FEATURE REVIEW

Terrorism cuts across the East and the West: deconstructing Lewis's Orientalism

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This article takes issue with Professor Bernard Lewis over some *of* the theses discussed in his recently published book *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (Oxford University Press, 2002). This book, at first glance, appears to be addressing the question *of* what preconditions gave rise to the political, ideological and violent struggles between Arabs, Muslims and finally the fundamentalist Muslim terrorists *of* today, and the West. Lewis ultimately wants to answer the question *of* why the West is so hated *by* Muslims.

Those who are familiar with Bernard Lewis know that he is *of* the same ideological and methodological school *of* thought as Samuel Huntington, the author *of* the famous mega-historical book, *The Clash of Civilizations.!* Both these renowned scholars are considered to be voices *of* conservative political thought in the West. They cite the difference between Islam and Christianity as the root cause *of* the problems that we are facing today. According to Huntington, the possibility *of* dangerous clashes between East and West rests on the reality *of* the fundamental differences that exist between two civilisations-'The West and the rest-and more specifically 'between Muslim and Asian societies on the one hand, and the West on the other' .2

The publication *of What Went Wrong?* is a study *of* those historic preconditions that Lewis believes led to Muslim hatred and resentment *of* the West, which in turn led, eventually, to the terrorist attacks *of* 11 September.

Lewis's thinking on this subject, like Huntington's, is based on the notion *of* the difference and the clash that exists between the two religions *of* Islam and Christianity. In fact it seems that these two illustrious thinkers see all cause *of* conflict in the world, or at least between East and West, as coming from this difference. Well then, one might ask, if a clash *of* religions is the cause *of* all conflicts, how do we account for all the bloodshed and the wars *of* the twentieth century, and throughout history, which had nothing to do with religious differences?

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Below I will come back to this point and delineate and cite as evidence many nonreligious struggles that have caused much loss and violence and resentment in this world.

Two **historiographic phenomena**

In his book Bernard Lewis tries to connect two historic occurrences that do not have any direct relation to one another in order to further his politically motivated argument. The first is: why did the Islamic world, once at the forefront of the sciences and philosophy and with its military prowess, not manage to keep pace with the progress of the West? Why is the Islamic world behind the West in all these aspects today?

The second historiographic question Lewis asks is, what are the roots of the violent anger of Muslims towards the West as expressed through the actions of terrorist and radical groups? He incorrectly sees the root causes for both these historical realities as one.

He writes of the advances of the Islamic civilisation as follows:

> For centuries the world view and self-view of Muslims seemed well grounded. Islam repre-sented the greatest military power on Earth-its armies, at the very same time, were invading Europe and Africa, India and China. It was the foremost economic power in the world... It had achieved the highest level so far in human history in the arts and sciences of civilization.'

Bernard Lewis adds that the loss of such a great civilisation has made the Muslims humiliated and resentful. 'The twentieth century, particularly the second half, brought further humiliations-the awareness that they were no longer even the first among the followers, but were falling ever further back in the lengthening line of eager and more successful Westernizers, notably in East Asia.'4 Their blindness to the real reasons behind their falling behind the West leads them to blame it. Because the world of Islam is looking for a scapegoat it needs to place the blame on the developed and Christian world. It is because of this deep and wrongly placed resentment that the West is now under attack by the Islamic terrorists and radicals.

Based on this wrong hypothesis Lewis criticises Muslims and writes:

> If the people of the Middle East continue on their present path, the suicide bombers may become a metaphor for the whole region, and there will be no escape from a downward spiral of hate and spite, rage and self-pity, poverty and oppression, culminating sooner or later in yet another alien domination; perhaps from a new Europe reverting to old ways, perhaps from a resurgent Russia, perhaps from some new, expanding superpower in the East. If they can abandon grievance and victimhood, settle their differences, and join their talents, energies, and resources in a common creative endeavor, then they can once again make the Middle East, in modern times as it was in antiquity and in the Middle Ages, a major center of civilization. For the time being, the choice is their own.'

