



---

The Outrage of Bernard Lewis

Author(s): C. M. Naim

Source: *Social Text*, No. 30 (1992), pp. 114-120

Published by: Duke University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/466471>

Accessed: 28/03/2010 13:49

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=duke>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



Duke University Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Social Text*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

## The Outrage of Bernard Lewis

C. M. NAIM

The 1990 Jefferson Lecture, nineteenth in the distinguished series sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, was given by Bernard Lewis, Cleveland E. Dodge Professor Emeritus of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University. The announced, somewhat modest, title of his lecture was "Western Civilization: A View from the East," but the Associated Press in its report described it as a discourse on "why Muslims hate America." That was perhaps also the original aim, for when the text, slightly re-worked, appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* (September, 1990; pp. 47-60), it bore the title: "The Roots of Muslim Rage." The editors complemented the rhetoric of the essay by putting on the cover a painting of a hugely turbaned and scowling "Muslim," his eyes starred and striped with passion.

The NEH Jefferson Lecture is described by its organizers as "the highest honor conferred by the federal government for distinguished intellectual achievement in the humanities." Sadly, the essay by Bernard Lewis is not particularly distinguished. Mostly it consists of stale generalizations and a selective, even disingenuous, use of evidence. In brief, Lewis pits (1) a monolithic, monochromatic Islam against (2) a West whose definition and parameters he changes at will. At the same time, (3) while every action of the West is contextualized in history, actions on the part of the Muslims are only "textualized" within what he calls "the classical Islamic view." Lastly, (4) Lewis indulges in psycho-social generalizations of the silliest kind.

Lewis begins by quoting Thomas Jefferson on the separation of the church and the state, then makes the statement that the problem and its solutions arose "from Christian, not universal, principles and experience." "There are other religious traditions," he continues, "in which religion and politics are differently perceived, and in which, therefore, the problems and the possible solutions are radically different from those we know in the West"(p.48). From this one may rightly conclude that (1) Lewis regards "Christian" and "West" as synonymous, and that (2) there are two causal factors, "principles" and "experience," which Lewis will consistently cite concerning any issue.

After some reassuring words about Islam as "one of the world's great religions," Lewis poses the problem he wishes to explore: "But Islam, like other religions, has also known periods when it inspired in some of its

followers a mood of hatred and violence. It is our misfortune that part, though by no means all or even most, of the Muslim world is now going through such a period, and that much, though again not all, of that hatred is directed against us”(p. 48). This plaintive note later becomes more explicit: “Certainly nowhere in the Muslim world, in the Middle East or elsewhere, has American policy suffered disasters or encountered problems comparable to those in Southeast Asia or Central America. There is no Cuba, no Vietnam, in the Muslim world, and no place where American forces are involved as combatants or even as ‘advisers.’ But there is a Libya, an Iran, and a Lebanon, and a surge of hatred that distresses, alarms, and above all baffles Americans”(p. 48). How reassuring the old motif: Americans as innocents abroad!

Note Lewis’s reluctance to make American foreign policy an active agent, to concede that in Southeast Asia and Central America it willfully affected disasters and created problems. As for the three countries he mentions, surely Lewis can’t be ignorant of the role the CIA played in destroying the legitimate government of Prime Minister Mossadegh in Iran and in his eventual murder? He must equally well remember the first deployment of the Marines in Lebanon by President Eisenhower and what Ronald Reagan and his Navy did the second time around. As for Libya, it cannot directly be accused of killing a single American. Even the “Libyan-sponsored terrorism” has caused only a nominal loss of American life compared to what Israel’s several “inadvertent” actions have done over the years. More importantly, the historian Lewis fails to mention American involvement in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Indonesia, the American sponsored, but now defunct, Central Treaty Organization of which Iraq was an original member, and America’s constant support of an assortment of dictators and kings in some of the so-called Muslim countries (Pakistan, Indonesia, Brunei, and Saudi Arabia, to name a few).

