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## What Is Wrong with *What Went Wrong?*

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It is no exaggeration to say that Bernard Lewis is the most influential writer on Middle Eastern history and politics in the United States today. Not only has he authored more than two dozen books on the Middle East, he trained large numbers of two subsequent generations of historians of the region. Lewis is a public figure of the first order, publishing widely read articles on Middle Eastern politics. He is perhaps the only scholar of the Middle East to be well-known outside the field -- most academics would be hard pressed to name another historian of the Middle East or the Islamic world, excepting colleagues at their own university. This is ironic, since, as we will see, his interpretation of Islamic history is essentialist and ahistorical. Furthermore, Lewis is greatly respected in US policymaking circles. His opinions on policy matters have been sought by governments run by both major American political parties, and by all reports have been especially heeded by the administration of George W. Bush. An August 29 op-ed by Lewis in the *Wall Street Journal* concisely states positions which are articles of faith for the Bush administration's neo-conservatives -- notably that the problems of post-war Iraq are caused by anti-American fascist or Islamist forces seeking to defeat Western Christendom, and that the Westernized former banker Ahmad Chalabi and his Iraqi National Congress are the best candidates to govern a stable Iraq in the future.

Lewis's public exposure reached new heights in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks. With the appearance of *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*, published by Oxford University Press in 2002, his readership extended much more widely than before beyond the circles of academics, intellectuals and policymakers who specialize in the Middle East to reach the general public. To some degree, this was a matter of luck. At the time of the attacks, Lewis was in the final stages of adapting a series of lectures he gave in Vienna in

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1999. A German translation appeared in 2001, and when Lewis came to publish a revised English version of the three lectures, he tacked on material drawn from four previous articles and conference papers, published over the 1980s and 1990s. Since, as Lewis himself tells us, *What Went Wrong?* was already in proofs when the September 11 attacks occurred, the book "does not deal with them, nor with their immediate causes and after-effects."

Why then did the book acquire such enormous popularity? At the time of this writing, Amazon.com listed *What Went Wrong?* as one of the most popular books in the world -- at least insofar as Amazon sales figures are indicative of such things. The book is number 19 in Italy, number 13 in Denmark and number nine in Savannah, Georgia. It is read at the neo-conservative bastion the University of Chicago (number 17) and at the post-modernist center New York University (number 19), not to mention at the Louisiana State University campuses (number five). Eager to take advantage of what is clearly a worldwide phenomenon, Lewis published a paperback edition with Harper Perennial Library in January 2003, under the revised title *What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East*.

In order to understand what went right for Lewis, at least in the world of commercial publishing, one must examine how it is that an ignorant public, eager for information that might help it to make sense of the events of September 11, found answers in this book. Interestingly, although Lewis disavows any direct connection between September 11 and the events discussed in the book, he claims that "it is however related to these attacks, examining not what happened and what followed, but what went before -- the larger sequence and larger pattern of events, ideas and attitudes that preceded and in some measure produced them."

This last sentence, quoted from the preface of the first edition, is typical of Lewis's style of argument. Although much of the book deals with the history of the late Ottoman Empire, and the attempts of the Ottoman state to stave off collapse, Lewis insists that connections, however indirect, can be drawn between these events and the September 11 attacks. Exactly what these connections are, Lewis never tells the reader, who is left to reach his or her own conclusions. Yet the title of the paperback edition gives us a clue: there is a conflict between Islam and modernity, and it is this conflict which is in some way responsible for the hijackings and mass murders in New York and Washington.

#### A CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS

For Lewis, the conflict between Islam and modernity is a conflict between cultures, Islamic and Western, and within a culture, Muslim modernists versus those who would drag the Muslim world back to the Middle Ages. The latter two options are

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represented by the modern states of Turkey and Iran, respectively. Turkey represents the way forward into secular democracy, while Iran attributes "all evil to the abandonment of the divine heritage of Islam" and "advocates a return to a real or imagined past." As for the rest of the Islamic Middle East (i. e., the Arab world), it must choose one path or the other. The majority of people in the Muslim world -- those Muslims who live outside the Middle East -- do not figure in Lewis's argument.

