



BOOKS

Root Causes

By STANLEY KURTZ

BERNARD LEWIS. *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*. OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS. 192 PAGES. \$23.00

WHY IS AMERICA at war with Islamic terrorists? For those not persuaded that legitimate grievances over American policies toward the Palestinians or Iraq are at the root of this conflict, the question remains unanswered. If not legitimate anger at the United States, what were the real causes of the attacks of September 11?

Under the direct or indirect influence of Princeton professor Bernard Lewis, the foremost living historian of the Islamic Middle East, many commentators reply that the attacks of September 11 were motivated by an impulse to scapegoat the West in general — and the United States in particular — for the Middle East's own failure to modernize. In Lewis's long-held view, put

Stanley Kurtz is a fellow at the Hoover Institution.

forward with especial thoroughness and clarity in his new book, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*, the humiliating and increasingly obvious failure of a once-great Islamic civilization to match the military, economic, political, and cultural might of the West has had a troubling effect. Many Middle Easterners, convinced that a turning from the pious ways of old is at the root of Muslim decline, have simultaneously embraced Islamic fundamentalism and repudiated the West.

The obvious parallel (although Lewis never explicitly draws it) is to the rise of Nazism. Whatever the legitimacy of German complaints about the Treaty of Versailles, Nazi ideology was fundamentally a nativist response to the national humiliation of World War I and to the traumatic economic failure of the depression. For Germans at the time, as for Muslim Middle Easterners today, the Jews and the Western powers served as convenient scapegoats.

Yet if the West is being scapegoated for the Middle East's inability to modernize, we need to understand the reasons for that failure. For the decline of Muslim society under the pressure of modernization is the true cause of this war. Not coincidentally, Bernard Lewis's *What Went Wrong?* is a systematic attempt to describe and account for the crisis of Middle Eastern modernity.

THE PUBLICATION of *What Went Wrong?* at so opportune a moment is a tribute to Lewis's prescience. The book was in page proofs when the attacks on New York and Washington took place — attacks that were ultimate outcomes of

the forces that Lewis has been describing and diagnosing for years. Even more than his prescience, however, *What Went Wrong?* is a tribute to Lewis's persistence in the face of decades of demonization by the academic left. This book seems welcome and timely today, but when Lewis wrote it, his insights — and even his questions — were widely condemned as bigoted “Orientalism” by scholars of the Middle East. The war has borne out Lewis's insights and confounded his foes, yet those blessedly uninitiated in the ways of the contemporary academy might easily miss the drama of courage and vindication embodied in the publication of this book at this time.

The field of “post-colonial studies” — the regnant academic paradigm for the study of non-Western cultures — was founded in 1978 by Edward Said's book, *Orientalism*. That book condemned virtually all existing literature and scholarship on the Middle East as a series of disguised rationalizations for Western colonial ambition. Most of Said's *Orientalism* was an elaborate tour of early, often highly distorted and bigoted attempts by Western travelers to make sense of the Muslim Middle East. But the body of the book was simply a setup for the all-important final chapter, which argued that even sophisticated contemporary scholarly accounts of the Middle East were infected by the distortions, biases, and imperial ambition so evident in the records of early Western travelers. The culminating moment of that critical chapter was Edward Said's blistering critique of Bernard Lewis.

Since the inception of post-colonial theory, then, Bernard Lewis has been its chief villain. Lewis's longstanding inter-

est in Muslim misconceptions about a modernizing Europe, his insistence on stressing the relationship between Islam and contemporary Middle Eastern terrorism, and his discussion of Muslim scapegoating of both Jews and Westerners were marked out by Said 24 years ago as proof of the bigotry and bankruptcy of the field of Middle Eastern studies itself.

Today, of course, Lewis appears to have been vindicated by events, while Said's repeated condemnations of the West's preoccupation with Islamic terrorism are an embarrassment to his supporters. If anything, it was America's inability to honestly name and diagnose the terrorist threat — provoked in no small part by the chastisements of Said and his followers — that made us let our guard down. Would that we had listened more closely to Lewis.

YET BERNARD LEWIS is far from the only one to ask, “What went wrong?” On the contrary, despite Said's strictures against even posing such a question, Lewis's point of departure is the long-standing preoccupation of Middle Easterners themselves with the loss of their civilizational dominance to the West.

