4-1-2008


Connie Lamb
*Brigham Young University*

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol58/iss58/12
BOOK REVIEWS


This essay reviews two books separately and then provides some comments by way of comparison. Both books are concerned with Islam and the challenges it has faced in modern times. However, the focus and coverage are quite different and they emanate from very different perspectives; hence, the organization of the review.

***

Throughout the world’s history, great civilizations have risen and declined – a pattern repeated over and over again. One of the most recent examples is the decline of the Islamic civilization and the rise of the Western world. In What Went Wrong, Bernard Lewis, a renowned scholar of Islam and the Middle East, takes on the challenge of explaining how this occurred and the reaction of the Islamic world.

The subtitle gives the focus of the book – the clash between Islam and modernity in the Middle East. Lewis gives no specific purpose for his book or the viewpoint from which he writes. Acknowledging that for many centuries the world of Islam was in the forefront of human civilization and achievement, he discusses how it was overtaken and dominated by the West. He does this by focusing on several different aspects of civilization including the military, economic factors, equality, types of governments, civil society, and culture. The introduction provides a historical context for the book.

Lewis’ training in history is evidenced in this book with the good documentation, many quotes, and contextualization. However it is from a Western perspective and he seems to want to speak for the Muslims and Arabs. Lewis was born in England and educated in London and Paris, receiving his Ph.D. from the University of London in History. He taught at the University of London from 1938-1974, except during the war years. He then came to the United States and joined the faculty at Princeton University where he taught for twelve years. He has written books about Arabs and the Middle East for the
general reader as well as numerous scholarly and theoretical publications.

One of the most debated aspects of the East versus West is the distinction between modernization and Westernization. Lewis notes that the dividing line is hard to establish, but he argues that the touchstone is in the emancipation of women. Middle Easterners' adoption of technology is modernization while the emancipation of women is Westernization—one is acceptable while the other is not. The western dress of men is modernization but the new dress of women is Westernization. From the Arab view, according to Lewis, Westernization is negative while modernization is positive. Borrowing can occur both ways, but in his view, the dominant civilization today is Western, so Western standards define modernity (p. 150).

Muslim authorities reluctantly adopted weaponry from the more powerful Western states, but the society remained weak, so new weapons did not prevent their collapse. Other factors must have been involved. There was little exchange in terms of diplomats, military leaders, refugees, etc. between East and West for many years. Muslims did not want to enter into the "infidels" area and Westerners had little knowledge of or interest in the "Near East". When exchange did happen later on it was mostly East to West so Muslims learned more about the West than vice versa. Also the trade routes began to bypass the Middle East because of the growth in shipping and new sea routes. Eventually developments in communication—printing, translation, newspapers, the telegraph and railways—broke down the barriers between the two regions and civilizations. Science became important again and this was the part of modernity which the East adopted, but it still did not put them on par with Western success. Meanwhile, various cultural aspects of the West became a choice which some Middle Easterners accepted and others did not.

According to Lewis, "Christian" Europe was the infidel in the Islamic view, but much of the West was becoming increasingly secular at this time of interaction. "Secularism in the modern political meaning—the idea that religion and political authority, church and state are different, and can or should be separated—is, in a profound sense, Christian" (p. 96). Based upon Jesus' instruction to render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's and unto God that which is God's, Western, mainly Christian states moved toward separation. Islam recognizes no ordination, no sacraments, and no priestly mediation between the believer...
and God. Since the state was Islamic, created as an instrument of Islam by its founder, there was no need for any separate religious institution. Non-religious society was very foreign to Islam in which God is the true sovereign of the community and the ultimate source of authority. Adoption of modernity coming from a non-religious source was difficult for Muslims to accept.

The core of the book is based upon three public lectures so the chapters are quite independent and make the flow a little uneven. Many of Lewis’ quotes and examples come from the Turks and Ottomans, which is his strong area of study, but cannot necessarily be applied to all of the Middle East and especially not to the whole Islamic world. The concluding chapter is not a bringing together of all the major points but rather a discussion of the “blame game” which Lewis ascribes to the Arabs/Muslims for their being overtaken by the West. Some of the reasons given are Mongol invasions, Turkish rules (Turks blame the Arabs and Arabs blame the Turks), Western imperialism, Jews, civil society governed by secular laws, and sexism. Some scholars find factual errors in the work and deem Lewis’ work to be a case of biased Orientalism. However even with that viewpoint, he provides many insights into the “clash” of two modern civilizations over the two previous centuries.

***

In the current United States where the Middle East and Islam are mentioned almost daily in the news media, there is a great need for knowledge and understanding. Seyyed Nasr’s book Islam: Religion, History and Civilization, was written for this purpose – to explain Islam. Although very readable, it is rich in detail, describing the whole sweep of Islamic history, doctrines, and diversity. The author is an internationally acclaimed scholar who was born in Iran. At the age of twelve, he was sent to study in the United States. In time, he graduated from MIT in physics, obtained a Master’s degree in geology and geophysics and a Ph.D. in the history of science and learning at Harvard University.

Like other introductory books on Islam, Nasr provides a brief history of the Islamic movement, basic beliefs and practices, views about God, revelation, man and woman, and institutions such as family, guilds, religious endowments and political institutions. However, unlike many descriptive books, he covers topics like the angelic world, the human state, the cosmos, and eschatology. The book is especially
strong on mysticism, schools of Islamic thought, and the "Dimensions of Islam", including divine law, spiritual paths (Sufism) and perfection (ihsan). This undoubtedly arises from his own background and interests. He comes from a family of Sufis and while in graduate school, he became very interested in philosophy, science, and mysticism, especially related to the Islamic religion. He became acquainted with and has studied intensely the idea of perennial philosophy which has influenced his life, thinking and writing as evidenced in this book and many of his other works.

