

## Edward Said, "Impossible Histories: Why the Many Islams Cannot be Simplified," *Harper's*, July 2002

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### Discussed in this essay:

#### ***Islam: A Short History***

Karen Armstrong. Modern Library, 2000. 222 pages. \$19.95.

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#### ***What Went Wrong?***

#### ***Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response***

Bernard Lewis. Oxford University Press, 2002. 180 pages. \$23.

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The history of trying to come to terms with this somewhat fictionalized (or at least constructed) Islam in Europe and later in the United States has always been marked by crisis and conflict, rather than by calm, mutual exchange. There is the added factor now of commercial publishing, ever on the lookout for a quick bestseller by some adept expert that will tell us all we need to know about Islam, its problems, dangers, and prospects. In my book *Orientalism*, I argued that the original reason for European attempts to deal with Islam as if it were one giant entity was polemical—that is, Islam was considered a threat to Christian Europe and had to be fixed ideologically, the way Dante fixes Muhammad in one of the lower circles of hell. Later, as the European empires developed over time, knowledge of Islam was associated with control, with power, with the need to understand the "mind" and ultimate nature of a rebellious and somehow resistant culture as a way of dealing administratively with an alien being at the heart of the expanding empires, especially those of Britain and France.

During the Cold War, as the United States vied with the Soviet Union for dominance, Islam quickly became a national-security concern in America, though until the Iranian revolution (and even after it, during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan) the United States followed a path of encouraging and actually supporting Islamic political groups, which by definition were also anti-Communist and tended to be useful in opposing radical nationalist movements supported by the Soviets. After the Cold War ended and the United States became the "world's only superpower," it soon became evident that in the search for new world-scale, outside enemies, Islam was a prime candidate, thus quickly reviving all the old religiously based clichés about violent, antimodernist, and monolithic Islam. These clichés were useful to Israel and its political and academic supporters in the United States, particularly because of the emergence

of Islamic resistance movements to Israel's military occupation of the Palestinian territories and Lebanon. Suddenly a rush of what appeared to be respectably expert material spouted up in the periodical press, most of it purporting to link "Islam" as a whole to such absurdly reductive passions as rage, antimodernism, anti-Americanism, antirationalism, violence, and terror. Quite unsurprisingly, when Samuel Huntington's vastly overrated article on the clash of civilizations appeared in 1993, the core of its belligerent (and dishearteningly ignorant) thesis was the battle between the "West" and "Islam" (which he sagely warned would become even more dangerous when it was allied with Confucianism).

What wasn't immediately noted at the time was how Huntington's title and theme were borrowed from a phrase in an essay, written in 1990 by an energetically self-repeating and self-winding British academic, entitled "The Roots of Muslim Rage." Its author, Bernard Lewis, made his name forty years ago as an expert on modern Turkey, but came to the United States in the mid-seventies and was quickly drafted into service as a Cold Warrior, applying his traditional Orientalist training to larger and larger questions, which had as their immediate aim an ideological portrait of "Islam" and the Arabs that suited dominant pro-imperial and pro-Zionist strands in U.S. foreign policy. It should be noted that Orientalist learning itself was premised on the silence of the native, who was to be represented by an Occidental expert speaking ex cathedra on the native's behalf, presenting that unfortunate creature as an undeveloped, deficient, and uncivilized being who couldn't represent himself. But just as it has now become inappropriate for white scholars to speak on behalf of "Negroes," it has, since the end of classical European colonialism, stopped being fashionable or even acceptable to pontificate about the Oriental's (i.e., the Muslim's, or the Indian's, or the Japanese's) "mentality."

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

With his veneer of English sophistication and perfect readiness never to doubt what he is saying, Lewis has been an appropriate participant in post-September discussion, rehashing his crude simplifications in *The New Yorker* and the *National Review*, as well as on the Charlie Rose show. His jowly presence seems to delight his interlocutors and editors, and his

trenchant, if wildly unprovable, anecdotes of Islamic backwardness and antimodernism are eagerly received. His view of history is a crudely Darwinian one in which powers and cultures vie for dominance, some rising, some sinking. Lewis's notions (they are scarcely ideas) seem also to have a vague Spenglerian cast to them, but he hasn't got any of Spengler's philosophic ambition or scope. There isn't much left to what Lewis says, therefore, than that cultures can be measured in their most appallingly simplified terms (my culture is stronger—i.e., has better trains, guns, symphony orchestras—than yours). For obvious reasons, then, his last book, *What Went Wrong?* which was written before but published after September 11, has been faring well on the bestseller lists. It fills a need felt by many Americans: to have it confirmed for them why "Islam" attacked them so violently and so wantonly on September 11, and why what is "wrong" with Islam deserves unrelieved opprobrium and revulsion. The book's real theme, however, is what went wrong with Lewis himself: an actual, rather than a fabricated subject.