For Lewis, secularism is "in a profound sense, Christian." Although he is unable to decide whether the separation of church and state in Western Christianity originated in the Roman persecutions of the early Christians, or as a result of the wars of religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (he neglects to mention the political influence of the medieval church), he clearly regards the Western tradition as the polar opposite of the Islamic tradition in that the latter is characterized by a total fusion of religion and state. Pious opposition to the caliphate, as the Muslim polity was known after Muhammad's death, can be attributed to a desire for a more perfect theocracy, not opposition to theocracy. Interestingly, Lewis's argument about the nature of religious and political authority in Western Christian and Islamic societies is not restricted to Christians and Muslims. Jews, a minority in both civilizations, took on the characteristics of their host civilizations. Thus, the struggle in Israel over the definition of a Jewish state is attributed by Lewis to the clash between European (Christianized) and Middle Eastern (Islamicized) Jews. While *What Went Wrong?* presents this struggle between secular modernity and medieval theocracy as internal to Islam, Lewis has recently joined the neo-conservative chorus of support for Western intervention in the Muslim world to push Muslim societies in the right direction (apparently he is confident that intervention is not necessary to maintain European Jewish ascendancy in Israel).

Lewis and the policymakers are taking a huge gamble. They believe that a combination of military intervention and diplomatic pressure can determine the course of an entire civilization. Whether this gamble will pay off, or whether it will blow up in the faces of the US and its allies, is something only time will tell. For the moment, however, it is important to examine the argument put forward by Lewis to explain the history of the modern Middle East and justify the new US policies. This can be done in two ways: by examining the validity of Lewis's argument about the relationship between religion and politics in the Islamic tradition, and by asking what he has left out of his rather selective presentation.

#### A RELIGION WITHOUT HISTORY

For all the historical anecdotes which Lewis includes in his book, his approach to Islamic civilization is strangely ahistorical. For

Lewis, the unity of religion and state in Islam originates in Muhammad himself, since he was both political and religious leader of the fledgling Muslim community (*umma*). Here Lewis, like many of the modern Islamists, accepts the idea that later Muslim institutions were already prefigured in the practice of the Prophet, an assertion of dubious historicity for which Lewis provides no evidence. For the Islamists, the state established by Muhammad provides the model against which the "Islamicness" of any subsequent Muslim society is to be judged. Those societies which most closely resemble or imitate this ahistorical ideal are considered properly Islamic, while the others are seen as in need of reform or revolution. For the less compromising of the Islamists, there can be no historical development or accommodation to local culture when it comes to God's eternal plan for society.

While Lewis does not attribute Islamic political ideals to God, he shows a similar lack of interest in the manifest variety of Islamic societies which have developed across time and space. Lewis considers the relationship between religion and state to have been determined from the beginning, and not as a result of subsequent historical developments. He pays no attention to the fact that Muslim polities have produced very different political systems over the centuries, in large part due to developments within Islamic political institutions and the interaction of these institutions with different cultures and historical circumstances. For example, although he recognizes that Ayatollah Khomeini's theory that the jurists should rule a Shiite state in the place of the Messiah is a deviation from Imami Shiite tradition, he never explains what has inspired this change in attitude, or why some Shiite scholars have embraced it while others have maintained their traditional distance from political power. For Lewis, what counts is the clash of Islam and the West, not internal developments within the Islamic world, unless those developments somehow can be shown to enact the collision with external forces.