Lewis continues to express his bafflement by noting: “At times this hatred goes beyond hostility to specific interests or actions or policies or even countries and becomes a rejection of Western civilization as such, not only what it *does* but what it *is*, and of the principles and values that it practices and professes”(p. 48, emphasis added). This distinction between “doing” and “being,” is not invoked in the case of the Muslims; in their case, in every instance, the classicist Lewis substitutes a text for the historical context. For every contemporary event he has a ready discourse on “the classical Islamic view.” What is most depressing is that at such moments Lewis never brings into discussion “the classical Judaic view” or “the classical Christian view.” For example, in the text of the original lecture he notes that in Islam “the struggle of good and evil acquired, from the start, political and even military dimensions.” This he modifies in the published essay to “very soon acquired”(p. 49). In neither case, however, did he see fit to mention the views that Moses and his people held of the

Canaanites and the contemporary relevance of those views vis à vis the attitude toward the Palestinians of some Zionists in Israel and some Christian fundamentalists in this country.

Similar is his treatment of the next topic. The initial statement is impeccable: "Most, probably all, human societies have a way of distinguishing between themselves and others: insider and outsider, in-group and out-group, kinsman or neighbor or foreigner. These definitions not only define the outsider but also, and perhaps more particularly, help to define and illustrate our perception of ourselves" (p. 49). But rather than stating what defines the "outsider" for him (and by implication for the "West"), Lewis wheels in another one of his discourses on "the classical Islamic view," and follows up with a capsule history of the world since the advent of Islam, seen as ceaseless rivalry between it and Christendom. Subsequently, we are treated to a bizarre psycho-social analysis of the contemporary situation.

The Muslim has suffered successive stages of defeat. The first was his loss of domination in the world, to the advancing power of Russia and the West. The second was the undermining of his authority in his own culture, through an invasion of foreign ideas, laws, ways of life and sometimes even foreign rulers or settlers, not to mention the enfranchisement of native non-Muslim elements. The third — the last straw — was the challenge to his mastery in his own house, from emancipated women and rebellious children. It was too much to endure, and the outbreak of rage against these alien, infidel, and incomprehensible forces that had subverted his dominance, disrupted his society, and finally violated the sanctuary of his home was inevitable. It was also natural that this rage should be directed primarily against the millennial enemy and should draw its strength from ancient beliefs and loyalties (p. 49).

Let us try an exercise in analogy and see if the following makes any sense.

The American has suffered successive stages of defeat. The first was his loss of domination in the world to the advancing economic power of Japan and Germany. The second was the undermining of his authority in his own country, through the invasion of foreign ideas and ways of life brought in by waves of non-European immigrants, and the enfranchisement of the vast African-American and Mexican-American populations within the country. The third — the last straw — was the challenge to his mastery in his own house, from emancipated women and rebellious children. It was too much to endure. It was natural this rage should be directed primarily against the millennial enemy and should draw its strength from ancient beliefs and loyalties.

Dare I submit the above as a serious analysis of President Bush's recent actions in the Middle East?

After a recondite and irrelevant digression on why America is a "daughter of Europe," Lewis describes the contacts between the United

States and the “Islamic lands” since 1939. As a model of selective history it too deserves to be quoted.

The Second World War, the oil industry, and postwar developments brought many Americans to the Islamic lands; increasing number of Muslims also came to America, at first as students, then as teachers, as businessmen and other visitors, eventually as immigrants. Cinema and later television brought the American way of life, or at any rate a certain version of it, before countless millions to whom the very name of America had previously been meaningless or unknown. A wide range of American products, particularly in the immediate postwar years when European competition was virtually eliminated and Japanese competition had not yet arisen, reached into the remotest markets of the Muslim world, winning new customers and, perhaps more important, creating new tastes and ambitions. For some, America represented freedom and justice and opportunity. For many more, it represented wealth and power and success, at a time when these qualities were not regarded as sins or crimes (p. 50).