For the book is in fact an intellectual and moral disaster, the terribly faded rasp of a pretentious academic voice, completely removed from any direct experience of Islam, rehashing and recycling tired Orientalist half (or less than half) truths. Remember that Lewis claims to be discussing all of "Islam," not just the mad militants of Afghanistan or Egypt or Iran. All of Islam. He tries to argue that it all went "wrong," as if the whole thing—people, languages, cultures—could really be pronounced upon categorically by a godlike creature who seems never to have experienced a single living human Muslim (except for a small handful of Turkish authors), as if history were a simple matter of right as defined by power, or wrong, by not having it. One can almost hear him saying, over a gin and tonic, "You know, old chap, those wogs never really got it right, did they?"

But it's really worse than that. With few exceptions, all of Lewis's footnotes and concrete sources (that is, on the rare occasion when he actually refers to something concrete that one could look up and read for oneself) are Turkish. All of them, except for a smattering of Arabic and European sources. How this allows him to imply that his descriptions have relevance, for instance, to all twenty-plus Arab countries, or to Indonesia or Pakistan or Morocco, or to the 30 million Chinese Muslims, all of them integral parts of Islam, is never discussed; and indeed, Lewis never mentions these groups as he bangs on about Islam's tendency to do this, that, or the other, backed by a tiny group of Turkish sources.

Although it is true that he protects himself at first by saying that his polemic "especially but not exclusively" concerns an area he vaguely calls the Middle East, he throws restraint to the winds in all of what follows. Announcing portentously that Muslims have "for a long time" been asking "what went wrong?" he then proceeds to tell us what they say and mean, rarely citing a single name, episode, or period except in the most general way. One would never allow an undergraduate to write so casually as he does that, during the nineteenth century, Muslims were "concerned" about the art of warfare, or that in the twentieth "it became abundantly clear in the Middle East and indeed all over the lands of Islam that things had indeed gone badly wrong." How he impresses nonexpert Americans with generalities that would never pass

in any other field or for any other religion, country, or people is a sign of how degraded general knowledge is about the worlds of Islam, and how unscrupulously Lewis trades on that ignorance—feeds it, in fact. That any sensible reader could accept such nonsensical sentences as these (I choose them at random) defies common sense:

For the whole of the nineteenth and most of the twentieth century the search for the hidden talisman [an invention of Lewis's, this is the supposed Muslim predilection for trying to find a simple key to "Western" power] concentrated on two aspects of the West—economics and politics, or to put it differently, wealth and power.

And what proof is offered of this 200-year "search," which occupied the whole of Islam? One statement, made at the start of the nineteenth century, by the Ottoman ambassador in Paris.

Or consider this equally precise and elegant generalization:

During the 1930s, Italy and then, far more, Germany offered new ideological and political models, with the added attraction of being opposed to the Western powers. [Never mind the dangling "being opposed"—Lewis doesn't bother to tell us to whom the models were offered, in what way, and with what evidence. He trudges on anyway.] These won widespread support, and even after their military defeat in World War II, they continued to serve as unavowed models in both ideology and statecraft.

Mercifully, since they are "unavowed models," one doesn't need to offer any proof of their existence as models. Naturally Lewis offers none.

Or consider, even more sublime, this nugget, which is intended to prove that even when they translated books from European languages, the wretched Muslims didn't do it seriously or well. Note the brilliant preamble: "A translation requires a translator, and a translator has to know both languages, the language from which he is translating and the language into which he is translating." (It is difficult for me to believe that Lewis was awake when he wrote this peculiarly acute tautology—or is it only a piercingly clever truism?)

Such knowledge, strange as it may seem, was extremely rare in the Middle East until comparatively late. There were very few [sic] Muslims who knew any Christian language; it was considered unnecessary, even to some extent demeaning. For interpreters, when needed for commerce, diplomacy, or war, they relied first on refugees and renegades from Europe and then, when the supply of these dried up, on Levantines. Both groups lacked either the interest or the capacity to do literary translations into Middle-Eastern languages.

And that is it: no evidence, no names, no demonstration or concrete documentation of all these Middle Eastern and Muslim incapacities. To Lewis, what he writes about "Islam" is all so self-evident that it allows him to bypass normal conventions of intellectual discourse, including proof.

When Lewis's book was reviewed in the New York Times by no less an intellectual luminary than Yale's Paul Kennedy, there was only uncritical praise, as if to suggest that the canons of historical evidence should be suspended where "Islam" is the subject. Kennedy was particularly impressed with Lewis's assertion, in an almost totally irrelevant chapter on "Aspects of Cultural Change," that alone of all the cultures of the world Islam has taken no interest in Western music. Quite without any justification at all, Kennedy then lurched on to lament the fact that Middle Easterners had deprived themselves even of Mozart! For that indeed is what Lewis suggests (though he doesn't mention Mozart). Except for Turkey and Israel, "Western art music," he categorically states, "falls on deaf ears" in the Islamic world.

