology — or is it only a piercingly clever truism?] Such knowledge, strange as it may seem, was extremely rare in the Middle East until comparatively recently. There were very few Muslims who knew any Christian language; it was considered unnecessary, even to some extent demeaning, for interpreters, who needed for commerce, diplomacy or war, to rely first on refugees and renegades from Europe and then, when the supply of these dried up (one of Lewis's more elegant and unacknowledged metaphors) Levantines. Both groups lacked either the interest or the capacity to do literal translations into Middle Eastern languages" (p. 147). And that is it; no proof, no names, no demonstration or concrete documentation of all these Middle Eastern and Muslim incapacies. To Lewis what he says about "Islam" is all so self-evident that it allows him to bypass conventional norms of intellectual discourse, including evidence and proof.

When Lewis's book was reviewed in the New York Times by no less an intellectual luminary than Yale's Paul Kennedy, there was only uncritical praise, as if to suggest that the canons of historical evidence should be suspended when "Islam" was the subject. Kennedy was particularly impressed with Lewis's assertion in his almost totally irrelevant chapter on "aspects of cultural change" that alone, "the whole of the twentieth century has taken no interest in Western music. Quite without any justification at all, Kennedy then latched on to lament the fact that Middle Easterners had deprived themselves even of Mozart! For that indeed is what Lewis actually says, though he doesn't mention Mozart. Except for Turkey and Israel, Western art music," he categorically states "falls on deaf ears" in the
Islamic world (p 149). Now as it happens this is something I know quite a bit about, but it would take some direct experience or a moment or two of actual life in the Muslim world to realize that what Lewis says is a total falsehood, betraying the fact that he hasn’t set foot in or spent any tangible time in Arab countries, for example.

Several major Arab capitals have very good conservatories of Western music in them, Cairo, Beirut, Damascus, Tunis, Rabat, Amman, and yes, even Ramadan on the West Bank. These have produced literally thousands of excellent Western-style musicians who have staffed the numerous symphony orchestras and opera companies that play to sold-out audiences all across the Arab world. Many of Western music there too, and in the case of Cairo (where I spent a great deal of my early life over forty years ago), they are excellent places to learn about, listen to and see Western instrumental and vocal performances at quite high levels of competence. The Cairo opera house has pioneered the performance of operas in Arabic, and in fact I own a commercial CD copy of Mozart’s Marriage of Figaro sung most competently in Arabic. I am a dedicated pianist and have played, studied, written about, practiced that wonderful instrument all of my life; the significant part of my musical education was received in Cairo from Arab teachers who first inspired a love and knowledge of Western music (and yes, of Mozart) that has never left me. In addition, I should also mention that for the past three years I have been associated with Daniel Barenboim in sponsoring a group of young Arab and Israeli musicians to come together for three weeks in the summer to perform orchestral and chamber music under Barenboim (and in 1999 with Yo Yo Ma) at a very high level. All of the young Arab and Israeli musicians received their training in Arab conservatories. How could Barenboim and I have staffed the West-Ostlicher Diwan workshop, as it is called, if Western music had fallen on deaf Muslim ears? Besides, why should Lewis and Kennedy use the supposed absence of Western music as a club to beat “Islam” with anyway? Isn’t there an enormous rich panoply of Islamic music to take account of instead of indulging in this ludicrous brow-beating?

