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Islam: Bernard Lewis' Lie, Abdessalam Yassine's Truth

by David Cherry

What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response

by Bernard Lewis

New York: Oxford University Press, 2002

180 pages, hardbound, \$23

Winning the Modern World for Islam

by Abdessalam Yassine

Iowa City, Iowa: Justice and Spirituality

Publishing, 2000

174 pages, paperbound, \$14.99

Professor Emeritus Bernard Lewis, of Princeton University, lies about Islam in the same way that Henry Kissinger once lied about Lyndon LaRouche. Sir Henry used to say, "LaRouche does not exist!" This was a statement of policy and marching orders all rolled into one. It was precisely because LaRouche did not exist, that Kissinger personally had to fly to Paris in 1975 to derail LaRouche's initiative for development and peace among the peoples of the Middle East.

For Lewis, the equivalent is that "Only the Islam of the Taliban exists." Lewis tells readers and audiences that they should not be fooled by Iranian President Mohammad Khatami and his call for a dialogue of civilizations, for Khatami is "just like the rest," and is only dissembling. Thus, Khatami "does not exist"; indeed, for Lewis, everything that is good

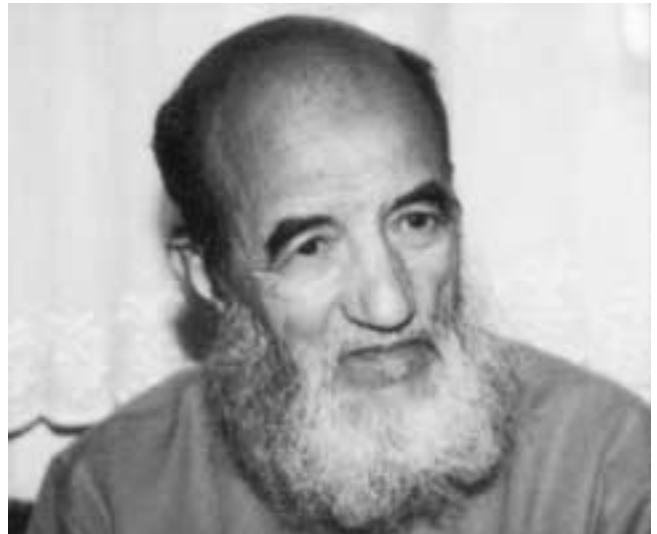
and true about Islam cannot be allowed to exist, for the simple reason that he needs to cultivate an enemy image of Islam to promote his Clash of Civilizations project.

Lewis' trick is to make the lie credible by preserving the appearance of academic objectivity, never showing animosity.

Lewis' new socio-cultural history, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response*—a *New York Times* bestseller—provides one or two examples of his Big Lie. He writes of the difference between Westernization and modernization of Islam:

The emancipation of women, more than any other single issue, is the touchstone of difference between modernization and Westernization. Even the most extreme and most anti-Western fundamentalists nowadays accept the need to modernize and indeed to make the fullest use of modern technology, especially the technologies of warfare and propaganda. This is seen as modernization, and though the methods and even the artifacts come from the West, it is accepted as necessary and even as useful. The emancipation of women is Westernization; both for traditional conservatives and radical fundamentalists it is neither necessary nor useful but noxious, a betrayal of Islamic values.

This is lying by clever omission. According to Lewis, there are Westernizing leaders of—for example—Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, and Turkey, on the one hand; and then there are the "traditional conservatives" and the "radical fundamentalists," on the other. But there are no Muslim leaders and



Clash of Civilizations “inventor” Bernard Lewis (left) tries to say, in his new book, that Islamic humanists such as Moroccan philosopher and opposition leader Abdessalam Yassine (right) do not exist in the Islamic nations.

movements that use knowledge and judgment (*ijtihad*) to revive the right interpretation of the Koran in the context of modern challenges, and who recognize the necessity to develop the powers of judgment of every individual. For Lewis, therefore, there can be no Khatami, no Abdessalam Yassine of Morocco, no Rashid Ghannoushi of Tunisia, and no Hasan al-Turabi of Sudan.

Yassine on Women

In *Winning the Modern World for Islam*, Abdessalam Yassine writes that the role of the Muslim woman is “to be the pivot of family well-being,” but the character of the woman and of the family itself must change:

This “woman at the hearth” is the opposite of the insignificant and oppressed creature that one sees these days in our societies, stunted by illiteracy and weighted down by unjust macho traditions. *Islam* and its Law and its model for woman have already delivered the Arab woman—during the time of the Prophet—from the abyss of injustice where she suffered martyrdom.

