

# What Went Wrong?: Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response

By Bernard Lewis

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For many centuries, the world of Islam was in the forefront of human achievement--the foremost military and economic power in the world, the leader in the arts and sciences of civilization. Christian Europe, a remote land beyond its northwestern frontier, was seen as an outer darkness of barbarism and unbelief from which there was nothing to learn or to fear. And then everything changed, as the previously despised West won victory after victory, first in the battlefield and the marketplace, then in almost every aspect of public and even private life.

In this intriguing volume, Bernard Lewis examines the anguished reaction of the Islamic world as it tried to understand why things had changed--how they had been overtaken, overshadowed, and to an increasing extent dominated by the West. Lewis provides a fascinating portrait of a culture in turmoil. He shows how the Middle East turned its attention to understanding European weaponry and military tactics, commerce and industry, government and diplomacy, education and culture. Lewis highlights the striking differences between the Western and Middle Eastern cultures from the 18th to the 20th centuries through thought-provoking comparisons of such things as Christianity and Islam, music and the arts, the position of women, secularism and the civil society, the clock and the calendar.

Hailed in *The New York Times Book Review* as "the doyen of Middle Eastern studies," Bernard Lewis is one of the West's foremost authorities on Islamic history and culture. In this striking volume, he offers an incisive look at the historical relationship between the Middle East and Europe.

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### Editorial Review

#### Amazon.com Review

Bernard Lewis is the West's greatest historian and interpreter of the Near East. Books such as *The Middle East* and *The Arabs in History* are required reading for anybody who hopes to understand the region and its people. Now Lewis offers *What Went Wrong?*, a concise and timely survey of how Islamic civilization fell from worldwide leadership in almost every frontier of human knowledge five or six centuries ago to a "poor, weak, and ignorant" backwater that is today dominated by "shabby tyrannies ... modern only in their apparatus of repression and terror." He offers no easy answers, but does provide an engaging chronicle of the Arab encounter with Europe in all its military, economic, and cultural dimensions. The most dramatic reversal, he says, may have occurred in the sciences: "Those who had been disciples now became teachers; those who had been masters became pupils, often reluctant and resentful pupils." Today's Arab governments have blamed their plight on any number of external culprits, from Western imperialism to the Jews. Lewis believes they must instead commit to putting their own houses in order: "If the peoples of Middle East continue on their present path, the suicide bomber 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, [and] poverty and oppression." Anybody who wants to understand the historical backdrop to September 11 would do well to look for it on these pages. --John Miller

#### From Publishers Weekly

In the fields of Islamic and Middle Eastern history, few people are as prominent and prolific as Lewis, emeritus professor at Princeton. This time around, however, he has written a book with an inconsistent argument and an erratic narrative consisting of recycled themes from his earlier books, a work that sheds no new light on Middle Eastern history or on the events of September 11. His general argument is that Islamic civilization, once flourishing and tolerant, has in modern times become stagnant. This, he contends, has led to considerable soul-searching among Muslims, who ask themselves, "What went wrong?" But while sometimes the author states that there is a critical inquiry into the source of economic weakness in Muslim civilizations, other times he says that, instead of looking into the mirror, Muslims have blamed their problems on Europeans or Jews and thus fed their sense of victimhood. In medieval times, Lewis notes, Muslim civilization transmitted scientific ideas into Europe. But after offering intriguing examples of Muslim physicians and astronomers on the cutting edge in the 13th to 15th centuries, this chapter abruptly ends by stating that in modern times the roles have reversed, leaving the reader baffled over what between the 15th and the 20th centuries may have contributed to this reversal. Thus, the book raises more questions than it answers. Furthermore, Lewis discounts the effects of various decisions made by European and American colonial powers that negatively impacted the development of a democratic political community and a viable economy in the Middle East. Lewis's earlier books, such as *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* and *The Middle East and the West*, are much more useful for anyone seeking to understand the historical dynamic between these two parts of the world. First serial to *Atlantic Monthly*.

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#### From Library Journal

Since its inception in the seventh century, Islamic civilization has remained a significant force in the world. In fact, the Muslim world was a leader in the humanities, arts, and sciences while Europe was still in relative darkness and mired in internecine wars and religious zealotry. The Muslim world was also largely

responsible for preserving and transmitting Greek and other Western scholarship to Christian Europe. However, Islamic civilization was eventually overshadowed by the achievements of European Christendom, and much of the Muslim world came under the direct or indirect domination of the West. In this highly readable book, eminent historian Lewis (Near Eastern studies, emeritus, Princeton Univ.) explains Islam's encounter with the West and the Middle East's varied responses to the West's sociocultural and political hegemony in the Muslim world. Like many of Lewis's previous writings on this subject (e.g., *The Arabs in History*), this book will undoubtedly generate significant debate and disagreement among scholars regarding the author's analysis of Islamic responses to modernity and Westernization. Recommended for academic and large public libraries. Nader Entessar, Spring Hill Coll., Mobile, AL  
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