

In Depth: A Conversation with Bernard Lewis as seen on C-Span 2, on 6 April 2003

A Review by Bassam M. Madany

Bernard Lewis, Professor of Near Eastern Studies, Emeritus, at Princeton University is very busy nowadays, lecturing on Islam and the Middle East. He continues to produce new books on these subjects, several years after his retirement. On April 6, 2003, he was interviewed for three hours on C-Span 2, a cable channel that deals with book reviews on weekends. Having been alerted about this event, I recorded the interview for further study and analysis.

I got acquainted with the writings of this British scholar when I taught a semester course on the **History of the Middle East**, at Trinity Christian College, in Palos Heights, a suburb of Chicago. When I first undertook this challenge in the 1970s, I used for a couple of years, a textbook prepared by a professor from one of our state universities. Having myself studied this subject years ago, when I was living in the Middle East I was disappointed with this textbook as it had omitted the theological motifs that are basic to the understanding of Islam. Eventually, I found a good source for my teaching when I came across Bernard Lewis' "**The Arabs in History**." I was instantly attracted to his comprehensive approach in the study of the history of the Middle East since the rise of Islam.

Who is Bernard Lewis?

Bernard Lewis was born in the United Kingdom, and is of the Jewish faith. He took his undergraduate and graduate studies at the University of London, in the School of Oriental and African Studies. He specialized in the History of Islam. During World War II, he served in the British Army. After the war, he returned to the University of London where he taught Middle Eastern History. He remained there until 1974. He came to teach at Princeton University in the fall of that year, and retired in 1986.

Here is a list of some of his works.

The Arabs in History, London 1950; **The Emergence of Modern Turkey**, London and New York 1961; **The Assassins**, London 1967; **The Muslim Discovery of Europe**, New York 1982; **The Political Language of Islam**, Chicago 1988; **Race and Slavery in the Middle East: an Historical Enquiry**, New York 1990; **Islam and the West**, New York, 1993; **Islam in History**, 2nd edition, Chicago, 1993; **The Shaping of the Modern Middle East**, New York, 1994; **Cultures in Conflict**, New York, 1994; **The Middle East: A Brief History of the Last 2,000 Years**, New York, 1995; **The Future of the Middle East**, London, 1997; **The Multiple Identities of the Middle East**, London, 1998; **A Middle East Mosaic: Fragments of life, letters and history**, New York, 2000; **What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response**, New York, 2002

In Depth: A Conversation with Bernard Lewis

On Sunday, 6 April 2003, this conversation took place at the home of Bernard Lewis in Princeton, New Jersey. A C-Span representative, with his television crew, began the interview with the retired professor giving a tour of his house. Throughout the interview, professor Lewis remained seated in his study, with hundreds of books in various languages stacked on the shelves around him. He answered questions that were put to him by the interviewer, and from the audience, calling in from various parts of the USA. The questions did not follow in any specific order. Quite a few viewers had on their mind the war in Iraq. Sometimes, there were multiple questions, making it rather difficult for Bernard Lewis to remember them, and to properly to deal with each one.

One of the first questions had to do with the number of books produced by Lewis. The answer was, *"more than 20 books, over the years. The most recent and newly published one was **"The Crisis of Islam."**"*

Another question went like this: *"It is often said that Muslims are different, and not capable of running an open society."* Professor Lewis' answer was quick, *"Such a statement is disrespectful of the Arab past, and totally false. It is true that in the middle of the 20th century, strong influences swept from the West into the Arab world. For example, after the fall of France in 1940, Vichy France remained in control of Syria and Lebanon. This allowed the Germans to bring their Nazi propaganda into the area. That impacted Iraq. An Iraqi leader, Rashid Ali, led a coup against King Faisal. Eventually the coup failed, and the king returned to his throne. The Ba'ath Party was born at that time, and was influenced by Nazi ideology. Later on, after the fall of Germany in 1945, Ba'athists adopted communist models for gaining and maintaining total power."*

The next question followed: *"What went wrong with the Arab Muslim world?"* This was the answer: *"After having been for 1000 years in the vanguard of world civilization, Muslims began to fall behind. During the last 300 years, the West was pulling ahead in all areas, in commerce, industry, the battlefield, and in the classroom."*