Indeed, Lewis shows little interest in the entire period that falls between the early Abbasid caliphate of the eighth and ninth centuries and the late Ottoman period of the eighteenth century, which directly precedes the European colonization of the Middle East. Thus, he has nothing to say about the changes in political culture and institutions that occurred in this long period. At the beginning of it, the caliphal rule over the Islamic world was legitimized not by law, but by the caliphs' claim to be members of the Prophet's family (*ahl al-bayt*). This was as true of the Abbasids as it was of the Alids, the succeeding dynasty, since the two groups represented rival branches of the same extended family tree. Despite some efforts to the contrary, the caliphs never succeeded in controlling the development of Islamic theology or law. Their most famous attempt to intervene in these matters occurred during the debate over the nature of the Quran,

and here they suffered an unmitigated defeat at the hands of the religious scholars (*ulama*). In an apparent attempt to bolster the caliphs' claim to interpret the Quran, the Abbasid Caliph al-Ma'mun tried to force government office-holders to accept the doctrine that the Quran had been created in time and was therefore not an eternal attribute of God. The eventual failure of this policy signaled the victory of the religious scholars over the caliphs in the struggle over who would determine correct theological doctrine. Since, however, the religious scholars disagreed about so many aspects of theology and law, what emerged was a range of opinions, not a universally accepted orthodoxy. During this period, a dizzying variety of theological, legal and philosophical ideas competed for influence among the scholars, each idea having its own partisans. Far from being absolute, religious doctrine in the Islamic world was highly fluid and hotly debated.

## POLITICS AND THE SACRED

A turning point came during the Buyid period (945-1055), when a group of Shiite soldiers established a dynasty that reduced the Sunni caliphs to symbolic figures. It was at this time that Sunni and Shiite Islam as we know them formulated their doctrines in the highly competitive atmosphere of Baghdad's scholarly circles. The leaders of the Imami Shiite community composed their authoritative works on *hadith* (the sayings of the Prophet and the Imams, whom Shiites view as Muhammad's legitimate successors as heads of the *umma*), law and theology. The Imami community also developed a series of rituals and commemorations designed to reinforce their belief in the right of the descendants of Ali, the Prophet's cousin and son-in-law, to rule the Muslim world. While other Shiite communities, such as the Ismailis, continued to struggle to overthrow the Abbasids, the Imamis focused on building their community and waiting for the return of the Mahdi, the Twelfth Imam who they expected to appear at the end of time.

Meanwhile, the decline of Abbasid authority and the dismemberment of the Abbasid state gave further impetus to the rise of law as the basis of Sunni Islam. Increasingly, it was the lawyers, now organized into four major schools, who filled the ideological gap left by the dissipation of the caliphal writ. Although this development reduced the field of competing doctrines somewhat, uniformity was never achieved, even within the major sects. There continued to be multiple schools of law and theology, and furthermore, political authority in the Muslim world was increasingly separated from religious authority. The next 500 years saw a series of military, tribal and even slave regimes rise to claim control over the Middle East, but even the most successful of them, the Mamluk sultanate, never succeeded in imposing Sunnism on all of its subjects. True, these dynasties presented their adherence to Islamic law as the basis of their

legitimacy, but this did not change the fact that politics in the Islamic world was increasingly seen as a secular activity.

Indeed, the Ottomans, who succeeded the Mamluks in ruling what is now called the Middle East (excepting Morocco and Iran), were quite explicit in issuing secular edicts (*qanuns*) which were tailored to the local conditions and traditions of their highly diverse subjects, who included many Christians and Jews. Although the Ottomans presented themselves as adherents to Sunnism, many of their subjects were sympathetic to the family of the Prophet, especially to the descendants of his daughter Fatima and her husband Ali. Although these were the same persons venerated by the Shiites, this presented no problem for the Ottomans until the rise of the explicitly Shiite Safavids in Iran. The subsequent wars between the two powers forced the Turcoman tribesmen to choose one side or another, but even the descendants of those who chose the Ottoman side continue to be known as Alevis today. In other parts of the Muslim world, Sunnism has been compatible with reverence for the family of Muhammad (supposedly a Shiite doctrine), while many Sufis (the mystics of Islam, some of whom are venerated as saints in most of the Muslim world) have combined Islamic with Christian or "pagan" practices. For example, Muslim and Christian peasants in Egypt commonly attend one another's saint festivals, while Muslims and Hindus in India often venerate some of the same holy men. In short, religious doctrine and practice in the Muslim world have continued to be fluid and frequently syncretic. These factors, which influence the way in which Islam is practiced by hundreds of millions of Muslims, receive no attention in Lewis's oversimplified account. Again, it is notable that Lewis devotes no space to Muslim traditions in countries like India, Malaysia or Indonesia, where religious norms are quite different from those in the Middle East.