I have gone into all this to give a sense of the unrelied tendentious rubbish of which Lewis’s book is actually made up. That it should fool even so otherwise alert and critical a historian as Paul Kennedy is an indication not only of how low most people’s expectations are when it comes to discussions of “Islam” but of the mischievous ideological fictions that pseudo-experts like Bernard Lewis trade in and hoodwink “non-experts” with in the aftermath of September 11. Instead of making it possible for people to educate themselves in how complex and interwoven cultures and religions really are, available public discourse is polluted with reductive clichés that Lewis shamelessly bundles about without a trace of skepticism or rigor. The worst part of it is that it systematically dehumanizes peoples and forms them into a collection of abstract slogans for purposes of aggressive mobilization and bellicosity. This is not at all a matter of rational understanding. The study of other cultures is a humanistic, not a strategic or security pursuit. Lewis mutilates the effort itself and pretends to be delivering truths from on high. In fact, as even the most cursory reading of his book shows, he succeeds only in turning Muslims into an enemy people, to be regarded collectively with contempt and scorn. That this has to do neither with knowledge nor understanding is enough to distance his work as a debased effort to mobilize unsuspecting readers into thinking of “Islam” as something to judge harshly, to dislike and therefore to be on guard against.

Karen Armstrong is the other best-selling author tossed up by the mass anxiety so traded on by the media in recent months. Like Lewis, she wrote her book long before the September events, but her publishers have pushed it forward as an “answer” to the problem of our times. I wish I could say more enthusiastically that in its modest way it was a useful book but alas for too much of the time it’s too humdrum and unoriginal for that. But her intentions seem decent enough. Most of the book is a potéd history that chronicles events since Mohammed’s birth without any insight or particularly fresh knowledge. The average reader would get as much out of a good encyclopedia article on “Islam” as from Armstrong, who seems to be a very industrious if not especially knowledgeable author. Many of the Arabic citations are wrong, the narrative often muddled and, above all, one reads her prose without much sense of excitement. It is all very dull and, like Lewis’s book, too frequently suggests great distance and dehumanization rather than closeness to the experience of Islam in all its tremendous variety.

Unlike Lewis, however, she is interested in concrete aspects of Islamic religious life, and there she is worth reading. Her book’s most valuable section is when she discusses the varieties of modern fundamentalism without the usual invidious focus on Islam. And rather than seeing it only as a negative phenomenon, she has an admirable gift for understanding fundamentalism from within, as adherence to a faith that is threatened by a strong secular authoritarianism. As an almost doctrinaire secularist myself, I nevertheless found myself swayed by her sympathetic and persuasive argument in this section, and wished that instead of being hobbled by a rigid chronological approach she had allowed herself to wander among aspects of the spiritual life of Islam that as a former nun she has obviously found congenial.
Of course one can learn about and understand Islam, but not in general and not in its unsituated and decontextualized way as far too many of these expert authors propose. To understand anything about human history it is necessary to see it from the point of view of those who made it, not as a packaged commodity or as an instrument of aggression. Why should the world of Islam be any different? I would therefore suggest that one should first begin with some of the copious first-person accounts of Islam written in English that describe what it means to be a Muslim, as in Muhammad Azad’s extraordinary book *The Road to Mecca* (a gripping account of how Leopold Weiss, 1900-92, born in Lvov, became a Muslim and Pakistan’s UN representative) or in Malcolm X’s account in his memoir, or in Taha Hussein’s great autobiography *The Stream of Days*. The whole idea would be to open up Islam’s worlds as pertaining to the living, the experienced, the connected-to-us rather than to shut them down, rigidly codifying them and sufficing them into a box labeled “Dangerous – do not disturb.”

Above all, “we” can’t go on pretending that “we” live in a world of our own; certainly as Americans, our government is deployed literally all over the globe militarily, politically, economically, so why do we suppose that what we say and do is neutral when in fact it is full of consequences for the whole world? In our encounters with other cultures and religions, therefore, it would seem that the best way to proceed is not to think like governments or armies or corporations but rather to remember and act on the individual experiences that really shape our lives, and those of others. To think humanistically and concretely rather than formally and abstractedly, it is always best to read literature which dispels the ideological fogs that so often obscure people from each other. Avoid the tracts and the manuals, give a wide berth to security experts and formulators of the us-versus-them opposition, and above all, look with the deepest suspicion on anyone who wants to tell you the real truth about Islam and terrorism, fundamentalism, militancy, fanaticism, etc. You’d have heard it all before anyway and even if you hadn’t, you could predict everything about it. So why not look for the expression of different kinds of human experience instead, and leave those great non-subjects to the experts, their think-tanks, government departments, and policy-intellectuals who get us into one unsuccessful and wasteful war after the other.