Who is Lewis blaming here? Terrorist groups or millions of ordinary people who live in the Middle East? These kinds of criticisms and 'recommendations' not only omit the colonial role that the West played in the history of the region, and its current responsibility in the crisis of the Middle East, but also actually condone it.

The causes of the backwardness of Muslim societies and the advancement of the West

Bernard Lewis sees the reason behind the relative underdevelopment of the Muslim world in two blatant differences that exist between Christianity and Islam. The first is an absence of an indigenous secularism in Islam, and its wholesale rejection of the imported secularism which he identifies as uniquely Christian.6 The second is the
inherent sexism in Islam.7 Bernard Lewis recognises the lower social status of women as probably the most fundamental difference between the two Islamic and Christian civilisations.8

We will now try to explain Lewis's ideas about the differences between Islam and Christianity in these areas.

Christian secularism

If the backwardness of Islamic nations is the result of a lack of secularism and their religion's inherent sexism, then what explains the backwardness of non-Muslim countries in South America, China, India, large sections of Africa and the Far East? If Christianity were the moving force behind Western civilisation, to what can we attribute Japan's advancements, considering its blatant sexism and cultural bias against women?

Let us consider Max Weber's theory of capitalism, the main authority recognizing Christianity's fundamental role in the rise of capitalism. Despite many wrong interpretations of Weber's theories, he himself, admonishing those who considered religion as the main force behind capitalism, considered Protestantism as simply a cultural backdrop for capitalism.9 Capitalist culture sprang from pre-existing socioeconomic relationships. In some of his later writings, he found features unique to the West as a causal chain of characteristics of rational capitalism, including the entrepreneurial organisation of capital, rational technology, free labour, unrestricted markets, and calculative law.!O As Anthony Giddens emphasises, 'of course, religious beliefs are only one among various sets of influences which may conditions the formation of an economic ethic, and religion itself is heavily influenced by other social, political and economic phenomena' .11

Secularism, meaning the division between church, as a religious institution, and state as an institution of political power, was a result of capitalist advancements, and not vice versa. The separation of the King and the Pope in mediaeval Europe was not the same as the separation of state and the Church established during modem times.12 What explains Japan's success in adopting capitalism among many other Eastern nations is the existence of a feudal system similar to what existed in Europe and which gave rise to the economic foundations of private capital as opposed to governmental ownership in other countries.

Bernard Lewis does not explain the rise and fall of Islamic civilisation; he also fails to illuminate how Western civilisation, with the Roman and Greek cultures in leading positions in earlier times, was left behind the Muslim world in later centuries. How did Christian secularism fail to play its role at this time? What explains the sudden jump in Western civilisation after 10 centuries of backwardness? And if, as Lewis mentions, it was Islam that created what he calls advanced culture during the

Middle Ages, how did it fail to ensure its dominant position? If Christianity gave rise to Western culture, what explains the Roman and Greek cultural dominance prior to the emergence of Christianity, and what caused the West's relative cultural demise later during the Middle Ages?

It is my belief that it was not Christianity that caused the West's advancements, and nor was it Islam that caused the backwardness of the East. It was in fact capitalism that was the main force behind modem advancements in the West, and that in turn came about through the evolution of feudal relations. While in the East governmental ownership prevailed, in the West private ownership was dominant; it was the creation of a system based on private ownership that gave the West the edge. Lewis has overlooked the multiple factors involved in both Western development and Eastern backwardness. Unlike him, Huntington, for instance, identifies these multiple factors 'as the core of Western civilization'. He includes the following: classical legacy, Catholicism and Protestantism, European languages, separation of spiritual and temporal authority, rule of law, social pluralism, representative bodies, and individualismY

Islamic sexism

Bernard Lewis considers 'the status of women' as 'probably the most profound single difference between the two civilizations' [14] He attempts to attribute the Middle East's backwardness on the one hand and the West's advancements on the other to the treatment and perception of women. But there is no rational or scientific foundation in making such a connection. Lewis's understanding of the differences between Christianity and Islam in the area of gender relations is simplistic and based on a few interpretations made either by Western diplomats in Islamic nations in relation to women, or by observations made of Turkish diplomats in Europe. These rather lopsided sources have led him to conclude that women have been better treated in the West.