#### ISLAM, THE ANTI-WEST

Time and again, Lewis resorts to Islamic law (*shari`a*) as his source and explanation for Muslim political attitudes, paying little attention to the context in which *shari`a* was, or was not, applied. Thus, Lewis introduces the concept of the caliphate, but has little to say about the political and religious institutions that developed after the caliphate lost its power to rule the Muslim world. While the complex relationship between the power of the sultans and the religious authority of the *ulama* does not reproduce the Western separation between church and state, it does show that pre-modern Muslims were quite pragmatic about the real, profane origins of political power in medieval Muslim societies. While the *ulama* attempted to persuade the sultans to rule their states in accordance with Islamic law, it was a separate group of bureaucrats, the *kuttab*, who actually administered the financial and diplomatic affairs of medieval Muslim states in most cases, frequently without reference to religious law. While

courts applied Islamic law to private transactions, this practice differed from one region to another and one time to another. Lewis recognizes that Islamic law was not immutable, but presents this fact as an example of hypocrisy, saying that changes were "always suitably disguised." What many modern scholars have seen as the flexible character of Islamic legal practice, Lewis sees as a utopian ideal of divine, unchanging law, occasionally counteracted by a wink and a nod.

All of this feeds into what we might call Lewis's "totalitarianism complex." For Lewis, the essential characteristic of Islamic religious and political thinking is that it is totalitarian in character. Indeed, Lewis has long believed that this aspect of Islam makes it ripe for the picking by other totalitarian ideologies such as fascism and communism. In a 1953 lecture to British policymakers, Lewis claimed to investigate "what factors or qualities are there in the Islamic tradition, or in the present state of Islamic society and opinion, which might prepare the intellectually and politically active groups in society to embrace Communist principles and methods of government, and the rest to accept them?"<sup>[1]</sup> Among those qualities is what he called the "anti-Western motif," whereby communists and Muslims share a common hostility towards the Western powers and the "Western way of life, Western institutions and ideas." In his lecture, Lewis rejected the idea that these feelings might be connected to the process of decolonization, because "even the removal of one or another grievance cannot bring more than a local and temporary alleviation" to this anti-Western hatred. Although the Soviet Union too was imperialist, in Lewis's view this fact escaped the notice of Muslims. This was, of course, prior to the era of the Afghan and Chechen wars, but not so long before the "Arab cold war" in which Saudi Arabia allied itself with the US against self-described "socialist" states such as Egypt, Syria and Iraq.

Lewis went on to describe the "autocratic" political tradition of the medieval Islamic world, with an emphasis on Sunni quietism. Persons accustomed to "such doctrines," which emphasize the obligation to obey the ruler, even if he is unjust, are supposed to prepare the Muslim believer to accept "Communist disregard of political liberty and human rights" with equanimity. This is especially true since communism could offer an alternative to "ineptitude, corruption and cynicism." Lewis invokes the theory of Oriental despotism to argue that members of these societies are prone to accepting the nationalization of the economy.

It may seem unfair to hold Lewis to things he said 50 years ago. Nonetheless, the ideas expressed in that lecture have recurred in Lewis's writings ever since. While he no longer asserts that communism is a danger, he continues to argue that the existing regimes in the Middle East are a combination of socialist and fascist styles of government, which perpetuate their existence by blaming all of their problems on foreigners, principally Jews and

Americans. These problems can only be addressed when Middle Eastern peoples cease blaming others and work to resolve their problems, presumably by adopting the Western values that they are so predisposed to hate.