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For many years, as a young university teacher of Middle Eastern History in England in the 1970s, I based my introductory courses loosely around Bernard Lewis' *Arabs in History* (1958), now in its sixth revised edition (1993). I also made use of *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (1961) for my lectures on the *tanzimat*, the Turkish reform movement of the mid-nineteenth century, and I read *The Origins of Ismailism*, a revised version of Lewis' thesis, which he presented for his Ph.D. at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) at the University of London in 1939, where his supervisor was Sir Hamilton Gibb.

Lewis was born in 1916, so that by the time that he was 23 he had obtained both his BA and his PhD. The Origins of Ismailism is not very long (113 printed pages), but it is a work of immensely detailed scholarship, a survey of a very large number of Sunni, Shiit and Ismaili printed texts and manuscripts. In addition, before obtaining his doctorate, Lewis published an article on the Islamic Guilds in the *Economic History Review* in 1937, and another on "An Ismaili Interpretation of the Fall of Adam" in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* in 1938. In 1939 he took up a junior position at SOAS, somewhere along the ways he learned Arabic, Persian and Turkish, possibly Hebrew.

During the war (1941-45) Lewis worked for British intelligence and was "attached to a department of the Foreign Office" (see his entry in the British Who's Who, 2002). He was appointed Professor of the History of the Near and Middle East at SOAS in 1949, when he was 33, again fairly young for a senior position. After the war his principal academic interests seem to have been in Ottoman and, to a lesser extent, modern Turkey, although he published another book on the Ismailis (*The Assassins*) in 1957, and of course *The Arabs in History* in 1950. In 1974 Lewis left SOAS for Princeton, where he was appointed Cleveland E. Dodge Professor of Near Eastern Studies. He retired formally from Princeton in 1986, but he has published at least nine books since then, and judging from his radio and television appearances, is obviously a vigorous and active, though perhaps slightly prickly, emeritus at the age of 86.

There are two main sides to Lewis' published work. One is that of detached scholarship, which would cover all or most of the works I have already mentioned, but would also include such books as *Population and Revenue in the Towns of Palestine in the Sixteenth Century* (1978), co-authored with the Israeli historian Amnon Cohen, and a host of scholarly articles on similar topics. It is also reflected in the subjects pursued by many of Princeton doctoral students, for instance in Fatimid history and in sixteenth to nineteenth century Ottoman history.

The other major areas of Lewis' interest are what are described somewhat disarmingly in the first person account on the Princeton History department website as "the contemporary Middle East" and "the relations between Europe and Islam from early through Ottoman to modern times". It is for this genre of writing that he is best known to the non-specialist reading public in the United States and elsewhere, and from which he is often quoted, both in the academy and in the media. I would suggest that the scholarly premises of much of this second category of work are less solidly grounded than the first, and that the scholarly ingenuity almost omnipresent in the first category is less obviously present in the second. In addition, some of this more "popular" history is rather repetitive. Thus many of the sentiments in "Communism and Islam", an address given at the Royal Institute of International Affairs in August 1983, especially such notions as "the very nature of Islamic society, tradition and thought", jump off the pages of *What Went Wrong?*, published nearly fifty years later.

As might be assumed, *What Went Wrong?* is a prime example of the second genre. Its title recalls another, perhaps apocryphal question which is also often asked, or implied, of the Middle East and/or the Islamic world: "Why can't they be like us?" Logically, the notion of a world, or part of a world, where things have "gone wrong", must suggest another world or part of a world where they have "gone right", and such indeed is one of the premises of this book. In essence, it is an old story, an old lament, flowing from the pens of many of Lewis' contemporaries in his field; how is it that this great culture (Islamic, Arab, Persian, or what you will) which flourished in the Middle Ages, could sink to the level of intellectual/artistic poverty in which it finds itself today? For Lewis, the answer lies in the failure, inherent inferiority, or what you will, of Islamic or Arab society properly or adequately to absorb "modernity" and, thus somehow to allow itself to become washed up on the shores of history, while the rest of the world continues its relentless march forwards.