Note the admirable neutrality of his words: “...the oil industry and postwar developments *brought* many Americans to the Islamic lands” (emphasis added). The oil industry did not entail, apparently, any state policy or action on the part of the United States. The Americans did not themselves come in pursuit of oil, some third party called “the oil industry” brought them. ARAMCO was as innocuous as Coca Cola. As for “the postwar developments,” Lewis conveniently does not list any. Let us therefore refresh our memory. (1) The Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), a brainchild of John Foster Dulles, that linked the United States with Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Pakistan in a cold war posture against the Soviet Union. It involved American bases, advisers, arm sales, and U-2 spy missions. (2) Kermit Roosevelt and the CIA’s destruction of the nascent democracy in Iran, and the consequent American love affair with the “King of the Kings.” (3) President Eisenhower’s use of U.S. Marines in Lebanon to prop up a political structure favoring the minority Christian population. (4) No American support for any democratic, nationalist movement in that part of the world. (5) Lastly — lest I be guilty of the same lapse of memory as Lewis — the adoption of the state of Israel as America’s surrogate in the Middle East.

“And then came the great change...,” so begins the next paragraph, apparently referring to the actions of Ayatollah Khomeini and his cohorts. Lewis now proceeds to explain the why of it. At the top of his list are “certain intellectual influences coming from Europe.” Then comes “the Soviet version of Marxism.” Third on his list is “the influence of the new mystique of Third Worldism, emanating from Western Europe...and later also from the United States”(p. 52). Either Lewis is merely rounding up the usual suspects or he genuinely believes that the populations of those

lands didn't have the intellectual resources to produce any thought of their own or even to make sense of their circumstances.

But even Lewis knows such generalizations would be hard to swallow for his Jefferson Lecture audience. So, with a flourish, he turns specific.

If we turn from the general to the specific, there is no lack of individual policies and actions, pursued and taken by individual Western governments, that have aroused the passionate anger of Middle Eastern and other Islamic peoples. Yet all too often, when these policies are abandoned and the problems resolved, there is only a local and temporary alleviation. The French have left Algeria, the British have left Egypt, the Western oil companies have left their oil wells, the westernizing Shah has left Iran — yet the generalized resentment [of the fundamentalists and other extremists] against the West remains and grows and is not appeased. ...Clearly something deeper is involved than these specific grievances, numerous and important as they may be — something deeper that turns every disagreement into a problem and makes every problem insoluble (p.52-53).<sup>1</sup>

The way he puts it, one can't help but feel sympathy for Lewis's bafflement. The active West pursues policies and actions upon a passive East; then, when it realizes that its efforts are not being appreciated, the West, being also singularly wise and just, *abandons* those policies and *resolves* all problems. The French leave Algeria, the British leave Egypt — apparently as peaceably as winter tourists. The Western oil companies, magnanimous as ever, leave *their* oil wells. The "King of the Kings" ups and leaves his throne one day. And yet the ingrate East remains resentful!

Clearly something deeper is involved. Later Lewis will tell us what it is — Islamic fundamentalism, of course — but first he must take care of the ingrates at home: "some elements in the United States" who have been affected by "this mood of disillusionment and hostility" and who accuse "[us] of the West" of "sexism, racism, and imperialism, institutionalized in patriarchy and slavery, tyranny and exploitation"(p. 53). Lewis's first response is a disarming *mea culpa*: "to these charges, and to others as heinous, we have no option but to plead guilty — not as Americans, nor yet as Westerners, but simply as human beings, as members of the human race"(p. 53). Then comes a bolder assertion: "Where [the West] is unique and distinct from all others is in having recognized, named, and tried, not entirely without success, to remedy these historic diseases"(p. 53). Needless to say, a recognition of human frailty and of a possible capacity to change is not extended by Lewis to the Muslim East.

There is much to agree with in Lewis's critique of the Islamic fundamentalists. He accurately identifies and condemns their ruthless urge to power and domination and their exclusive claim to truth. He is on target when he criticizes those among the new Muslim minorities in Western Europe who demand for Islam "a degree of legal protection which those countries no longer give to Christianity and have never given to Judaism."

