Book Reviews

Bernard LEWIS, *The Muslim Discovery of Europe* (New York/London: W.W. Norton & Co., 1982), 350 pp., Index & Illustrations. Price $19.95.

The Muslims have had a long history of relations with Western European peoples. Some part of it was tumultous and violent and the other was peaceful and harmonious. It was the Muslims who held the torch of civilization when the lights went out in Europe and elsewhere in the world. And indeed it was the Muslims who passed on to Europe in the Middle Ages the coveted intellectual jewels of the ancient world. However, such transactions and ties between the Western European peoples and the Muslim world have led to two major historical developments. The first was the renaissance in Europe, which interestingly enough led to the distancing of Europe from the Muslim World. The second was the subsequent development of learning and the sciences in Europe and the rise of European power to challenge, threaten, and finally defeat Muslim power in the world.

It is indeed against this background that one can examine this book by the well-known but controversial British orientalist, Professor Bernard Lewis. His book is certainly an important contribution to the limited literature on early and medieval Muslim transactions with the European world. But in order to do justice to the work and its author, let us analyze its contents and see how and to what extent the author captures the salient points about the Muslim discovery of the West.

The book is divided into twelve chapters with a preface and a note on the source of illustrations. In the first chapter, entitled "Contact and Impact", Professor Lewis traces the rise of Islam in the Middle East and the geopolitical revisions that accompanied the Muslim ascendancy. He points out that at the time the Muslim armies made their sweep over the Mediterranean region Christianity served as the dominant worldview of the area's inhabitants. But within a very short span of time the Muslims were able not only to conquer Christian lands but also to Arabicize and Islamize the hitherto non-Arabic, Christian peoples.

Professor Lewis goes on to identify important milestones in Islamic history. Among these milestones four are of great importance. First of all, he talks about the Western perception of the Islamic threat. This was evident in the desperate attempt to check the tide of Islamism in Byzantium and later in the southern part of Western Europe, particularly in the Iberian Peninsula. He brings out an important point

at this juncture of the discussion of the Western perception of the Islamic threat, when he shows how the victory of Charles Martel is exaggerated in Western historiography while in the Islamic sources nothing is known or said about such an historical event. He states it quite accurately when he writes:

> "There can be little doubt that in disregarding Poitiers and stressing Constantinople, the Muslim historian saw events in a truer perspective than the later Western historians. The Frankish victors at Poitiers encountered little more than a band of raiders operating beyond their most distant frontiers, thousands of miles from home . . . The Greek defenders of Constantinople, in contrast, met the flowers of the Caliph's armies, launched from home bases in a major attack on the enemy capital." (p. 20)

The second point raised by Professor Lewis, in his discussion of points of contact between the two peoples and civilizations, is the Christian crusades and their effects on the two societies. He reaches the conclusion that the crusades had a stunning effect on Muslim society in the Middle East. He describes the state of affairs created by the crusaders as one in which Muslims could not do anything about these invaders and that some Muslims were even willing to collaborate with these crusaders. Here he is implicitly suggesting a historical precedent for Anwar Sadat's peace arrangement with Israel. Yet, by his own admission, he concludes that the Muslims at a later date (almost two centuries after the initial invasion) successfully ejected these invaders from the Frankish world and thereby wiped out all the residual elements of their influence.

The third point of contact which had significant consequences and implications for future relations is the tradition of trade and the network of trade ties that linked the two peoples. In his view, this was the only legacy of the crusaders which was destined to expand over the centuries. European traders continued to enter the Islamic world and their religious brethren in the Middle East served as go-betweens in this relationship. With the establishment of trade between the two areas, Muslim and Christian merchants were able to engage in long-distance trade and to establish colonies. This was however more true for the Christians than the Muslims.

The fourth point of contact and impact relates to the decline of Muslim power and the emergence of a more balanced Muslim view of the West. In discussing this aspect of the relationship, Professor Lewis examines the reconquest of Spain, the rise of European naval power in the Mediterranean and beyond, and the arrival of the age of discovery in Europe. Such developments, he argues, set a new stage for Muslim-Christian relations. At this time in history, Muslims were forced by certain historical realities to deal with the European turning of the historical tables against them. This theme occupies his attention in the

last paragraphs of his chapter on contact and impact.

After having outlined the historical development and expansion of Islam in the Middle East and beyond, Professor Lewis proceeds to the discussion of the Muslim worldview. He argues that Muslim geographers up until the 19th century knew little or nothing about other continents. He adds that Muslim geographers divided the world not in terms of languages, nations, or territorial states but rather in terms of climates. Up until the intrusion of Western ideas of nationalism, he would argue, Muslim loyalties were not confined to a territory. It always resided in the *ummah* and the Muslim leaders knew this and vied with one another for the coveted title of Amir al-Mumineen or Sultan of Darul Islam. This attitude in his view is related to the Islamic view that the world is divided into two camps—namely, *Darul Islam* and *Darul Harb*. Such a bipolarization of the world, Lewis contends, affected the nature of Christian/Muslim relations, but in time the Muslim jurists were able to work out elaborate arguments justifying links between their land and the Christian world.