One of the reasons why Lewis enjoys such popularity is that much of what he writes puts a seal of scholarly approval on opinions held about Islam by people who, for a variety of reasons, are wary of distrustful of Islam and Muslims, particularly in its or their contemporary manifestations. Thus he supports (and given the terminological coincidence, may have inspired) Huntington's notion of the "clash of civilizations". As a Professor Emeritus at Princeton, many readers of, say, *The New York Review of Books*, are inclined to believe what Lewis says. Finally, Lewis often finds himself, although obviously not by design, cast as the experts' expert, the specialist on the Middle East quoted by authors whoseanvas is the non-North.
American and non-European world in general but who have little research familiarity with the region themselves. The example of Huntington has been mentioned, but Lewis is also quoted as an authority on the nineteenth century Middle East in David Landes’ *compendious The Wealth and Poverty of Nations.* Landes himself “explains,” for instance, Egyptian industrial backwardness with reference to “Egypt’s social and cultural incapability,” taken as an unfootnoted given (p. 465).

Let us look at a few of Lewis’ contentions in *What Went Wrong?* First, one of the main arguments of Chapters Two and Three is that in the sixteenth and subsequent centuries, the Islamic world failed to modernize and/or to absorb both Western science and Western technology sufficiently quickly or thoroughly to compete on a world scale, and has lagged behind the West in these fields and in the fields which derived from them (industrialization, for instance). This is the more surprising for Lewis because of the Arabs’ undoubtedly superior science and technology in earlier periods. In broad and general terms the contention is accurate, but in order to understand the process more broadly, several things need to be added to the account.

In the first place, there was a fairly long gap between the principal scientific discoveries in Europe (c. 1520-c. 1660) and the European industrial revolution (c. 1770). According to a recent account, the “New Science” bestowed no technological competitive advantage on, say, England, France and the Netherlands (as against, say, China or the Ottoman Empire) before the end of the eighteenth century. Secondly, the “New Science” was itself essentially based on reconstructions of Ptolemaic astronomy and the development of a sophisticated algebra, which had both come to Europe from the Arabo-Islamic world fairly recently. The most daring leap of the scientists of the sixteenth century was to point, beginning with Copernicus in 1512, that the earth went round the sun rather than vice versa. However, since he knew that the Church would regard this as heretical, Copernicus chose not to publish his theory.

In 1616, a little over a century later, the Inquisition forced Galileo, who had reached the same view more or less independently, into the public recantation of a theory whose experimental validity he could easily demonstrate; his works were not given the papal imprimatur until 1741. In consequence, scientific work was largely abandoned in Italy and moved to northern Europe. The next leap forward, Newton’s understanding of the linkage between astronomy and physics and his discovery of the laws of gravity and the laws of motion, came in 1683, with his publication of *The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy.* It is worth pointing out that, as an undergraduate at Cambridge in the 1660s, Newton had been obliged to teach himself the new mathematics, astronomy and physics. The various scientific discoveries led eventually to the manufacture of precision instruments and then to the introduction and wider application of technology to manufacturing processes, but, as I have tried to explain, the road was by no means smooth, and the attitudes of both the Catholic and Protestant churches can scarcely be regarded as progressive.

Two other points should be made in this general context. First, the Industrial Revolution began in England, largely because of the various innovations just described, and the harnessing of steam power in the late eighteenth century, could be put to work in a region plentifully supplied with water, hydrotile, power, coal and iron ores. Those parts of Europe which were not similarly endowed were very slow to industrialize, and in that respect the Iberian peninsula and Scandinavia were not very different from the Middle East, which (apart from the Egyptian and Mesopotamian river systems) also had little in the way of natural resources before the discovery of oil. The major pre-modern industry of the Middle East was textiles, based on the region’s ample rocks; Donald Quaile’s recent work *refute[s]* the notion that Ottoman industry merely declined and/or stagnated in the era of European industrial hegemony. In terms that others might well take to heart, Quaile describes his book as “a study of events that happened, not about failures to industrialize according to a pattern prescribed from outside.”