There is a large element of truth in his judgement that "Islam was never prepared, either in theory or in practice, to accord full equality to those who held other beliefs and practiced other forms of worship." One may appreciate his subsequent remark: "[Islam] did, however, accord to the holders of partial truth a degree of practical as well as theoretical tolerance rarely paralleled in the Christian world until the West adopted a measure of secularism in the late-seventeenth and eighteenth centuries"(p. 56). But it remains a tragic fact that the same degree of tolerance was often not available in the past to the "innovators" within the Muslim community, and is not even now being extended to religious minorities in several of the so-called Islamic states, e.g. in Iran, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Lastly and most importantly, one wishes Lewis had strictly followed his own precept of examining both the "principles" and the "experience" in each and every instance.

So what does Lewis offer as his parting advice? There are two conclusions. First: "This is no less than a clash of civilizations — the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both. It is crucially important that we on our side should study their heritage and understand their present, and that we should not be provoked into an equally historic but also equally irrational reaction against that rival"(p. 60). Rather patronizing, but fair enough; it is at least not mischievous. Then comes the second conclusion: "The movement nowadays called fundamentalism is not the only Islamic tradition. There are others, more tolerant, more open, which helped to inspire the great achievements of Islamic civilization in the past, and we may hope that these other traditions will in time prevail. But before this issue is decided there will be a hard struggle, in which we of the West can do little or nothing. Even the attempt might do harm, for these are issues that Muslims must decide among themselves. And in the meantime, we must take great care on all sides to avoid the danger of a new era of religious wars, arising from the exacerbation of differences and the revival of ancient prejudices"(p. 60).

It is rather unfair of Lewis to give recognition to these other Islamic traditions in just one sentence on the very last page. Shouldn't their "principles" and "experiences" be counted as equally significant in what he wishes us to regard as Islam? In marginalizing them in this fashion, Lewis is akin to the very fundamentalists he wishes to criticize. On the other hand, he never takes up the issue of the U.S. intervention in the so-called Muslim countries since the end of the W.W. II. That intervention has never been on the side of any popular, secular or modern movement. American foreign policy, through its military might or through covert intelligence actions, has always sought to support and protect those who could best serve narrow, short term interests of the United States, be it the

Shah in Iran, the Islamic “King” in Saudi Arabia, the fundamentalist dictator in Pakistan, the military junta in Indonesia, or the Reagan “mujahideen” in Afghanistan. Further, Lewis suppresses the fact that since the end of the W.W. II, the most modern and secular Arab population in the Middle East, namely the Palestinians, has been a victim as much of American diplomacy as of Israeli guns.

What Lewis suggests amounts to no more than saying, let them kill each other. No doubt before the issue between the “open” Islamic traditions and the now rampant fundamentalism is decided “there will be a hard struggle,” but that struggle has always been going on. And the West has been very much involved in it, unfortunately not always according to its own proclaimed principles of secularism, modernism, democracy, freedom, etc. In any case, the struggle between the “open and tolerant” Islam and its more obscurantist version is no longer out there somewhere, it is already being waged within the geo-political boundaries of the “West.”

When the editors of *The Atlantic Monthly* asked Lewis to describe how he felt when he arrived in the Middle East for the very first time, Lewis borrowed the words of an earlier Orientalist, Edward Lane: “On my first landing I was filled with emotion, like an Eastern bridegroom about to lift the veil of his as yet unseen bride.” It is a most telling comment. Lewis could see himself only as the groom, the confident and “active” male eager to ravish the “passive” female. Uncertainty and anxiety were not on Lewis’s mind. Had that been the case, he would have identified himself with that helpless bundle of clothes on the bed. Then we would have also received from him a different kind of Jefferson Lecture.

### Notes

1. The words within the square brackets are in the published essay but not in the text of the original lecture. That’s the case also with the long digression on Israel that has been elided here for brevity. The problem is Lewis keeps changing his object of critique. One moment it is something called “the East,” another time it is the Muslim lands, a third time it is Islam, next it is Islamic fundamentalism, then he trains his guns more specifically on the Ayatollahs of the Islamic Republic of Iran. As a matter of fact, he finally seems to settle on the last two as his target, but then why the initial generalizations?