For a long time, it is true, the threat from the West was ignored. Throughout the Middle Ages, the Islamic Near East was the mightiest military, economic, political, scientific, and cultural power in the world. The majesty of the Islamic empire seemed to confirm the Prophet's claim to have completed and surpassed the messages of Judaism and Christianity. The infidels of Europe, it was thought, could

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have nothing of significance to teach Muslims. How much less could they represent a threat? (“Infidels,” of course, was a common Muslim term of reference for European Christians.)

The early signs of Europe’s rise were therefore ignored. Secure in their assumption of superiority, Muslim diplomats never bothered either to learn European languages or to post permanent ambassadors in European countries. Few Muslims traveled in the West, and no significant accounts were left by those who did. The scientific advances of the Renaissance thus remained completely unknown. When the rise of Western power finally necessitated extended ambassadorial visits, the scientific discoveries of the West were dismissed as trivial and uninteresting. Even as Muslim armies grew accustomed to the need to adopt the latest innovations in Western weaponry, no one asked why it was infidels, rather than Muslims, who were coming up with the new devices. Nor did the rise of the West’s colonial empire in Asia, with the challenge this posed to Middle Eastern domination of world trade, raise concern.

A long, scattered, and seemingly insignificant series of Muslim military setbacks could be ignored or dismissed until 1698, when the Treaty of Carlowitz ratified the first serious territorial losses to the European infidels. After that, as the West continued to make inroads on the territories of the Ottoman Empire — most dramatically with the conquest of Egypt by Napoleon in 1798 — the question of “what went wrong” took on urgency for Muslims themselves.

The initial response was an effort to go beyond the mere adoption of

weaponry by mastering European military training and tactics. This failed to turn back the Western challenge, but the importation of European military instructors and education in European languages and science represented both an enormous blow to Muslim pride and the introduction of a critical channel of alternative cultural influence.

At first, these influences were kept at bay by the Ottoman technique of employing members of the Empire’s Greek Christian minority as translators and diplomats in dealings with the West. (The Ottoman Empire included much of what is now Greece, Turkey, the Middle East, the Balkans, Moldova, and Georgia.) The Ottoman Empire’s tolerance for its many minority communities — and the high degree of self-government granted them — were among its greatest strengths. Nowadays we’re used to seeing migrations from East to West, but in the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, immigrants flowed freely from Europe to live in the tolerant and prosperous lands of the Ottomans. Eventually, however, European ideas of personal liberty and national independence provoked revolts in the Ottoman Empire’s Christian lands. With this, it became evident that there was more to the rise of the West than military knowledge alone. The secrets of the Western state, as well as the source of its growing economic power, would have to be unraveled.

Yet here, as before, the attempt to master the techniques of the West ended in failure. The young Ottoman elites tried to cultivate a version of Western patriotism as a way of binding together the diverse populations of the empire in allegiance to the sultan. But

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the effect of Western nationalism's focus on ethnic and linguistic identity was to divide and disrupt this culturally heterogeneous empire, not to unify it. The Ottomans also tried to catch up with Europe by building factories to equip and clothe their army, but the effort failed and the factories were abandoned, perhaps because Muslims regarded such work as the demeaning province of the Christian and Jewish minorities.

The move toward modernization did create a class of professionals — journalists, lawyers, and professors — who represented a secular alternative to the doctors of the holy law. Yet, oddly, the rise of these professionals, and the newspapers, telegraphs, and other modern means of communication upon which they depended, seemed only to strengthen the autocratic powers of the center. When independence from colonial rule finally came, it brought with it no political freedom. Despite British and French attempts to create indigenous constitutional and parliamentary regimes in their own image, all of these failed after independence. If anything, Soviet domination in the Muslim regions of its empire, along with fascist models from Italy and Germany, were the only reasonably successful political imports from the West.