Professor Lewis reminded the audience that unlike people in the West, Arabs on the whole, are very conscious of their history and past glory. *"Muslims are historically aware. As an example, when Saddam Husein invaded Iran in 1980, he called the Iraqi intrusion into Iran 'the Second Qadisiyya' The first Qadisiyya happens to be the name of the battle that took place in the 7th century, when the Arab forces overran Persia."* He continued, *"The defeat of the Ottoman Turkish Empire in 1918 was a low point in Islamic history. The new leader of Turkey, Mustapha Kemal, known also as Ataturk, abolished the caliphate in 1924, and made Turkey a secular state."*

The next question dealt with Islam and its tolerance of other beliefs. The answer was *"Islam tolerates people of other beliefs subject to certain conditions. This tolerance is prescribed by the shari'a law. Intolerance in Islam was learned from Europe."*

Many of the listeners were eager to learn about the concept of jihad in Islam, a word that has become part of the vocabulary of Western languages. *"What is the meaning of Jihad*

in Islam?" The response was forthright: "In normal usage, jihad has a military connotation. Books on Islamic law discussed legal ways of conducting jihad, since Divine Law regulates it. Jihad outlaws terrorism."

Now if Islam, in its early days, was a tolerant faith, one questioner asked, *"Was tolerance practiced by Muslims for two centuries only?"* Professor Lewis responded, *"For more than two centuries. The intolerance of Islam nowadays is due to the influence of Wahhabism. It is a pernicious sect that arose in central Arabia. Most of the Wahhabi jihad was conducted against other Muslims."*

Since the **In-Depth Conversation with Bernard Lewis** took place during the war to liberate Iraq, the next question was *"Can we expect democratic institutions to emerge after the war in Iraq?"* Bernard Lewis right away said, *"Tyranny is not indigenous in Islam. Tyranny is a byproduct of modernization. It is an unintended consequence of modernization. Modernization made it possible to have authoritarian and tyrannical rule in many parts of the Middle East."* Here, professor Lewis made another reference to the Ba'athist ideology that was first influenced by Nazism, and later on by Communism. The ideology of the Ba'ath Party came into existence in the 1930s, and took over, both Syria and Iraq, around forty years later. He went on explaining how modernization allowed the Ba'athists to take total control of the societies in both Syria and Iraq. *"Modernization gave the central government an enormous control over all aspects of life and society. Also, it limited the forces of the gentry and the 'ulema that had been at work within Muslim societies. These limiting forces disappeared due to modernization. In classical Islam, government was both contractual and consensual. This legacy was destroyed by the modern state. Because old standards had ceased to be effective due to modernization, shabby tyrannies like Iraq emerged. From the West, the new leaders got the apparatus to be used in repression."*

Questions coming from an audience spread all over America became somewhat repetitious, but still, they were quite relevant. Since 9/11, Americans are eager to learn more about Islam and its impact on the rest of the world. So, back we go to the subject of tolerance in Islam. This was the professor's answer, to the question, *"Do you mean there is tolerance in Islam?"*

"Yes, Islam was far more tolerant than the Christian world. Islam tolerated the People of the Book, i.e., Jews and Christians. That precluded the polytheistic peoples, the pagans."
"But what about the Arabic Qur'an and its translations? And how are we to understand, the verse that tells Muslims "to strike terror in God's enemies?"

In answering this question, Bernard Lewis first dealt with the Holy Book of Islam. He explained that, *"according to Islam, the Arabic Qur'an is the Word of God, it is immutable, and uncreated. As to that verse, the Arabic text does not imply terrorism. It was dealing with a particular situation in the life of Muhammad."*

Back to the future of Iraq, *"Do we expect a renewed tyranny to return to that country?"*
The answer: *"The best-case scenario would be the opposite of tyranny. What we did in Germany and Japan after World War II could happen in Iraq. Iraqi elements would emerge and create their own free society. This is a possibility; it will be slow and gradual."*

Q. *"What about Muhammad and his treatment of the Jews?"*

A. *"After Muhammad's success in getting the allegiance of Arabia, it resulted in the destruction of one Jewish tribe, and the expulsion of another tribe."*

Q. *"Is the stagnation of the Middle East due to the influence of Islam?"*

A. *"No. This stagnation is due to the failure of the Middle Eastern countries to integrate into global economy. One shocking fact is that, excepting for oil exports; all of Arab world exports are less than Finland's exports!"*

Q. *"What about the Palestinian question?"*

A. *"The Palestinian problem has persisted due to the United Nations. Take for example India. The British partitioned India in 1947, creating a Muslim state, Pakistan, and a Hindu majority state, India. While there were serious problems immediately after the partition, yet the two countries have more or less settled down, with no pending refugee problem."*

"However, Palestine, which is much smaller than India, and after the United Nations partition plan was rejected by the Arabs, produced around 750,000 refugees in 1948. The UN still keeps most of these refugees in camps in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. The UN was not involved in the partition plan of India, but it was involved in the partition plan of Palestine."