Sexism exists in all religions. The difference in Christianity's and Islam's views and treatment of women is not one of principle but one of degree and tone. These differences arise from the value systems of the society or societies in which a given religion has developed. All religious dogmas explain gender differences in terms of unbending biblical or celestial wisdom.

As societies change, the dominant religions change too. Did not the Catholic Church persecute and sometimes punish by death those whose scientific opinions it found contradictory to its dogmas? Is this so today? Did not the Catholic and Protestant Churches, in Europe and America, accuse women of witchcraft, or of being possessed, of creating all societal ills? Did it not persecute them, and bum them at the stake? Do they do that today?

Is it not that in Western societies women were granted full citizenship rights in the form of universal suffrage only after many years o~ women's struggle and only at the beginning of the twentieth century? Is it not true that, even today, women are not allowed to reach the higher echelons of leadership in most Christian churches? Tens of other observations prove beyond doubt that, like Islam, Christianity is also sexist, and has changed only under societal pressure. As society progressed, polygamy was banned, and not vice versa. Rights are gained by struggle and seldom granted from above.

Bernard Lewis's mention of polygamy in Islam is true, but its relation to societal norms is unclear. His rationale, based on the lack of participation of women in the economic milieu of the Islamic world, is completely baseless and unscientific. Women have participated in all modes of economy in Islamic countries. Besides, unlike in Christianity, women in Islam have had the right of private ownership, the fundamental element of citizenship in the West.

Again, one could ask how, if polygamy and sexism are the main reasons for Muslims' backward status, one can explain their dominance during the Middle Ages? Didn't oppression of women and their subordinate social status and legal rights exist then? The phenomenon of polygamy existed in Japan and China and their cultures too had similarly oppressive attitudes towards women. But during the Middle Ages China too was superior to the West in many aspects, while the lack of polygamy in the West did not create a condition for cultural growth during this time, nor is it the case in Latin America today. So Lewis's opinion that sexism in Islam, after the absence of secularism, is the main contributing factor to backwardness is simply incorrect.

The evolution of the condition of women and their assertion of their rights in all societies, including the West, have had a long historical passage and culminated during the twentieth century. The original sparks came with the creation of liberalism in the West and ironically religion has always opposed it. The major contributions to women's rights came during the twentieth century but even after the second world war religious institutions in the West, as in the Muslim world, have opposed women's rights movements. Even today the Church has its ways of justifying the inequality between the sexes. During the International Women's conference, held in Beijing in 1995, Islamic nations, in unity and co-operation with the Catholic Church, blocked certain laws preventing women's equal rights from being passing.15 The Christian-Muslim alliance opposing equal rights for women became further evident in a recent UN meeting. Colum Lynch reports: 'The alliance of conservative Islamic states and Christian organizations has placed the Bush administration in the awkward position of siding with some of its most reviled adversaries-including Iraq and Iran-in a cultural skirmish against its closest European allies, which broadly support expanding sexual and political rights.' 16

The other point Bernard Lewis makes is that the disbarring of half the population (women) from participating in the economy ofIslamic countries thanks to sexism is a further contributing factor to their backwardness. As pointed out before, women's role in Islamic counties in contributing to development has not been less significant than that of men. The only exceptions are the city-dwelling middle-class women, who are a small percentage of the total population. Women's role both in town and country, in agriculture and farm and hearth, in bearing and rearing the usual many children, has been stronger and more significant than men's. The determining gulf between men and women in the East (and the West) has not been in their contribution to society and the economy, but in the lack of recognition of women's work and the unfair distribution of the wealth generated. This is not an Eastern or Islamic phenomenon but a world-wide, universal inequality. The disparity between the basic rights of men and women is still a problem in Western societies. **In the** USA, for example, for each dollar a man makes a woman earns only 71 cents, or almost 30 cents less.l7

