

[The Blind Spots of Bernard Lewis](#)

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Almost every weekend, I watch cable channel C-Span2's program: **Book TV**. Well-known authors introduce their latest works on a variety of subjects, including current issues. On Saturday, 10 March, 2007, I watched the "**2007 AEI Irving Kristol Award Lecture**". This year, its recipient was Bernard Lewis. This award is presented annually by the American Enterprise Institute at its annual dinner. In his lecture, Bernard Lewis "outlined the historical relationship between the west and the Middle East and recent trends in European attitudes towards Muslims."

I was very eager to hear and record the lecture, since Bernard Lewis has been, through his books and articles, my teacher for a very long time. Mr. Lewis was introduced by Reuel Marc Gerecht, a resident fellow of the AEI, and one of his great admirers. I appreciated much of what Mr. Lewis said. And yet, as in some previous occasions, I was very, very disappointed by certain serious flaws that cling to his historiography.

In all fairness to Bernard Lewis, I would like to highlight some of his great insights regarding the history of Islam, before referring to what I would like to call his blind spots.

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, when 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

What I appreciate in Bernard Lewis

As we attempt to understand other cultures, quite often we see them, consciously or unconsciously, through the prism of our own worldview. In other words, we seek to understand others by comparing them with what we already know; with our ways of thinking and our outlook on life. But such a method does not produce a genuine understanding of the other; this is especially the case, in our attempt to understand Islam.

Since mere comparisons do not yield an objective or factual knowledge of this complex religion, it would be more helpful to seek to understand Islam, from within 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 Islam and the Middle East will do well in heeding these words of Bernard Lewis.

It was more than this aspect of the historiography of Bernard Lewis that drew me to his books. Islam, being a theistic religion that proclaims the God of creation and providence, requires a theological approach. This is quite evident in **“The Muslim Discovery of Europe,”** that appeared in 1982. In the opinion of Mr. Gerecht who introduced Bernard Lewis at the **“Irving Kristol Award Lecture,”** this book is one of the most important works that appeared in the 20th century. In the last chapter, **“Conclusion,”** Mr. Lewis

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 [Emphasis is mine, J.T.]*

Having illustrated the points that I most appreciate in the writings of Bernard Lewis on the history of Islam and the Middle East, I must admit that several of his books and the March 2007 lecture, left me very disappointed. He continues to claim that Islam has been a tolerant religion, especially in its attitude to the **People of the Book**, i.e. Jews and Christians.

It is true that when Jews and Christians surrendered to the invading Islamic armies, they were given the status of *“dhimmis,”* an Arabic word that means, *“Protected Ones.”* But this so-called *“protection”* while allowing them to maintain their faith, deprived them of most of the rights they had enjoyed prior to their conquest. Actually, severe 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 extremely 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 ignored the ignominious treatment of Jews and Christians within Daru’l Islam. One wonders why he continues ignoring the writings of a fellow Jewish scholar, **Bat Ye’or**, whose works on the subject of *“Dhimmis”* 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 in his lecture, was not that magnanimous as 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.” * [Emphasis is mine, J.T.]

The late 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.” * [Emphasis is mine, J.T.]*

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. It is not easy to calculate the number of Christian boys from the Balkans who were taken away from their families over the several centuries that this institution lasted.

But one can imagine the deep hurts that were left in the societies of the countries affected by this evil system. It is not too much to speculate that the collective memory of the people of Eastern and Central Europe regarding the years of Ottoman oppression must have played a role in the serious troubles that erupted between Serbians and Bosnians in the aftermath of the dissolution of the Yugoslav Federation.

So, I cannot help asking myself: what motivates Bernard Lewis, now in his nineties, to persist in his silence about the **Devshirme**?

Another unexplainable blind spot in the historiography of our great Middle East scholar is his persistence in minimizing the terrible events that took place before and during WWI within the Turkish heartland, I am referring to what is known as the Armenian Genocide. For those readers who would like to learn more about this tragedy, I would refer them to my article, "**The Armenian Genocide: Eighty Years Later**" that appeared on 22 October, 2006: [FFI](#)

It is with great sorrow that I write these critical words about Bernard Lewis. But for a historian who enjoys such an international reputation, as the dean of Middle Eastern and Islamic scholars, and an authority whose wisdom is sought by various governmental agencies, to remain silent on subjects of great importance, is unexplainable. I must confess that I have resisted entitling my article simply "**J'accuse**,"** and settled on a gentler one: "**The Blind Spots of Bernard Lewis**."

*Note: The quotations are taken from Bat Ye'or's book, "**The Dhimmi**." The complete text is available on [dhimmi.org](#)

** "**J'accuse**" i.e. I accuse. I have borrowed "**J'Accuse**" from the text of a letter written by the French author, Emile Zola on January 13, 1898, to Felix Faure, the President of France. It had to do with "**L'Affaire Dreyfus**." In the aftermath of the Prussian-French war of 1870 which cost France the loss of Alsace and Lorraine, the French High Command charged Captain Alfred Dreyfus with treason. They claimed he had given military secrets to the Prussians that enabled them to win the war. Captain Dreyfus was court marshaled in 1894, stripped of his rank, and sent to Devil's Island, near French Guyana, in South America.

Actually, Alfred Dreyfus was innocent; but was framed by officers in the French Army because of his Jewish faith. Emile Zola took up his cause, and in his letter to the French President, he repeated the word "**J'Accuse**" nine times. Alfred Dreyfus was rehabilitated in 1899, rising eventually to the rank of colonel.