In the third chapter, Professor Lewis addresses the question of language and translation. He argues that Muslims were not only selective in the translation of works, but they spent very little time on the literature of other societies and cultures outside the pale of Islam. He attributes this to Muslim reluctance to bother with other societies whose history did not link them to the Prophetic tradition. He asserts that, though Muslims drew heavily from Greek sources, their worldview imposed a limit to what they were willing to do. He sees Muslim lack of curiosity about other cultures in their unwillingness to learn and study the languages of the Frankish peoples, hence the reliance on foreigners, renegade foreign Christians and local Christian and Jewish minorities. Compared and contrasted to this Muslim attitude, Lewis tells us, was the Western willingness to go beyond the practical needs of commerce and diplomacy. This in his view contributed to the relatively significant development of Arabic studies in Western universities. Whereas in the 1600s, England could boast of a great Arabist of the caliber of William Bedwell (1561-1632), in Lewis' view, Darul Islam could not come up with a single scholar or man of letters who before the 18th century "sought to learn a Western language, still less of an attempt to produce grammars, dictionaries, or other language tools." Things changed for the better, in Lewis' view, when under the Ottoman Turks the vocabulary of the Turkish people borrowed heavily from Italian words either directly or via Greek. This development was directly related to the growing realization by Muslims that access to scientific and technological knowledge was now possible only through a European language. With this understanding, Lewis concludes, old Muslim attitudes of contempt gave way to "a new respect for the means of access to superior skills and knowledge. . ."

In his fourth chapter Professor Lewis identifies the media of communication between the two peoples and the types of people serving as intermediaries. He points to the fact that Muslims in the earlier periods discouraged their fellow believers from journeying into the lands of the Christian unbelievers. Added to this also was the pervasive hostility of Christian rulers and subjects to Muslims. Lewis identifies diplomats as the two main go-betweens for the two societies and civilizations. He came to the conclusion that the Muslim merchants failed to have impact in Europe not only because Muslims were at a disadvantage vis-a-vis the Christian European merchants operating in the Middle East and enjoying the services of fellow Christians within Darul Islam, but because Christian authorities denied them equal opportunities. He identifies the institution of the Quarantine as a major obstacle to Muslim commercial penetration and success in Europe. This attitude towards the Muslim world was also evident in the diplomatic relations between the two societies.

To Professor Lewis, the development of the Quarantine erected a formidable barrier against any closer relations between Darul Islam and Christiandom, for it subjected Muslim diplomats to great indignities and thereby made a diplomatic tour of duty in Europe quite unpalatable to Muslim dignitaries. This, in his opinion, was also responsible for the Muslim tradition of delegating a renegade or a Christian/Jewish emissary to represent their interest. Because of Muslim uncertainty about local Christian loyalties, the past Muslim rulers in the Middle East preferred Jews over Christians.

In his discussion of Muslim scholarship on the West, he finds that Muslim scholars had their first knowledge of the European Mediterranean area through the Greco-Roman sources. Such sources of information, in his view, were not surpassed in the subsequent centuries, because the Muslims failed either to go into Europe and update their data or to draw upon European sources. He laments the fact that even an original thinker such as Ibn Khaldun did not have a balanced and accurate view of Europe. This state of affairs he attributed to the persistence in Muslim attitude not to learn anything from the Christians. It was because of these attitudes that one learns virtually nothing from the diplomatic reports of Muslim ambassadors stationed in Europe. This state of affairs, according to Lewis, changed only in the nineteenth century.

Discussing the role of religion in Muslim-Christian relations over the centuries, Professor Lewis tells us that Muslims have up until recently defined themselves in religious terms. This attitude manifested itself in many forms in Muslim society. In fact, according to him, this Muslim attitude resulted in the lack of interest in European Christianity. From the available sources he finds that the Muslim diplomats and scholars who wrote about Europeans continued to talk about Christianity without bothering to go into details and to check their facts. As a result of this

negligence, they persistently reported to their readers outdated facts about the Christian world. Muslims apparently did not see Christianity as a threat and because of this saw no reason to study or understand it. Professor Lewis, however, states that the French Revolution did cause alarm in certain circles in the Ottoman Empire, and the French invasion of Egypt "induced the Ottoman Empire to venture in what would nowadays be called psychological warfare." (p. 181).

Following his discussion of the role of religion in the relationship between the two civilizations, Professor Lewis devotes five chapters to economic, scientific/technological, social and cultural dimensions of the relationship. He finds that in the economic realm, the Muslim merchants in Europe were not as effective and as numerous as their Christian counterparts in Darul Islam. He identifies the conditions and circumstances that worked against Muslim commerce in Europe, and points to the factors responsible for Christian economic and commercial gains in the post medieval periods.

In looking at the writings of Muslim visitors to Europe and their views of European life and culture, he finds that with a very few exceptions, almost all Muslim visitors compared their society favorably vis-a-vis Christian European society. Things changed only in the nineteenth century when some of these observers began to appreciate some characteristics and qualities of western women. But a common thread that ran through much of these early Muslim writings on European social life was the feeling that European women were very free and independent.

In concluding this review, I would say that, though Bernard Lewis is generally regarded in the Muslim world as a controversial distorter of Muslim historiography and an author sympathetic to Israel, the book reviewed here stands to command attention in certain academic circles. It is a thoroughly researched work which fills a gap in the field of Muslim-Christian relationships. His findings are likely to serve as catalysts to other enterprising scholars interested in uncovering all available data on such a long-lasting relationship. There may be counter-arguments to it. It could also be a talking point for Muslims and Christians in the remaining quarter of the twentieth century. Regardless of how scholars and laymen may view this product of Professor Lewis' intellectual labors, the fact remains that the growing ties between Muslims and Christians in the modern period make it imperative to reconsider his evidence and to begin to look at their relations with the West in an objective historical perspective. This would do much good for Muslims and in the end benefit all humanity. Last but not least, if Lewis' intentions were to give a historical answer to Edward Said's *Orientalism*, then the debate is just beginning.

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