In an attempt to explain the differences between the East and West, Lewis writes: 'The difference in the position of women was indeed one of the most striking contrasts between Christian and Muslim practice' [18] He reaffirms this view as he concludes: 'the main culprit is Muslim sexism, and the relegation of women to an inferior position in society, thus depriving the Islamic world of the talents and energies of half its people, and entrusting the crucial early years of upbringing of the other half to illiterate and downtrodden mothers. The products of such an education, it was said, are likely to grow up either arrogant or submissive, and unfit for a free, open society.'[19] Consciously or not, Lewis has misplaced the distinction between the dictatorial and repressive policies of some governments with the prevailing sexism in those societies. He would have been better off deferring to Everett Hagen's 'Innovative Personality', [20] which explains the main problem not as a lack of creative contribution on the part of women, but on the part of the whole of society-men and women. Have the men of these societies enjoyed an environment for creative growth? Middle Eastern, or as a whole, Eastern countries, more than being a victim of their sexism, suffer in the hands of dictatorial regimes that Western countries have contributed to preserving throughout modem history. Lewis's view is therefore
skewed. Instead of recognising a backward society as a backdrop to a backward religion, he has taken the opposite view. Does he not recognise that religion is a part of society, and not the opposite?

Bernard Lewis's flawed interpretation

Bernard Lewis writes: 'The struggle for Palestine greatly facilitated the acceptance of the anti-Semitic interpretation of history, and led some to blame evil in the Middle East and indeed in the world on secret Jewish plots.'[21]

Is this really true? For almost four centuries the Middle East has been in a backward position yet it has never reacted violently to the West. Also, as Lewis reiterates himself, Jews 'were better off under Muslim than under Christian rule, until the rise and spread of Western tolerance in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries'. [22] Terrorist acts committed by 'Islamic fundamentalist' groups are an entirely new phenomenon and related to the past few decades; they have no relation to differences between East and West that have clearly existed for the previous four centuries. Moreover, the population of these terrorist organisations constitutes no more than one ten-thousandth of the 1.2 billion populations of the Islamic nations. How can one convert that to include all Muslims and the backwardness of the East as a whole?

In reality, what Lewis is doing is using some shortsighted theories and views that exist in these societies, theories that engage in a sort of 'blame game', pointing the finger at outsiders for their own backward status alone. He tries to extend this
attitude and give it undue prominence as the main cause of the whole problem. He attempts to draw a parallel between the way that Iranians blame Arabs, Mongols and Turks, and ultimately the West and imperialism for their backwardness, and the way that Arabs blame Jews and the USA for theirs. He writes: 'For the governments, at once oppressive and ineffectual, that rule much of the Middle East, this game serves a useful, indeed an essential purpose-to explain the poverty that they have failed to alleviate and to justify the tyranny that they intensified. In this way they seek to deflect the mounting anger of their unhappy subjects against other, outer targets.'[23]

He adds that some Middle Easterners, after asking, 'who did this [backwardness] to US?',24 resort to imaginative hysteria and conspiracy theories, and then blame the Christian West, or 'Western imperialism' .25 Using the phrase 'Western Christianity', Lewis is making a conscious effort to persuade us that the main difference is the one that exists between Christians and Muslims. But that is not the case. It is not just Muslims who are left behind the West. Almost the whole of the East, and large portions of Latin America and Africa are experiencing similar backward conditions of industry and technology and suffer from poor economies.

Muslims now number some 1.2 billion people. Considering that more than 75% of the world population suffers from poor living conditions, almost three billion people who suffer from these ailments are therefore non-Muslims.

The wars of the past few decades have either been non-or intra-religious. For example, thousands of citizens of Latin American nations during the 1970s and 1980s fell victim to either government or opposition groups' terrorism. Almost none of this had anything to do with religious differences and contradictions, and none involved Muslim versus Christian adversaries. These bloody confrontations, which have resulted in hundreds or thousands of times more deaths than those caused by Middle Eastern terror organisations are the result of a struggle between the haves and the have nots. Bernard Lewis has not explained these numerous historical facts, all of which clearly point to the role of economic, political and social forces. Two world wars have taken place in the twentieth century. When was the cultural struggle between Muslims and Christians at the centre of any of this bloodshed? Even during the crusades, religions were used as a tool to incite the people to fight wars that at their core were about economic and territorial ambitions.