It is urgent to deliver the contemporary Muslim woman, fallen again, perhaps even lower than her pre-Islamic sister, and to draw her up from the abyss of injustice and negligence where she languishes. . . .

Under Islamic Law, Muslim women have the right—a right that backward traditions have confiscated from them—to choose their husbands, not to accept a suitor without conditions (including the condition of not marrying a second woman), to ask for divorce, to

work and assume social and professional responsibilities, and to dispose freely and independently of their income.

A woman’s right to instruction is limitless, as well as her duty to participate in society’s efforts to emancipate itself and to liberate the Muslim nation from the fetters of custom and moral depravity. In other words, she has the right to be a complete human being on her own, worthy, living in propriety!

There are strong similarities to Yassine’s view in that of Tunisian author Rashid Ghannoushi, who refers to the “oppression, degradation, abasement [and] restrictions of [women’s] horizons and roles. . . during the long centuries of decline. . . [in which] woman’s personality was obliterated and she was transformed into an object of pleasure—in the name of religion!” He, too, recognizes the equality of men and women, and hence the right and duty of women to address the sickness of the world.

Hasan al-Turabi of Sudan was one of the first—in the 1960s—to fight for the view that women are fully responsible human beings who are addressed directly by Islam, not through the medium of Muslim men. His *Women in Islam and Muslim Society*, first published in the early 1970s, has been called his most influential work.

To Islamize Modernity

Winning the Modern World for Islam is one of many books by a passionate man, whose primary concern is “to make known the message of the Koran: a message of peace

for a violent world, a message of sanity for a directionless world, a spiritual message for an ailing modern world.” The book appears to be Yassine’s first to be published in English translation, unfortunately. His virtue is best conveyed in his questions: “We have been given the unique good fortune to exist; to what are we going to devote that existence? To begin with, what is the point of existence—mine, yours, that of the universe? Where and how shall we invest our lives, our energy, our time, our possessions, and our wisdom, for the greatest return?”

And in his answer: “The physical, moral, and spiritual well-being of humankind is the point of our existence; everything should contribute to its expansion.”

However, he warns the reader “of the condition without which his action, even if effective and useful for Muslims, will have no value for his personal accountability: absolute devotion to God. Vulgar intentions may well accompany an activism that is devoted to some ideological idol or commonplace ambition, but is not with action for God’s cause.” Who from the Christian tradition can read these words without recalling those of St. Paul in *I Corinthians* 13: “And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, . . . and have not love [*agapē*], it profiteth me nothing”?

Yassine’s *islam* (submission to God—he consistently uses *islam* rather than Islam) is expressed in his retelling of an incident in the life of Mohammad:

At the time of the Prophet (grace and peace on him!), the Jews of Medina, who incessantly betrayed their covenants with Muslims, were conducting the casket of one of their people and passed before the Prophet, who was seated with his Companions. The Prophet stood up to show respect for the funeral procession, under the astonished eye of the assembly. Questioned about the reason of his gesture, the Prophet explained, “Is it not a soul?” This practical lesson was given to teach us that the dignity of a human being derives from being a human, and no other consideration.

Yassine’s themes are twined about a single, central theme of “islamizing modernity,” a conscious inversion of the familiar idea of “modernizing Islam.” The “modernity” that needs to be won to *islam* is the replacement of God by society “as the principle of moral judgment.” It is “a ‘sacralization’ of the natural law of reason, and a submission to all that this entails,” which he traces to the European 18th Century and the French Revolution. By reason—or more properly mere rationalism—Yassine means rationality not anchored in the law of love, but rather making itself supreme. It finds expression, for example, in the revolutionary violence of Bolshevism and of Hitler, he says, but also in the daily life and non-thought of the mass of ordinary people under the sway of this disembodied reason, who suffer from banality, ignorance, indifference to neighbor, consumerism,

deprivation, and the rest.

Consider the implications of this standpoint for the project of constructing an Islamic state: “[V]iolent revolution and Stalinesque re-education should play no role in the program of Islamist power—no more ‘cultural revolutions’ *à la* Mao,” writes Yassine, “Islamists must understand that they will not come to power with an arsenal of repressive laws, but with a capital of love and energies of sympathy.” What could be more terrifying to the oligarchs of this world and their geopolitical strategists?

‘The American System Is Excellent . . .’

Some of Yassine’s sharpest barbs are reserved for democracy. If a society has no moral grounding, he writes, democracy, as a process, is meaningless. Democracy has been “essentially secularist in essence and birth,” he says. He condemns what he calls mere “British ‘due process.’”