As stated in the introduction, this book "is written from within the Islamic perspective and from the traditional point of view, from the perspective of the sacred and universal teachings of Islam as they were revealed and later transmitted over the ages" (p. xxiii). It stands in opposition to both modernism and its complement, so-called fundamentalism — the second being a backlash to the first (p. xxiii, 182). Nasr explains the religion from an Islamic viewpoint including its public and private rituals, and the significance of the Quran and the prophet Muhammad. One chapter covers the history of the Islamic world including the non-Middle East areas of black Africa, China and Southeast Asia.

A difficult issue for Muslims today is the question of unity or separation of religion and politics within their civilization. Nasr insists on the unity of Islamic civilization by virtue of codified religious doctrines, although he accounts for the great diversity too, stating that "there is nothing more erroneous than thinking that Islam is a monolithic reality" (p. xxii). Even so, he frequently mentions the theme of unity in terms of basic spiritual matters taught by Muhammad and in personal spirituality. But in today's current situation, that concept is being tested particularly for the umma or community of Muslims. Public display and rhetoric of today is often not one of unity.

Nasr is currently a professor of Islamic Studies at George Washington University. After receiving his doctorate, he returned to Iran to teach and also held leadership positions at various universities there. In 1970, he was appointed as head of the Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy by Empress Farah Pahlavi. At the time of the Islamic revolution in Iran, he immigrated to the United States where he taught at Temple University before moving to George Washington University. His life in both the East and West gives him a good perspective of the political issues and the need to help Westerners better under-
stand the religion of Islam in all its aspects. He does this by thoughtful and thorough works such as this book. It has few references and appears to have been written mainly from the author's own experience and knowledge. At the end Nasr gives a useful list of recommended readings. The index shows the emphasis on such topics as Allah, philosophy, Prophet of Islam, Quran, Sufis, etc. The book is a deep, sympathetic introduction to the history, teachings, and diversity of Islamic faith and practice.

Both Lewis and Nasr are eminent scholars and prolific writers, but they come from different training and interests. Lewis writes from a historical perspective to explain why the Islamic world (really the Near East) was overcome by the West. He uses the "clash of civilizations" theory which pits religion (Islam, which is also a cultural civilization) against modernity (Western civilization with its religion, culture, etc). For his part, Nasr writes from a spiritual/philosophical perspective in the attempt to explain Islam as religion and a way of life. He tries to explain to secularized Westerners the basis of the religious life and why there is conflict and misunderstanding.

The two books are indicative of the rhetoric from East and West within the current political and social situation. The "East" is trying to explain Islam, its past and the current conditions and feelings while the "West" is trying to explain why and how the clash between two major entities came about and continues. From an Eastern Muslim viewpoint, which Nasr represents, western literature about Islam is often Orientalistic and Eurocentric in the pattern of Edward Said's ideas (p. xvii). Lewis was accused by Said of Orientalism yet his knowledge of Middle Eastern languages, culture, and primary sources is impressive. He provides many insights and alternative ways of viewing the interaction of these two major civilizations. On the other hand, Nasr states that Christian Europe developed the idea that there is only one civilization, the Western one, and that all other cultures were inferior and thus treated the Islamic world in that way. So in his book, Nasr takes a deeper look at Islam and its personal spirituality and culture at a critical time in history. Both authors acknowledge the greatness of the Islamic civilization at one time and its contributions to science, medicine, literature, the arts, etc. but neither one dwells on this as both are more focused on the current world. They each include a chapter devoted to the history of Islam and its civilization. But Lewis focuses on the interaction and rela-
tions of Muslims with others through time while Nasr concentrates on the history of the religio-political development of Islam within its traditional world view.

As mentioned earlier, Lewis feels that women’s role is pivotal to the discussion of secularization and Westernization. Nasr reminds readers that the Quran gave women a number of rights they did not previously have and that were not available in the West at that time. But he agrees with Lewis that further emancipation of women in the Islamic world is not perceived as modernization but as Westernization which, for many, is a betrayal of Islamic values. In practice, the treatment of women has changed through time and space via tradition and rules set by various Muslim leaders. Both authors agree that so-called “fundamentalism” of today is misnamed and that it politicizes Islam in a new way. Those involved in this movement try to undo the secularizing reforms and return to the Holy Law of Islam (Lewis) or Divine Law (Nasr); some use peaceful means while others use violence to make their point.

In the end, Lewis suggests that maybe Muslims need to look at the Christian or Western view of separation of Church and State to be able to succeed in the modern world (p. 116). On the other hand, Nasr states that strictly speaking, Islam believes in nomocracy, that is, the rule of Divine Law, rather than theocracy, which is usually understood as the rule of the priesthood or church. “If Muslims were to accept in principle the separation of religion from the domain of public life, they would have to abandon the doctrine of Unity that lies at the heart of the Islamic message” (p. 113). Nasr believes that contemporary Islamic society must develop political institutions that are authentically Islamic but also respond to the challenges of the day; however he does not explain how this is to be done. In like manner, Lewis identifies some of the problems of inequality between the Western world and the Islamic world, but does not give much in the way of solutions to the current crisis precipitated by the “clash”. The books by Lewis and Nasr create an interesting disconnect in rhetoric, but maybe their valuable insights on both sides can help narrow the divide of understanding.

Connie Lamb
Brigham Young University