The seeds of modernism and violence in Islam

In the modem era the first steps for creating Islamic groups were taken in the latter part of the 19th century, when there was a desire to recreate a powerful Islamic Caliphate. Following the failure of this, the groups settled for establishing Islamic governments and regimes. This period started with the thoughts and actions of Jamal aI-Din aI-Afghani and Muhammad Abduh. Islamic movements, from the beginning, were not anti-West, and they are not so now. As a response to the West, three alternatives-Kamalism, Reformism and Rejectionism-grew up in Muslim societies. While Kamalism was to modernise and Westernise Turkey, the 'reformers attempted a new reconciliation of Islam and modernity',26 or to modernise Islam without Westernisation. 'For Rejectionism both modernization and Westernization are undesirable and it is possible to reject both.'27 Rejectionism originated as a result of occupation and repression, for example in anti-colonialist movements in India and Egypt, and has gained strength because of the Palestine crisis in recent decades. Terrorist organisations grew up out of this alternative. They are not the representatives of Islamic societies, or even of a considerable portion of them, but a minute minority that receive disproportionate publicity, ironically because of their violent tactics. They represent nostalgia for the past (pre-modern civilisation) against modem civilisation. Much more than being against the West, Muslims are interested in re-establishing an Islamic unity and incorporating Western technology and science into Islam.

Islamic government

As Enayat observes, 'the stresses and frustrations caused by the war, and the Arab defeat of 1948, incited the activities to fresh violence inside Egypt'.28 With Jamal Abdul Nasser's rise to political power in Egypt, the opposition to Israel found a new dimension. The Muslim Brotherhood at first helped and supported him but, after they tried to create an Islamic government and failed in an attempt on his life in October 1954, Nasser ordered their demise and executed some of their leaders.29 As the antagonism between Arabs and Israel expanded, and following the six-day war of 1967, the Muslim Brotherhood found new freedom to use the condition of this defeat to raise the Islamic flag in opposition to Israel and other opponents.

'The more the West and Israel appeared to be aggressive the more strongly the Brothers felt confident to fall back on the neglected Islamic heritage and delineate the state that should be grounded on it. '30 To the point that 'some of the Azharites (related to the *Ai Azhar* news paper) interpreted the Arab-Israeli conflict in terms of a conflict between Islam and JudaismY Even though the Muslim Brotherhood were never able to establish an Islamic government anywhere, their ideological counterparts did this successfully in Iran. While the late Shah talked from the both sides of his mouth regarding the issue of Israel, he did in fact recognise it as a sovereign nation. This action increased Muslim opposition to him.

The success of Islamists in Iran and the establishment of the first Islamic government opened the way to an extended Islamic fundamentalist movement interested in terrorism. This widened the gap between the West and some Islamic nations. Yet the establishment of the first Islamic government did not cause a rift between Muslims and Christians, as Lewis contends, but bloody wars among Muslims. The eight-year war between Iran and Iraq, the breaking off of diplomatic relations between Iran and many Muslim countries of the region, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Egypt, a cooling of relations between Iran and Turkey, Azerbaijan and some of the Muslim countries of the Central Asian region, and finally the war between Iraq and Kuwait and the unity of all Muslim countries and their solidarity with the West in opposing Iraq have demonstrated that the opinions of Samuel Huntington and Bernard Lewis lack a strong foundation. One could add to these the unity between the West and Bosnian Muslims in opposing Christian Serbs. Further, the lO-year struggle inside Afghanistan, with 1.5 million casualties, and in Algeria, with 80 000, were not a war between Muslims and Christians, but a struggle of Muslims among themselves. And Afghan battles with Russian troops were not a war against Christians, but against aggressors. During the Iran-Iraq war (both Muslim countries) the US government assisted the Iraqis against Iran. Shibley Telhami writes: 'As for terrorism against American targets, as defined by the State Department, the Middle East consistently accounted for less than 7% of all global attacks aimed at American targets, reaching a low ofless than 2% in the year 2000.'32