So Muslim attempts to adopt and adapt Western models in the military, economic, and political realms ended in failure. For Lewis, this suggests that something deeper was at work than a simple inability to import the “secrets” of Western success. The Muslim approach to the question of “what went wrong” had been to single out and imitate some distinctive characteristic of Western life — its military tech-

niques, its factories, its political structures. Yet this strategy deliberately avoided deeper cultural issues. Was there something fundamental about the way of life or thinking in Muslim lands — perhaps even something deriving from Islam itself — that made the successful adoption of Western political structures or techno-economic practices problematic? In a Muslim world long convinced of its cultural superiority — and reeling even from its limited attempts to master the secrets of the West — these were unaskable questions. (Not coincidentally, these cultural questions are of the sort that Edward Said's post-colonial theory not only prohibits but also stamps as evidence of contemptible bigotry.)

Lewis identifies three fundamental cultural barriers to the success of the Muslim world's attempts to modernize. The first is the place of women, which Lewis marks out as “probably the most profound single difference” between the Islamic world and the West. Although Lewis himself remains formally noncommittal, he quotes with apparent approval those who argue that the relegation of Muslim women to an inferior position in society “deprives the Islamic world of the talents and energies of half its people,” thereby also preventing these women from instilling in their children the mores of a free and open society.

The second cultural barrier to Muslim modernization is, according to Lewis, the absence of separation between religion and the state. This cultural difference, says Lewis, was written into the foundations of Islam and Christianity themselves. Jesus, after all, was put to death by the state, and for hundreds of years after, Christianity

developed in the face of Roman persecution. Muhammad, in contrast, achieved victory in his own lifetime, creating a state in which he himself was the supreme sovereign. Perhaps more important, centuries of Christian dominance in Europe were followed by a series of religious wars which virtually compelled Christian society to secularize the state, simply to escape from never-ending rounds of religious persecution and conflict. Muslim society fell under no such compulsion.

The third cultural barrier to modernization cited by Lewis can be characterized as resistance to the “systematic” quality of modernity. Lewis frames the point metaphorically, by saying that the Muslim world has adopted the “words” of various Western cultural innovations while nonetheless failing to master the “music.” Muslim society, for example, quickly grasped the advantages of Western timepieces, importing clocks and watches in significant numbers. Yet Muslim attitudes toward time itself changed little, as the precision, coordination, and punctuality demanded by modern life remain little valued in many parts of the Muslim world.

Lewis himself is reluctant to venture an open opinion about all this, but it seems fairly clear from his presentation that he is a “Kemalist.” Kemal Ataturk, the founder of modern Turkey, set his country on a course of radical secularization in the conviction that Islamic religion and culture are ultimately incompatible with modernity. For Lewis, the fundamental choice facing the Muslim world is between the secularist Ataturk, on the one hand, and Khomeini on the other. Lewis’s preference is easy enough to decipher.

IF THERE IS a weakness in *What Went Wrong?*, it is Lewis’s slight attention to the organization of Islamic society. Lewis, of course, is an historian, not a social scientist. Yet no attempt to make sense of the troubled encounter between modernity and the Middle East can afford to ignore the characteristic structures of Muslim social life. A brief sociological detour will therefore allow us to make sense of Lewis’s findings in a new way.

Muslim society, classically, is tribal society. Muhammad’s achievement was to meld the desert tribes of Arabia into an irresistible force for the spread of Islam. To this day, in fact, tribal identity remains politically relevant, not only in the arid territories of Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan, but even in settled Muslim states like Iraq. This is a distinctive characteristic of social life in the Middle East. Historically, it is unusual for states and tribes to coexist for long within a single territory, and rare as well for tribal peoples to found dynasties (as they have throughout Muslim history). In Europe, for example, the German, Celtic, and Gothic tribes that overran a collapsing Roman Empire quickly lost their tribal identities. The same fate awaited the great tribal dynasties that conquered ancient China. But in the Middle East, tribal identity persists.

Middle Eastern tribes are organized into what anthropologists call “segmentary lineage systems.” Simply put, segmentary lineages allow a society to operate strictly on the basis of kinship ties, without the need for a central government. If a man is attacked, for example, he’ll be defended not by

police, but by members of his lineage, who will be pitted against the lineagemates of his foe. And what if a man is attacked by one of his own lineagemates? In that case, his lineage will simply break apart (segment), and those most closely related to him will be opposed to those most closely related to his attacker. The system works through an almost infinite capacity for either segmentation or unity. Tribes can easily be split by internal disputes, yet can just as easily combine in the face of an alien enemy.

