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What Went Wrong: Western Impact And Middle Eastern Response



Synopsis

For many centuries, Islam was the world's greatest, most open, most enlightened, most creative, most powerful civilisation. And then everything changed, as the previously despised West won victory after victory, first on the battlefield and in the marketplace, then in almost every aspect of public and even private life. Bernard Lewis examines the anguished reaction of the Islamic world as it tried to understand why things had changed, and he provides a fascinating portrait of a culture in turmoil. Some Middle Easterners asked not who did this to us? but where did we go wrong?; while others fastened blame on a series of scapegoats, both internal and external - and the results are very much with us today. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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Customer Reviews

Sampling a broad collection of historical accounts, diplomatic cables, journals and official correspondence, Bernard Lewis illustrates the historical development of Middle Eastern political and religious institutions. This work, which is rich in vivid imagery and erudition, demonstrates Lewis's gifted eloquence and mastery of foreign languages, with a wide range of French, Turkish, Arabic, German and Italian sources cited throughout the study. Like Lewis's other works, including *The Crisis of Islam*, widely considered his best work in the field, *What Went Wrong?* presents the reader with a profuse collection of accounts that describe the internal struggle battling for domination in the modern Muslim world: on the one hand, moderate Islam seeking to embrace the liberties of modern democracies and alignment with the

West, and on the other, a fundamentalist strain of Islam that condemns any departure from ancient practice as a deviation from and corruption of true Islam. Lewis enters the minds of the disciples of the latter school and describes not only their struggle against outside influence, but also their struggle against the enemy from within (p. 107): In the literature of the Muslim radicals and militants the enemy has been variously defined. Sometimes he is the Jew or Zionist, sometimes the Christian or missionary, sometimes the Western imperialist, sometimes the Russia or other communist. But their primary enemies, and the most immediate object of their campaigns and attacks, are the native secularizers those who have tried to weaken or modify the Islamic basis of the state by introducing secular schools and universities, secular laws and courts, and thus excluding Islam and its professional exponents from the two major areas of education and justice. The arch-enemy from most of them is Kemal Atatürk, the founder of the Turkish Republic and the first great secularizing reformer in the Muslim world. Characters as diverse as King Faruq and Presidents Nasser and Sadat in Egypt, Hafiz al-Asad in Syria and Saddam Hussein in Iraq, the Shah of Persia and the kings and princes of Arabia, were denounced as the most dangerous enemies of Islam, the enemies from within. For Lewis, the struggle between moderate and fundamentalist Islam has increased in the modern age, in part due to the twentieth century rise of autocratic government. Traditionally, justice within the context of Islamic governance meant not only that the ruler was there by right and not by usurpation, but also that "he governed according to God's law, or at least according to recognizable moral and legal principles" (p. 54). This requirement "was sometimes discussed in terms of a contrast between arbitrary and consultative government" (p. 55). Yet today, consultative government has largely eroded in the Middle East, where capricious rulers who decide and act on their own have replaced "the wise and just ruler who consulted others" (p. 55). As a result, the region has come to be governed by corrupt rulers who, rather than act in accordance with principles of divine justice, oppress their people and subordinate their nations to foreign interests. This has in turn fueled the zeal of Islamic fundamentalists to purge their governments of all secular influence and restore the Shari'ah as their constitution and Islam as the state's ordering mechanism. What went wrong in the Middle East was thus not natural disaster, poverty, foreign invasion or armed conflict, but rather, war of a different kind. What went wrong was the erosion of Islamic institutions that traditionally provided for the ordering of Islamic societies, but that gradually wore away when confronted with modernity, leaving a vacuum that was filled by unscrupulous rulers. The collage of cables, letters, vignettes, clippings and other

texts that Lewis draws on serve as supportive materials to bring the reader to the forefront of Middle Eastern history and richly color the book with depictions of Middle Eastern and Ottoman culture and institutions. These materials are surprisingly dominated by Ottoman and Turkish rather than Arabic texts, perhaps because Islam experienced its civilizational apex during the Ottoman Empire, and they are not essential to explaining the causes of the decline of Islam in the modern age. Rather, without reference to these materials, one can extract the central thesis of the book from its concise ten-page conclusion.

My husband, who is from a country close to what is happened, was very pleased with the reliability of the facts.

If you want to know why they are at war with us and themselves, then this is the primer for your reading. It combines well with *The Siege of Mecca* to round out a basic understanding of political Islam's mass hysterical violence. What went wrong -- why did the West become a technologically advanced and superior civilization as compared to Islam? Dr Lewis identified the times and places where this occurred and its lasting impact on Islamic civilization. To the political Islamist mind, Islam is the superior civilization and produces the superior man within it. Yet, the West seems to have all the "toys" while Islamic societies are riddled with poverty, crushing dictators, and squalor. Surely the West is to blame for Muslim misery. Dr Lewis debunks that common myth while also showing where parts of the myth hold some truth. It's a quick read for the commute on public transport or long airline journeys.

If there is a question that troubles the Islamic world more than any other it is the reason why Islam has fallen behind the west and is dominated by western powers, when once Islam was the glory of the world. The author, who is a Princeton University professor, chronicles the rise and fall of the Ottoman empire and how Islam ignored the rapid advances of the west, thinking that there was little to learn from the "wretched infidels." Just a few decades after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Columbus discovered the new world and the European powers accelerated their growth and military power. At the end of WWI, the Ottoman empire and all its glory had collapsed. The European powers, led by England, began to carve up and dominate the Islamic world; a situation that continues to this day. The reasons why this happened are chronicled in this important book, and leaves the reader with a better understanding of why the Islamic world resents the west and why some extremists cling to the dream of a renewal of Islamic glory, that can only come with a more

fervent commitment to Allah and a willingness to engage in jihad.

I read this shortly after 9/11. Slammed by the liberal academic media as shallow and simplistic, they fail to see in their vapid commentary that this book speaks the truth. Arab culture, long burdened by Islam, and empowered by easy oil money does not see that the separation of church and state, a secular educational system, the empowerment of women, and the embracement of science is the path to nation building and becoming a member of the world community. We now have almost 300 years of experience in such building. Japan and Germany got it wrong in WW II and had to be bombed back to the Stone Age to realize their mistakes. I don't think the Islamic world understands how bad it can be. And guess what? the oil money is in the process of drying up.

This book has helped me better understand foreign policy. Anyone claiming to be a foreign policy expert, national security expert, or religious expert needs to read this book because it tells you exactly the kinds of religious mentality that I experienced when I lived in these countries. There are many Muslim members in my family. This book really helps understand Islam and how it relates to the governmental policies of Middle Eastern countries.

IMHO, the single most fascinating and unexpected thing Mr. Lewis brings to light is that within a generation of each area falling under Islamic, wheeled vehicles and the roadways that supported them disappeared. Lewis surmises that a tendency for the authorities to confiscate wheeled vehicles discouraged people from building and using them any more. Lewis explores aspects of Islamic rule that may be responsible for this backward slide in transportation systems -- answers to the question posed in the title: "What Went Wrong."

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