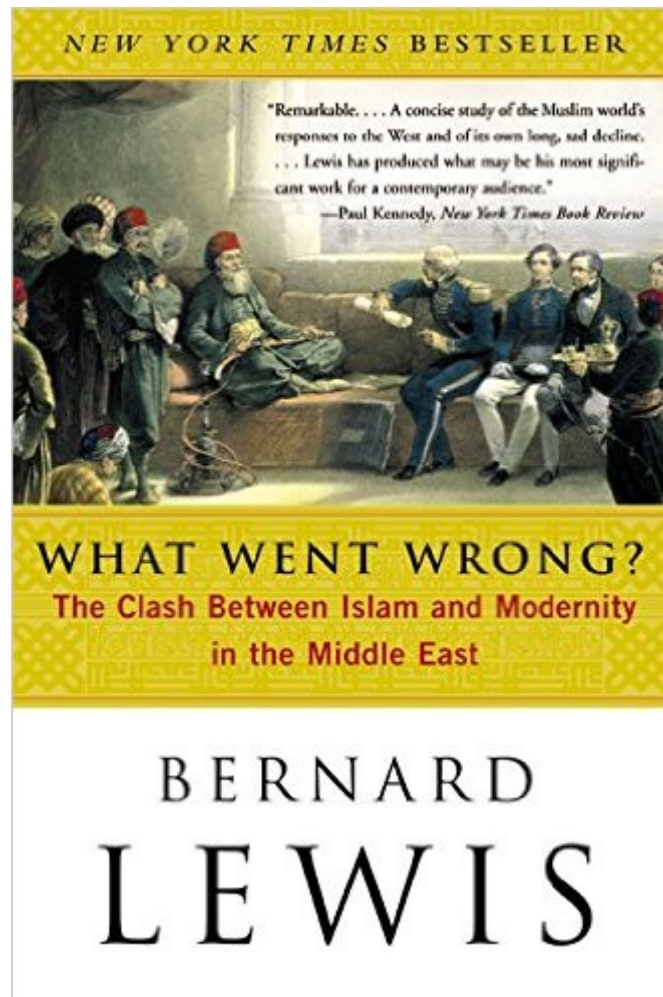


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What Went Wrong?: The Clash Between Islam And Modernity In The Middle East



Synopsis

For 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 was seen as an outer darkness of barbarism and unbelief from which there was nothing to learn or to fear. And then everything changed. The West won victory after victory, first on the battlefield and then in the marketplace. In this elegantly written volume, Bernard Lewis, a renowned authority on Islamic affairs, examines the anguished reaction of the Islamic world as it tried to make sense of how it had been overtaken, overshadowed, and dominated by the West. In a fascinating portrait of a culture in turmoil, Lewis shows how the Middle East turned its attention to understanding European weaponry, industry, government, education, and culture. He also describes how some Middle Easterners fastened blame on a series of scapegoats, while others asked not "Who did this to us?" but rather "Where did we go wrong?" With a new Afterword that addresses September 11 and its aftermath, *What Went Wrong?* is an urgent, accessible book that no one who is concerned with contemporary affairs will want to miss.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

It is difficult not to ask this question when one sees that during the Middle Ages Islamic civilisation was far more advanced than Western Christian civilization in most areas, including science. Yet today, the combined non-petrol exports of all Arab countries amount to less than those of Finland, and in Spain each year more books are translated than the Arab world has during the last 1000

years. Lewis clearly belongs to the school, which seeks to explain the fortune or misfortune of civilisations through their cultures, rather than geography or political events. There have been many studies in recent times trying to explain the backwardness of Arab countries in economical and other matters (see e.g. Arab World Competitiveness Report 2002-2002, Arab Human Development report 2002). All of these stop at secondary explanations, such as the discrimination of women, lack of freedom etc..... Lewis traces these back to their roots : the culture of Islam. Lewis paints a picture of an Ottoman world, the most powerful entity in and a proxy for the Islam world, not interested in learning much from the infidel west, except in military matters (to avert defeats). Cultural Exchanges between the West and the Ottoman world had been a one-way street for centuries, the West absorbing what was useful, and the Ottoman empire too aware of its superiority to contemplate learning from infidels. This superiority in part was due to Islam's view of Christianity as a precursor of Islam, i.e. less perfect. Still, military defeats in the 17th and 18th century forced the Ottomans to ask themselves what caused their decline and what was the solution. In the 19th century Ottoman rulers undertook a number of modernisations, which they hoped would strengthen the empire.

Certainly "What went wrong?" is a provocative question that many will find unpalatable from the start. However, it is the right question, and Lewis answers the question superbly. To deny that the current state of Islam and the Islamic world is not in dire decay is simply agenda-driven or politically-correct blindness. Oppression of women and ethnic minorities is rampant -- women are not allowed to own property, drive cars, appear in public without the veil, and instead undergo clitorectomies, honor killings, and enslavement. Similarly, one can look at Muslim treatment of other Muslims, for starters, such as Saddam's gassing of the Kurds, or the Iran-Iraq war, or the current Sunni-Shia violence in Iraq. Lewis traces the insularity of Islam after its heyday during the middle ages, when it rejected or was slow to adopt "infidel" technologies, such as modern weaponry and the printing press. At the same time, Islamic societies did import some of the poorer offerings of the Western World, such as fascism and centralization of state power (brought on by bureaucracy, record keeping, and so on). These led to the Islamofascist dictatorships -- secular strongmen bolstered by an ideology, which we see in Egypt or Syria, or fundamentalist ones such as Iran, and would be examples, such as the resurrection of the caliphate that Bin Ladin seeks. A sad byproduct of this centralization was the elimination of intermediate power holders in the Islamic societies, which acted as a constraint on the capriciousness of central authorities. The loss of the Caliphate, the "rightful" empire of Islam, has fueled resentment as Muslims confuse Westernization with Modernity,

or resent the successes of modernity, which have painfully few roots in the Islamic world.

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