Muhammad's achievement was to unify the tribes of Arabia under the banner of Islam, in the process replicating and extending to Islam itself the tribal ethos of militance and pride. By creating a kind of tribal feud between all of Islam and the outside world of infidels, Muhammad was able to launch a successful military campaign that unified and deployed the existing tribal structure against the enemy. In later battles against the Byzantine and Sasanian empires, tribal regiments united by bonds of kinship maintained a cohesion that state-employed mercenary armies could not. The Muslims swept the field.

Lewis rightly points out that Muhammad's religious empire set a pattern for the unification of "church and state" in Islam. Yet the theocracy established by Muhammad and his immediate successors (the "rightly guided" caliphs) did not last long. Instead, there came a critical development in Muslim history, albeit one of which Lewis makes little mention in this book. In order to hold together a growing but fractious empire, the rulers of the Umayyad caliphate were forced to make a series of compromises in

pure Islamic principle. Authoritarian rule by hereditary succession began to replace the egalitarian and consultative practices of Muhammad and the rightly guided caliphs. Some rebelled against this fall from pure Islam, but most accepted the tainted necessities of power. The upshot of the change, however, was that the caliphate lost its religious quality. The state was tolerated now, but entering into its service came to be seen as unworthy of a true Muslim. "Church and state" were still united in the *ulema*, the doctors of the holy law who interpreted and applied the religious regulations that governed social life. And the dream of a righteous ruler on the model of Muhammad and his immediate successors was preserved. Yet for the rest of Muslim history, there arose a profound separation between the governing political regime and society itself. The arbitrary power of government was accepted as a necessary evil, but government itself was devalued and avoided.

The profound separation between the state and society that has long characterized Islamic civilization would never have been possible without the persistence of the tribes. The old image of the "oriental despot" is misleading. The early caliphs and the later Ottoman sultans ruled their empires lightly. Essentially, they arbitrated or mediated disputes between subject tribes, which because of their self-sustaining organization were largely left to govern themselves.

This state/society distinction, together with the tribal structure upon which it depends, explains much about the story that Bernard Lewis tells in *What Went Wrong?* To this day, Middle Eastern nations embody the state/soci-

ety distinction. The populace submits in resignation to what it views as arbitrary and barely legitimate government while organizing its own daily activities around extended tribal and kinship networks and the practice of Islam. Democracy requires a layer of “civil society” — associational networks that stand between the individual and the state. But the social “work” that is accomplished in Western society through voluntary associations of freely choosing individuals is done in Middle Eastern society by extended networks of family and kin.

Europe saw a long period of development in which local feudal interdependencies and traditional family and kinship networks were gradually eroded while their functions were taken over by the modern bureaucratic state and the growing capitalist economy. This process, which helped to precipitate modern individuals out of ancient communal structures, has never occurred in the Middle East, where extended tribal and kinship networks continue to do the fundamental work of society, even in large modern cities like Cairo.

This persistence of traditional kinship ties, and the consequent absence of “spiritually modern” individuals, helps explain not only the failure of Middle Eastern democracy, but the region’s economic problems as well. Young people and their families in modern Muslim cities still spend years accumulating the massive amounts of money needed to finance the wedding ceremonies and gift exchanges at the heart of the kinship system. These funds are managed by the kin networks themselves, and so are kept out of banks and freed from taxation. Not only do

kinship obligations draw money out of the modern economy, but they inhibit entrepreneurship and feed the endemic corruption that undermines the bureaucracy — even as they simultaneously provide the surest security against poverty and the helplessness of aging.

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systematic conception of time that characterizes individualist modernity. Americans have taken their modern conception of time to the point where collective family dinners now take second place to every individual family member’s personal schedule. In a kin-based society, on the other hand, it’s understood that a request from some relation, however distant, always trumps your personal schedule. It isn’t simply a question of valuing the emotional rewards of personal ties (although it includes that). Requests from relatives are simply how things get done in kin-based societies, whereas

precise coordination of individual schedules is how things are accomplished in ours.