In this light, it is clear that Lewis regards the contemporary Islamic movements as the latest installment in a series of totalitarian ideologies to dominate the Middle East, easily planted in the fertile ground of Islamic theocracy. As such, the Islamic world constitutes the anti-West, the perennial opponent to Western values of democracy and individual liberty. As Lewis must know, this is a very old trope in Western thought. Its origins can be found in the horror felt by the ancient Greeks towards Persian imperialism, and it was resurrected during the early modern period by the Venetians who used the Ottoman Empire as an ideological foil to their own republican system of government.<sup>[2]</sup> The Enlightenment made further use of this idea in its struggle for freedom of individual conscience. Interestingly, the idea of the despotic East reemerged during the Cold War, when theories of totalitarianism which had been constructed to explain similarities between the regimes of Hitler and Stalin were married to this traditional Orientalist trope. The most famous of these works was Karl Wittfogel's *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power*, which applied these "insights" to communist China. It is no coincidence that Lewis referred to Wittfogel in his lecture on "Communism and Islam."

#### ONLY CULTURE MATTERS

The advantage of this Manichean view of the world is that it is self-justifying. If the US, the West and Israel stand for democracy and individual liberties against totalitarianism (fascist, communist or Islamic), then their struggle is inherently just. This is not merely a struggle between civilizations, but for civilization against totalitarian barbarism. Naturally, the defenders of democracy are entitled to use force to achieve these ends, and the loss of life on both sides is to be blamed on those who threaten the Western way of life. The West should encourage Muslims to adopt its values, Lewis writes, but "the choice is their own." That is, the burden is upon them to demonstrate their fitness to participate in international society, and the West will render judgment in accordance with its own criteria.

This attitude relieves the West of any sense of responsibility for current conditions in the Islamic world or elsewhere ("the blame game" as Lewis calls it), whether for imperialism, capitalism, short-sighted Western support for repressive regimes in the region or anything else. In his view, the disenfranchisement of the Palestinian people and destabilization of the Middle East result purely from the unwillingness of Arabs and Muslims to face facts and look beyond grievances. Lewis has no patience for



the idea that at least some of these grievances may be well-founded. Nor does he consider the possibility that the Arab and Muslim states, like any other states, may have their own geopolitical interests which differ from those of the US. For Lewis, opposition to US policy in the Middle East is ideological, rather than political, in character. Until such time as the Muslim world makes the correct ideological choice, the West may have no choice but to vigorously confront its enemies. As Lewis writes in the *Wall Street Journal*, speaking of instability in Iraq and friction with Iran, "the worst of all options is the line of submissiveness, which can only strengthen the perception of American weakness." That perception was the impetus for the September 11 attacks, and US-led wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have just begun to dispel it.

In his history as well, Lewis believes that he can explain the development of the modern Middle East entirely through the lenses of ideology and Islamic tradition. He makes no effort to compare the Middle East to other parts of the world using economic, demographic or other indicators. The past 50 years have witnessed an important rapprochement between history and the social sciences, which has transformed history as a discipline. Yet Lewis continues to write literary, anecdotal history as if such developments had never taken place. Indeed, he has expressed contempt for such efforts to integrate Middle Eastern history into the mainstream of the historical profession. In his 1976 essay, "The Return of Islam," published in *Commentary*, he scoffs at those modern journalists who insist on interpreting the Islamic world using Western political concepts like right and left, or progressive and conservative, arguing that, "Modern Western man, being unable for the most part to assign a dominant and central place to religion in his own affairs, found himself unable to conceive that any other peoples in any other place could have done so, and was therefore impelled to devise other explanations of what seemed to him only superficial phenomena."

It is one thing to argue that culture matters. It is quite another to argue that it is all that matters. That such an antiquated view of history could appeal to so many in the policymaking world in the United States indicates just how fully they are committed to a cataclysmic conflict with the Islamic world. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that such a conflict is exactly what Bernard Lewis and his disciples desire, and that they just may succeed in provoking it.

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[1] Bernard Lewis, "Communism and Islam," *International Affairs* 30/1 (January 1954).

[2] Lucette Valenci, *The Birth of the Despot: Venice and the*

*Sublime Porte* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

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