Q. Another question dealt with professor Edward Said of Columbia University in New York who had made some very critical comments about the works of Bernard Lewis. One could not help but notice the pain on the professor's face as he hesitated to say anything about the outrageous views of Said regarding Orientalists in general, and Bernard Lewis in particular.

A. *"Said's comments were awful. What he said was a total misrepresentation of what I said. His attitude precludes any basis for discussion."*

Q. *"Does the word Islam mean peace?"*

A. *"No, Islam does not mean peace. Islam means surrender."*

Q. *"What about the teachings of the Qur'an and the Bible about Jerusalem?"*

A. *"According to the Qur'an, the revelations that preceded Muhammad were authentic, but eventually they were corrupted. So, a new revelation was necessary. The Qur'an does not accord Jerusalem a special place in Islam. In post-Qur'anic times, Jerusalem came to be considered a holy city in Islam. Now, it is considered the third holy city in Islam."*

Q. *"How did Islam spread?"*

A. *"Islam is an expansionist religion like Christianity. It is unlike the other major world religions. But Islam's expansion was different from that of Christianity. Islam does not have a teaching like Christianity's 'turning the other cheek,' or 'love thy neighbor as thyself.' Christianity expansion was through the word."*

"But Islam is a tolerant religion, more tolerant than Christianity. As the Qur'an says, 'there is no compulsion in religion.' la ikraha fi'deen'." Here Lewis forgot to quote another Qur'anic statement: "The acceptable religion with God is Islam. Inna dina 'indal-laahi al-Islamu" BMM

Professor Lewis went on explaining, *"Christians during the era of classical Islam, enjoyed internal autonomy. Yes, they were second-class citizens, but that is better than their present situation."*

Q. *"What about the vilification of Israel in the Arab media?"*

A. *"Due to the impact of the Nazi propaganda in the 1930s, European-style anti-Semitism entered the Middle East. This is found in the textbooks used in the schools, on television programs, and the newspapers."*

Q. *"What are the choices that face the Arab world today?"*

A. *"The Arabs can either become part of the modern civilization or go against it."*

Q. *"What book do you recommend on Islam?"*

A. *"Hamilton Gibb's 'Muhammadanism.'"*

Q. *"What is the perception of the Muslims vis-à-vis the West?"*

A. *"Due to the ubiquity of modern means of communication, Muslims feel that the West is becoming very dominant."*

Q. *"What is the Muslim's attitude toward the separation of Religion from the State?"*

A. *"Muslims regard the attempt to separate Religion from the State as a pernicious doctrine. The French first brought the idea when they invaded Egypt in 1798. Nowadays, Iran has established a 'Church' state with a Pope, cardinals, etc."*

Q. *"Who are the Baha'is, and why are they being persecuted in Iran?"*

A. *"Bahaim is a post-Islamic faith. According to orthodox Islam, Muhammad was the last, or the 'seal' of the prophets. Anyone who claims to be a prophet after Muhammad is an imposter, and therefore, must be condemned, as well as his followers. So, the Iranian revolution has acted in accordance with the classical teachings of Islam regarding innovators like Baha'allah, the founder of the Baha'i faith in the 19th century."*

"In Pakistan, the followers of the Ahmadiyya movement are not considered authentic Muslims."

Q. *"Did Islam spread by conquests?"*

A. *"Yes, but according to Muslims, they did not force others to Islamize. The conquests [Futuh] simply removed obstacles so that others may be converted to Islam. Those who embraced Islam chose to do so."*

Q. *"What are the reasons for the backwardness of Islam?"*

A. *"When Muslims encountered Europeans in the modern times, they realized, as one Turkish observer put, 'the reason for our backwardness is the way we treat women.' The creator of modern Turkey, Ataturk campaigned for the freedom and equality of women."*

Notice: The above is, as close to what Professor Lewis said, but is not be considered a verbatim account of the interview.

