

Book Review

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What Went Wrong?

Bernard Lewis

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Bernard Lewis, Dodge Professor of Near Eastern Studies Emeritus at Princeton University, is a highly respected historian and author of more than two dozen books on Islam and the Near East. *What Went Wrong?* is his latest work, and it seeks an answer to the question of why Islam abruptly halted its centuries-long expansion in the modern era.

Dr. Lewis writes:

What went wrong? For a long time people in the Islamic world...have been asking this question..., provoked primarily by their encounter with the West.... For many centuries the world of Islam was in the forefront of human civilization and achievement. In the Muslims' own perception, Islam itself was coterminous with civilization.... [I]n the centuries designated in European history as medieval, the Islamic claim was not without justification.... For most medieval Muslims, Christendom meant, primarily, the Byzantine Empire, which gradually became smaller and weaker until its final disappearance with the Turkish conquest of Constantinople in 1453. The remoter lands of Europe were seen in much the same light as the remoter lands of Africa—as an outer darkness of barbarism and unbelief from which there was nothing to learn and little even to be imported, except slaves and raw materials [3-4].

During the medieval era, Islam fostered the highest civilization in the arts and sciences yet known on Earth while Western Europe was a small and unimportant appendage of the vast continent of Eurasia, an appendage populated by backward and inconsequential peoples. As the greatest political, military, economic, and religious power on Earth, Islam's global triumph seemed inevitable. The battles in Europe that the Europeans thought so decisive, such as Tours in northern France in 732, only a century after Muhammad's death, were regarded as minor setbacks by the Muslims. Rather, they saw their inexorable advance reflected in the ignominious expulsion of the Catholic Crusaders from the Levant in the 13th century, the capture of Constantinople in 1453, and their triumphant march through the Balkans toward Vienna in the early 17th century.

Had it not been for their preoccupation elsewhere (at one point their armies were operating simultaneously on four continents), the Muslims might have conquered all of Europe just as they had quickly conquered all of "Christendom" in Africa and the Near East. But in the providence of God (Lewis does not say this), the unimportant and backward peoples of the West were not absorbed by Islam, for God would raise up from among them men like Luther, Calvin, and Knox. Long accustomed to being the center and keeper of world civilization, Islam took little notice of developments in darkest Europe, including the 16th century movement known as the Reformation.

Their failure to conquer all of Europe was not due to the strength or the freedom enjoyed by Europeans, for, as Lewis points out, many in Christendom welcomed the Muslims (which

partially explains Islam's rapid expansion) as offering more freedom than the Roman ecclesiocracy of Western Europe permitted. The Orthodox Patriarch of Constantinople said, "Rather the turban of the Turk than the tiara of the Pope," and refugees from the tyranny of papal Rome flowed for centuries into Muslim lands. To quote Lewis, "The medieval Islamic world offered only limited freedom in comparison with modern ideals and even with modern practice in the more advanced democracies, but it offered vastly more freedom than any of its predecessors, its contemporaries and most of its successors" (156).

That correlation of freedom with civilization is the key to understanding why Islam was the acme of human civilization a thousand years ago, but not today: Five hundred years ago, something changed—not Islam, but the West. Lewis notes:

[A] principal cause of Western progress is the separation of church and state.... [T]he idea that [institutionalized] religion and political authority, church and state are different, and can or should be separated—is, in a profound sense, Christian. Its origins may be traced to the teachings of Christ.... The persecutions endured by the early church made it clear that a separation between the two was possible; the persecutions inflicted by later churches persuaded many Christians that such a separation was necessary [96].

Lewis, unfortunately, does not develop this idea. Nevertheless, he provides many illustrations of how the resurgence of Christianity in the 16th century, and the growth of learning (aided, ironically, by the Muslims) that prepared the way for, accompanied, and was the result of the Reformation transformed the West. Victorious against a corrupt Christendom, outstripping it in virtually every aspect of civilization, Islam's triumphant global march was halted by the sudden reappearance of Biblical Christianity in Western Europe in the 16th century, with its attendant blessings of freedom, capitalism, technology, and prosperity.

See *Matthew* 6:25-34 for the principle involved.