Secondly, quite apart from the region’s poor natural resource base, the terms of the Treaty of Kaita Liman of 1838 obliged the Ottoman state to admit first British and then other European goods at tariff rates favourable to the European states rather than to the Empire. Hence it was extremely difficult, and became more so with the passage of time, for the Ottomans, their successors and contemporaries (e.g. Egypt, Iran) to develop their own industries. The Europeans had the machinery and mechanism which enabled them to make enormous economies of scale through mass production, and besides they had, not unnaturally, little interest in the development of indigenous industry in countries which might eventually compete with their own. Factors like these, rather than any innate predisposition of a people, or a group, either in a positive or in a negative direction, need to be taken into account. Recent work on Egypt, northern Iraq and Palestine shows clear evidence of a thriving regional economy in each of these areas in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, well before their permanent incorporation into the world economy.

Let me now turn to Lewis’ animadversions on Islam, which in Chapters Three and Four largely concern Muslims and non-Muslims, and masters and
slaves. As far as slavery is concerned, it has generally been abolished in the Muslim world, except, perhaps most notably, in Mauritania, and in spite of the fact that the institution was a fundamental feature of Islam in the classical age, it has disappeared without much protest or difficulty. Let us leave Muslims and non-Muslims, since this too is no longer much of an issue except for a very small core of ultra-nationalists who advocate the killing of Christians (attacks on Coptic Christians over the last few years, for example). The position of women is a rather different matter, and here again Lewis does not do the problem justice because of the selective way in which he tells the story.

I am not an apologist for the way in which women are treated in many Muslim countries, but the question of "emancipation" is more complex than Lewis seems to allow. For example, the wearing of "Islamic dress" in, say, Lebanon or Syria, or France or the United States, can function as the assertion of identity, and since - allowing for course for family and other pressures - society in these countries does not compel women to dress in one way or the other, dress may well be an expression of individual choice. Again, although most outsiders would not envy the position of Iranian women, it is clear that there is a strong movement towards women's rights in Iran. Since Khomeini's death, the sphere of popular political activity has been enlarged to encompass various constituencies, including women, whose support for Muhammad Khatami was crucial in ensuring both his election and re-election. Finally, while the growing numbers of Iranian women in the labour force may - as in Eastern Europe during the Cold War - reflect economic necessity rather than "emancipation", these numbers have increased dramatically over the last decade. In general the position is far more nuanced than a reading of Lewis' book might suggest.

Finally, let us look briefly at democracy. Civil society and secularism, and the lamentable but inescapable fact of the general absence of all three in the contemporary Middle East. "Western democracy" has not, it is true, fared well in the region, with the exception of Turkey, and to a limited extent of Israel - limited, since Israeli exercise coercive control over a substantial population which has no say in the determination of its own affairs. Many, though not all, of the extremely undemocratic regimes in the region, are (still) in place either because it has long been convenient for the West not to interfere with them, and/or because of a general equation on the part of security and intelligence services of longevity with stability. Neither Egypt nor Saudi Arabia, for example, have been either pressed or encouraged to democratize by the United States, and the Israeli regime, a most offensive dictatorship by any standards, was staunchly supported, both militarily and economically, by the United States and most Western countries until the very end of the 1980s. While the American administration takes the moral high ground about restoring democracy to Iraq (and it goes without saying that this would be more than welcome to nearly all Iraqis), it is a little odd that it is not equally fervent about, for instance, bringing genuine democracy to, say, Morocco, let alone Saudi Arabia. To say, then, that the region has produced spectacularly dreadful regimes, and that democracy has "failed" in the Middle East, is, once more, perfectly true, but the dictatorships and the failure of democracy have everything to do with specific sets of economic and political circumstances (such as oil, the existence of Israel, the Cold War) rather than being the result of the "true nature" of Middle Eastern societies.