Analysis and Comments

When we attempt to understand other cultures, quite often we consciously or unconsciously see them through the prism of our worldview. In other words, we try to understand others by comparing them with what we already know, meaning our ways of thinking and outlook on life. But such a method does not produce a genuine understanding of the other; this is especially the case, when we seek to understand Islam. Since mere comparisons do not yield an objective or factual knowledge of this world religion. It would be much more helpful to seek to understand Islam, from the Muslim point of view.

This is the method that Bernard Lewis has adopted. For example, in one of his earliest works, **The Arabs in History**, Bernard Lewis cautions us against using Western

categories of thought when we undertake the task of studying the history of the Arabs, and of Islam.

"The European writer on Islamic history labours under a special disability. Writing in a Western language, he necessarily uses Western terms. But these terms are based on Western categories of thought and analysis, themselves deriving in the main from Western history. Their application to the conditions of another society formed by different influences and living in different ways of life can at best be an analogy and may be dangerously misleading. To take an example: such pairs of words as Church and State, spiritual and temporal, ecclesiastical and lay, had no real equivalents in Arabic until modern times, when they were created to translate modern ideas; for the dichotomy which they express was unknown to mediaeval Muslim society and unarticulated in the mediaeval Muslim mind. The community of Islam was Church and State in one, with the two indistinguishably interwoven; its titular head, the Caliph, was at once a secular and religious chief." Pp. 19,20

Professor Lewis ended his Introduction with these words:

"Such words as 'religion', 'state', 'sovereignty', 'democracy', mean very different things in Islamic context and indeed varying meanings from one part of Europe to another. The use of such words, however, is inevitable in writing in English and for that matter in writing in the modern languages of the Orient, influenced for close on a century by Western modes of thought and classification. In the following pages they are to be understood at all times in their Islamic context and should not be taken as implying any greater degree of resemblance to corresponding Western institutions than is specifically stated." P. 20

One may describe this approach in the study of the history of Islam as both sympathetic and objective. Such qualities were extremely needed in 1950 when this book was first published, as most of the Arab and Muslim countries had recently achieved their independence from Western colonialism. Now, more than half a century later, Western students of that history must read and reflect on them since most of our international challenges and conflicts take place in the Household of Islam.

It was more than a sympathetic historiography of Bernard Lewis that drew me to his books. Islam, being a theistic religion requires a theological approach. This is quite evident in "**The Muslim Discovery of Europe**," that appeared in 1982. In his last chapter, "*Conclusion*," he explains why Islam failed to take Europe seriously as it was emerging from the Middle Ages, and was about to play a major role on the world scene.

"It may well seem strange that classical Islamic civilization which, in its earlier days, was so much affected by Greek and Asian influences should so decisively have rejected the West. But a possible explanation may be suggested. While Islam was expanding and receptive, western Europe had little or nothing to offer but flattered Muslim pride with the spectacle of a culture that was visibly and palpably inferior. What is more, the very fact that it was Christian discredited it in advance. The Muslim doctrine of successive

revelations culminating in the final mission of Muhammad led the Muslim to reject Christianity as an earlier and imperfect form of something which he, himself, possessed in its final, perfect form, and to discount Christian thought and Christian civilization accordingly. After the initial impact of eastern Christianity on Islam in its earliest period, Christian influences, even from the high civilization of Byzantium, were reduced to a minimum. Later, by the time that the advance of Christendom and the retreat of Islam had created a new relationship, Islam was crystallized in its ways of thought and behavior and had become impervious to external stimuli, especially those coming from the millennial adversary in the West." P. 300

Having illustrated the points I most admire in the writings of Bernard Lewis on the history of Islam and the Middle East, I must admit that both his books and the Interview of 6 April 2003, left me disappointed with respect to the so-called tolerance of Islam. When asked about this topic, his answer was *"Islam tolerates people of other beliefs subject to certain conditions. This tolerance is prescribed by the shari'a law. Intolerance in Islam was learned from Europe."*

The tolerance that professor Lewis mentioned was vis-à-vis the **People of the Book**, i.e., Jews and Christians. When they surrendered to the invading Islamic armies, they were given the status of "*dhimmis*," an Arabic word that meant, "the Protected Ones." But this so-called "*protection*" while allowing them to maintain their faith, deprived them of the rights they had enjoyed prior to their conquest. Actually many restrictions were placed on *dhimmis*. They could no longer propagate their faith, they had to pay the *Jizya tax*, and when their houses of worship needed repair, it was difficult to get a permit for such repairs. Some of their churches were confiscated, such as the Church of Saint John the Baptist in Damascus, Syria. It became the Umayyad Mosque.