Views such as those of Lewis and Huntington, which solidify the international rift between Muslim and Christian nations have resulted in conditions in which opportunistic individuals have tried to re-ignite the Christian hatred against Muslims. For example, conservative columnist Ann Coulter, writing after the bloody 11 September disaster, says: 'We should invade their countries, kill their leaders and convert them to Christianity. We weren't punctilious about locating and punishing only Hitler and

his top officers. We carpet-bombed German cities; we killed civilians. That's war. And this is war.'33 People such as Fred IkIe, strategist and former undersecretary of defence, misinterpret the nature of terrorist groups and wrongly blame the Muslim community, threatening their holy sites with nuclear bombs. He writes, "Those who out of cowardice use their wealth to pay danegeld to the preachers of hate and destruction must be taught that this aggression will boomerang. A nuclear war stirred up against "infidels" might end up displacing Mecca and Medina with two large radioactive craters.'34 These people have forgotten that, without Iraq having ever killed a single American soldier, the US military killed over 100 000 Iraqis but defended other Muslim countries such as Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf Sheikhdoms, Egypt and Turkey. This too, then, was not a war between religions, but over economic goals and political power, just as the war between terrorism and the rest is not a religious war. For the sake of humanity, world civilisation and the rights of millions of ordinary Muslims who have nothing to do with this conflict and terrorism, this hostility must be consciously avoided.

Notes

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1 The theory of *The Clash of Civilizations* was articulated first by Bernard Lewis in his article 'The Roots of Muslim Rage: why so many Muslims deeply resent the West and why their bitterness will not be easily modified', *Atlantic Monthly,* 266 September 1990. For Bernard Lewis's view on Orientalism see his book *Islam and the West,* Oxford University Press, 1993, chapter 6.

2 Samuel P Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order,* New York: Touchtone, 1997, p 183.

3 Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong?,* p 6.

4 *Ibid,* P 152. , *Ibid,* P 159. 6 *Ibid,* plOD. 7 *Ibid,* P 157. 8 *Ibid,* P 67.

9 Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism,* Los Angeles: Roxbury Publishing, 1995, pp 91-92.

10 Randall Collins, 'Weber's last theory of capitalism: a systematization', *American Sociological Review,* 45, 1980, pp 925-942. See also Irving M Zeitlin, *Ideology and the Development of Sociological Theory,* NJ: Prentice Hall, 1997.

11 Aanthony Giddens, *Capitalism and Modem Social Theory: An Analysis of the Writings of Marx, Durkheim and Max Weber,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971, p 170.

12 See Michael Wilks, *The Problem of Sovereignty in the Later Middle Ages: The Papal Monarchy with Augustinus Triumphus and the Publicists,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963.

13 Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations,* pp 69-72.

14 Lewis, *What Went Wrong?,* p 67.

15 Jane Bays & Nayereh Tohidi (eds), *Globalization, Gender and Religion: The Politics of Women's Rights in Catholic and Muslim Contexts,* New York: Palgrave, 2001.

16 Colum Lynch, 'Islamic bloc, Christian right team up to lobby UN', *Washington Post,* 17 June 2002, p AO!.

17 M James Henslin, *The Essentials of Sociology,* Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2000.

18 Lewis, *What Went Wrong?,* p 66.

19 *Ibid,* P 157.

20 Everett Hagen, *On the Theory of Social Change,* Homewood: Dorsey Press, 1962.

21 Lewis, *What Went Wrong?,* p 154.

22 *Ibid,* P 154.

23 *Ibid,* P 159.

24 *Ib id,* P 22.

[25] *Ibid,* P 153.

[26] Huntington, *Clash of Civilizations.*

[27] *Ibid,* pp 74-75.

[28] Enayat, Hamid, *Modem Islamic Political Thought,* Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1982, p 84. [29] *Ibid.*

[30] *Ibid,* P 88.

[31] *Ibid,* p. 87.

[32] Shibley Telhami, 'Put Middle East terror in global perspective', *Baltimore Sun,* 17 February 2002.

[33] Ann Coulter, 'This is war', *National Review On Line,* 13 September 2001.

[34] Fred IIde, 'Stopping the next Sept 11', *Wall Street Journal,* 2 June 2002.