Much the same can be said of the failure of secularism and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. When I first became interested in the academic study of the Middle East as a graduate student some thirty-five years ago, few of my contemporaries would have imagined that "Islam" and "Islamic politics" would continue to be major items on the political agenda. So what happened, or What Went Wrong? Why did the Middle East (and perhaps much of the rest of the Islamic world) not follow the road to secularism down which the Americans and the Europeans were treading with such determination? I think the reasons are much the same as those I have advanced to explain the "failure of democracy", for instance, that political pluralism has never been, for a variety of reasons, given a chance, that the Cold War and the growth of repressive political systems; and that, suffering in various ways under this kind of repression, as well as from what they regard as their leaders' often shallow acceptance of Western domination, many Middle Easterners came to consider that "Islam" was the solution. For instance, in post-1953 Iran, any kind of political debate was banned, with the result that opposition became centred around the mosques, which, in a Muslim country, could not easily be shut down. Like the Americans at the time, the Shah's regime was obsessed with "Communism" to the extent that it labelled any criticism as Communist and hence impermissible. Similarly, various US intelligence agencies supported Ba'thism in the 1960s on the grounds that its evident anti-Communism made it harmless, or at least harmless to US interests. In time, particular kinds of fundamentalism became a far greater threat to stability than "Communism" in its Middle Eastern manifestations had ever been - if it had ever in fact possessed a serious threat in the first place.

I have deliberately put "Islam" in inverted commas, because I believe that it is futile to generalize about it as if it was an immutable monolith, good
for all times and places. I do not know whether it would be intrinsically more difficult, given happier political and economic circumstances, for our contemporaries in the Islamic world to move towards a secular society, for the kind of thoroughgoing separation of church and state – with the caveat that these terms are not quite applicable to Islam – which pertains in, say, France, and which is supposed to pertain in the United States. I think that probably was the vision held by many progressive Middle Easterners in the 1950s, perhaps until 1967. The hardening of lines in the Cold War, the various external and internal interferences with the development of democracy and civil society, and the militarization of the region which regimes could call for on the grounds, real or manufactured, of the threat posed by the presence of Israel, are some of the principal reasons why secularism did not materialize. I cannot help hoping that its time will come. In any case, I see "Islam" more as a political football which contesting groups struggle to possess than as a fixed body intrinsically and implacably opposed to change. Let me finish by quoting the last sentence of Albert Hourani's *History of the Arab Peoples*:

"It might happen... that at a certain stage of national development, the appeal of religious ideas – at least of ideas sanctified by the cumulative tradition – would cease to have the same force as another system of ideas: a blend of modernity and law which will be both secular but might have some relationship to the general principles of social justice inherent in the Jewish*.

**NOTES**


2. Cf. ... we are facing a mood and a movement for transcending the level of issues and policies that they pursue. This is no less than a clash of civilizations... – Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, New York, Simon and Schuster, 1996, p. 213.

3. New York, Norton, 1998, especially Chapter 24, "History Gone Wrong"? It is curious that in this chapter there are virtually no references to the fairly abundant specialist literature, while letting three of Lewis's books, the bibliography does not for, instance, mention such standard works on the 19th century Middle East as Roger Owen's *The Middle East in the World Economy 1800-1914*, London, Methuen, 1984, or Kenneth C. Davis's *The Past in the Present: Land, Society and Economy in Lower Egypt, 1740-1858*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1980.

4. The two preceding paragraphs are based on an unpublished chapter of a world history text by my colleague Peter von Sivers. As always, I am grateful for his generous assistance.

5. Guzman, *Ottoman Manufacturing in the Age of the Industrial Revolution*, Cambridge,
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