THE STATE/SOCIETY dichotomy, and its basis in the Muslim kinship system, also explains one of the paradoxes at the core of *What Went Wrong?* How, Lewis asks, could the Islamic world have offered relative freedom, tolerance, and even prominence to minorities in medieval times while failing so dramatically to grant freedom to its people today? The answer is that the tolerance for minorities that characterized traditional Islamic empires was a function of the separation between the regime and the state. The Ottomans (and Muslim rulers before them) granted considerable leeway to their Christian and Jewish subjects precisely because the sultans were accustomed to serving as mere mediators between essentially self-governing Muslim tribes. But modern democracy is based on individualist values and on social structures that are alien to kin-based societies, so freedom and tolerance, in the modern sense of those words, remain elusive in the Muslim world.

Even the failure to achieve a Western-style separation between church and state can be seen as a function of the tribal and kin-based character of Muslim society. After Christianity's triumph in the West, it took the religious wars of the sixteenth century to definitively ratify such separation. Lewis rightly notes that because the Muslim world was spared such wars, a comparable separation never took root. But why did the West experience its religious wars to begin with? It was precisely the slow dissolution of

the West's feudal and kinship structures that drove the rise of individualist Protestantism, thereby provoking a series of wars between Protestants and Catholics. So the Western separation of church and state is ultimately a product of our gradual evolution toward a non-kin-based, individualist society.

The salience and persistence of veiling among Muslims is also a function of the particular characteristics of the Middle Eastern kinship system. The details need not detain us, but suffice it to say that only in the Middle East do lineages ensure their solidarity by encouraging men to marry their own lineage-mates. Ideally, Muslim men are to marry their cousins (their father's brother's daughter), and this practice of cousin marriage lends tremendous force to the drive to shelter close female relatives, since in doing so men are effectively safeguarding their own future marriage partners.

I think Lewis goes a bit far in attributing the failure of Muslim modernization to veiling. Even today, few Japanese women work after becoming mothers, yet the home-bound state of half of Japan's population has not prevented that country's economy from fully modernizing. But Japanese women are highly educated, and Lewis is correct to say that insofar as the impulse to "protect" Muslim women prevents them from gaining an education, traditional practice acts as a brake on modernization.

In broad terms, there is nothing about Muslim society's resistance to modernity that distinguishes it from other traditional societies (many of which have had their own difficulties with modernization). But Muslim society does seem to represent the extreme

of a type. Segmentary lineage systems are designed to operate as self-sustaining tribal societies, entirely independent of government. And of all possible solutions to the problem of lineage solidarity posed by marriage, Muslim cousin marriage is the most “involuted” — the one that tends, both morally and practically, to seal off families and lineages from outside influences and alliances. So the reason Muslim society seems more resistant than many others to modernization may be that its fundamental social structure is a kind of expression, on a grand scale, of a closed and self-sustaining kin-based society.

The self-sustaining tribal structure that enabled Muhammad to quickly conquer the world — and that allowed his successors to knit together a loosely governed empire with minimal effort — turns out to be uniquely problematic in relation to modernization. And from the rise of Europe to the present moment, the transformed tribal ethos of militance and pride that governs Islam has set up a powerful barrier even to recognition of this problem. In a modern setting, the result has been cultural decline, nativist reaction, and a literal clash of civilizations.

What, then, does all of this say about the “Kemalist” option apparently favored by Bernard Lewis? If the fundamental principles by which Muslim society is organized are profoundly incompatible with modernity, a total break with tradition might seem to be in order. But, of course, the very centrality of kin-based structures to Muslim society makes such a break very hard to sustain (as Turkey’s Kemalists have discovered of late). Japan presents a model in which the

traditional ethos of family solidarity becomes an engine of economic progress rather than a barrier. But Japan’s family system is considerably less closed and self-sustaining than that in the Middle East. So knowing “what went wrong” in the Middle East imparts at least as much sobriety and pessimism as wisdom and hope. Nonetheless, we have no choice but to take the measure of the underlying problem, win this war, and afterwards take up the challenge of helping to set things right.

Thinking Out Loud And Louder

By JON JEWETT

RICHARD A. POSNER. *Public Intellectuals: A Study of Decline*. HARVARD UNIVERSITY PRESS. 448 PAGES. \$29.95

EARLY IN HIS career as a legal scholar at the University of Chicago, Richard Posner began to diverge from the usual path. At the time, nearly all legal scholarship was internal to the law, consisting of the doctrinal analysis of cases and statutes using the techniques of legal reasoning. The monuments of legal

Jon Jewett practices law in Richmond, Virginia.