It is a pity, therefore, that in spite of his erudition and knowledge of several Islamic languages, Bernard Lewis failed to consult the writings of a fellow Jewish scholar, Bat Ye'or, whose works on the subject of "*Dhimmi*" and "*Dhimmitude*" are well known both in their original French, and in their English translations.

I would like to quote from one of her books, "**The Dhimmi**," about the true nature of the *Dhimmi* status.

It will be easily seen that the "tolerance" that the Princeton professor mentioned was not that magnanimous an institution. In her Introduction to the book, Bat Ye'or wrote:

*"Its aim is much more modest. It has grown out of an independent reflection on the relationship between conqueror and conquered, established as a result of a special code of warfare, the jihad, for in the "drama" acted out by humanity on the stage of history, it is clear that the dhimmi peoples bore the role of victim, vanquished by force; and indeed, it is after a war, a jihad, and after a defeat, that a nation becomes a dhimmi people. "Tolerated" in its homeland, from which it has been dispossessed, this people lives thereafter as if it were merely suspended in time, throughout history. For the pragmatic political factor that decides the fate of a dhimmi people is essentially a territorial dispossession." **

Professor Jacques Ellul, of the University of Bordeaux in France, having taken a special interest in the history of the peoples conquered by Islam, made these comments in the Preface of "**The Dhimmi**."

*"It is within this context that Bat Ye'or's book **The Dhimmi** should be placed: and it is an exemplary contribution to this crucial discussion that concerns us all. Here I shall neither give an account of the book nor praise its merits, but shall simply indicate its importance. The dhimmi is someone who lives in a Muslim society without being a Muslim (Jews, Christians, and occasionally "animists"). He has a particular social, political, and economic status, and it is essential for us to know how this "refractory" person has been treated. But first of all, one ought to realize the dimensions of this subject: it is much more than the study of one "social condition" among others. The reader will see that in many ways the dhimmi was comparable to the European serf of the Middle Ages. The condition of serfdom, however, was the result of certain historical changes such as the transformation of slavery, the end of the State, the emergence of the feudal system, and the like, and thus, when these historical conditions altered, the situation of the serf also evolved until his status finally disappeared. The same, however, does not apply to the dhimmi: his status was not the product of historical accident but was that which ought to be from the religious point of view, and according to the Muslim conception of the world. In other words, it was the expression of the absolute, unchanging, theologically grounded Muslim conception of the relationship between Islam and non-Islam. It is not a historical accident of retrospective interest, but a necessary condition of existence. Consequently, it is both a subject for historical research (involving an examination of the historical sources and a study of their application in the past) and a contemporary subject, most topical in relation to the present-day expansion of Islam. Bat Ye'or's book ought to be read as a work of current interest. One must know as exactly as possible what the Muslims did with these unconverted peoples, because that is what they will do in the future (and are doing right now). It is possible that my opinion on this question will not entirely convince the reader." **

Another point of history that Bernard Lewis failed to remember or to mention is the **Devshirme**, the practice of the Ottoman Turkish conquerors in Eastern Europe whereby they forcibly took young Christian boys from their parents and made them adopt Islam. As they grew up, they were formed into an elite army corps known as the *Janissary*. These soldiers participated in the further Ottoman conquests in Central and Eastern Europe.

My reference to Bat Ye'or's works on *Dhimmitude*, and the comments made by the late French Protestant scholar Jacques Ellul, are not meant to detract from the value of Bernard Lewis's writings. I still recommend them highly. However, it is a matter of great importance at this juncture in global history that we do not neglect to mention an aspect of Islamic history that has seldom received proper attention. I am not indulging in what the prevailing political correctness advocates call "*Islamophobia*," but I must bear testimony to the truth. My own people, the Eastern Christians, lived for centuries as *Dhimmis*, and their sufferings must not be forgotten. Now that millions of Muslims have moved to Western lands, and enjoy freedoms that they lacked in their homelands, it is the

duty of Western Christians to testify about the plight of their fellow believers in Muslim lands. And should the "*shari'ah law*" be re-enacted in parts of the Muslim world where Christians live, the return to *Dhimmitude* would inexorably follow. This must not be allowed nor tolerated in the twenty-first century.

*Note: The quotations above are taken from Bat Ye'or's "**The Dhimmi**," the complete text is available on www.dhimmi.org