Now, as it happens, this is something I know quite a bit about, but it would take some direct experience or a moment or two of actual life in the Muslim world to realize that what Lewis says is a total falsehood, betraying the fact that he hasn't set foot in or spent any significant time in Arab countries. Several major Arab capitals have very good conservatories of Western music: Cairo, Beirut, Damascus, Tunis, Rabat, Amman—even Ramallah on the West Bank. These have produced literally thousands of excellent Western-style musicians who have staffed the numerous symphony orchestras and opera companies that play to sold-out auditoriums all over the Arab world. There are numerous festivals of Western music there, too, and in the case of Cairo (where I spent a great deal of my early life more than fifty years ago) they are excellent places to learn about, listen to, and see Western instrumental and vocal music performed at quite high levels of skill. The Cairo Opera House has pioneered the performance of opera in Arabic, and in fact I own a commercial CD of Mozart's Marriage of Figaro sung most competently in Arabic. I am a decent pianist and have played, studied, written about, and practiced that wonderful instrument all of my life; the significant part of my musical education was received in Cairo from Arab teachers, who first inspired a love and knowledge of Western music (and, yes, of Mozart) that has never left me. In addition, I should also mention that for the past three years I have been associated with Daniel Barenboim in sponsoring a group of young Arab and Israeli musicians to come together for three weeks in the summer to perform orchestral and chamber music under Barenboim (and in 1999 with Yo-Yo Ma) at an elevated, international level. All of the young Arabs received their training in Arab conservatories. How could Barenboim and I have staffed the West-Ostlicher Diwan workshop, as it is called, if Western music had fallen on such deaf Muslim ears? Besides, why should Lewis and Kennedy use the supposed absence of Western music as a club to beat "Islam" with anyway? Isn't there an enormously rich panoply of Islamic musics to take account of instead of indulging in this ludicrous browbeating?

I have gone into all this detail to give a sense of the unrelieved rubbish of which Lewis's book is made up. That it should fool even so otherwise alert and critical an historian as Paul

Kennedy is an indication not only of how low most people's expectations are when it comes to discussions of "Islam" but of the mischievous ideological fictions that pseudo-experts like Bernard Lewis trade in, and with which they hoodwink nonexperts in the aftermath of September 11. Instead of making it possible for people to educate themselves in how complex and intertwined all cultures and religions really are, available public discourse is polluted with reductive clichés that Lewis bandies about without a trace of skepticism or rigor. The worst part of this method is that it systematically dehumanizes peoples and turns them into a collection of abstract slogans for purposes of aggressive mobilization and bellicosity. This is not at all a matter of rational understanding. The study of other cultures is a humanistic, not a strategic or security, pursuit: Lewis mutilates the effort itself and pretends to be delivering truths from on high. In fact, as even the most cursory reading of his book shows, he succeeds only in turning Muslims into an enemy people, to be regarded collectively with contempt and scorn. That this has to do neither with knowledge nor with understanding is enough to dismiss his work as a debased effort to push unsuspecting readers toward thinking of "Islam" as something to judge harshly, to dislike, and therefore to be on guard against.

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

Unlike Lewis, however, she is interested in concrete aspects of Islamic religious life, and there she is worth reading. Her book's most valuable section is that in which she discusses the varieties of modern fundamentalism without the usual invidious focus on Islam. And rather than seeing it only as a negative phenomenon, she has an admirable gift for understanding fundamentalism from within, as adherence to a faith that is threatened by a strong secular authoritarianism. As an almost doctrinaire secularist myself, I nevertheless found myself swayed by her sympathetic and persuasive argument in this section, and wished that instead of being hobbled by a rigid chronological approach she had allowed herself to wander among aspects of the spiritual life of Islam that, as a former nun, she has obviously found congenial.

Of course one can learn about and understand Islam, but not in general and not, as far too many of our expert authors propose, in so unsituated a way. To understand anything about human history, it is necessary to see it from the point of view of those who made it, not to

treat it as a packaged commodity or as an instrument of aggression. Why should the world of Islam be any different? I would therefore suggest that one should begin with some of the copious first-person accounts of Islam available in English that describe what it means to be a Muslim, as in Muhammad Asad's extraordinary book *The Road to Mecca* (a gripping account of how Leopold Weiss, 1900–92, born in Lvov, became a Muslim and Pakistan's U.N. representative), or in Malcolm X's account in his memoir, or in Taha Hussein's great autobiography, *The Stream of Days*. The whole idea would be to open up Islam's worlds as pertaining to the living, the experienced, the connected-to-us, rather than to shut it down, rigidly codifying it and stuffing it into a box labeled "Dangerous—do not disturb."

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

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