If Yassine considers Britain the birthplace of democracy, then the charge is true, but it is not true for the United States’ founders’ writings, their Declaration of Independence and the Preamble to the Constitution. What Yassine really intends is made clearer by what he endorses. Secret-ballot elections, when conducted honestly, are good, he says. A constitution, “as an explicit and interpretative expression of the Law,” is a necessity. The principle of the separation of powers “does not conflict with any Islamic prescription.” Checks and balances are one of democracy’s great assets, he writes. An independent and incorruptible judiciary is important for rooting out corruption, favoritism, and influence peddling. “The American system is excellent” in this respect, he says, for “elected judges are closely observed by the interested population, and they are recalled when necessary without anyone finding fault with the process!” No doubt that is still true, some of the time. “Freedom of expression is one of the most desirable democratic institutions.” Political pluralism is a “natural gift” that an Islamic government should encourage. Yassine emphasizes that the democracy that is *not* tolerable, is the system that is ruled by “the religion of secularism.”

Some will take issue with Yassine, and with all Islamists, on the central question of defining government in terms of a single religion. The European experience was that this inevitably resulted in the pitting of the religion in power, against another. This led to the original American system in which there was agreement on the primacy of natural (God-given) law, with no official recognition of the doctrine of any one faith. Admittedly, this approach has been overthrown, for want of passion and vigilance, by “the religion of secularism,” but that is no argument against its superiority. Indeed, this is the approach taken today in the most populous Muslim country in the world, Indonesia, in its doctrine of *Pancasila*. Nonetheless, a sovereign nation that chooses to make Islam the basis for its government, must not be subjected to attack on that account.

Like other Islamists, Yassine rejects the nation-state as “our prison,” seeing the nation-states of the Muslim world as the creations of imperialism to divide and conquer; without national sovereignty, they were not, in fact, nation-states. Why is it that the same advocates of secular democracy whom Yassine opposes, are on the warpath to pull down all nation-states?

“My intention in this book,” Imam Yassine writes in his epilogue, “is to play upon all registers of human understanding, including sometimes the jostling of direct challenge, in the hope of awakening the heedless and honing a blunted will.” He succeeds. In a remarkable way, this poet shifts from pungent polemic, to reasoned argument, to olive branch, and back again.

A Badge of Honor

Yassine has clearly earned the “Does Not Exist” badge of honor. And it did not first come in the form of being lied about by Bernard Lewis. Yassine was put under house arrest in December 1989 by a Moroccan government that found its identity in appeasing the Anglo-American powers through Westernization. He remained so confined until his release—without any concession on his part—at the age of 72, in May 2000. His non-violent association, al-’Adl wa’l-Ihsan (Justice and Spirituality), is the most powerful Islamist organization in Morocco, and especially strong in the universities. Although still officially banned, it is now tolerated to a certain degree. Information about its publications and conferences in the Western world is available at www.JSpublishing.net.

Rashid Ghannouchi, leader of the Ennahda movement in Tunisia, with an outlook broadly similar to that of Yassine, has suffered imprisonment and exile at the hands of a government of similar identity to that of Morocco.

The treatment of the two leaders makes it easier to understand why similarly oriented American Muslim institutions of national and international importance, based in northern Virginia—such as the Graduate School of Islamic and Social Sciences and the International Institute of Islamic Thought—were recently raided at the direction of the Department of Justice, with staff herded together and held at gunpoint for hours. According to an American specialist in Islam, Muslim institutions that actually might have come under suspicion of ties to terrorism, were not raided.

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Russia at the Launch Of the Great Game

by Mary Burdman

Diplomacy and Murder in Tehran: Alexander Griboyedov and Imperial Russia’s Mission to the Shah of Persia

by Laurence Kelly

London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2002

314 pages, hardbound, £25; paperbound £14.95

For 150 years from the early 19th Century, two empires—the Russian on the one side, and the British, and later Anglo-American, on the other—vied for power and influence over vast areas of the Eurasian land-mass. This imperial opposition is known in the West as the “Great Game”—a phrase first used in 1841, by Britain’s Capt. Arthur Conolly (famous for his death at the hands of the Emir of Bukhara, now in Uzbekistan). While the two empires actually never engaged in all-out war, there was plenty of conflict, in the British conquest of the Indian Subcontinent, and the Russian conquest of the Caucasus, the ancient Khanates of Central Asia, and Siberia, up against the borders of China.

The strategic conflicts in Eurasia have not ended. Since the breakup of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States has been striving to assert economic and military influence in West and Central Asia, as the ongoing—increasingly disastrous—foray into Afghanistan shows. Now, the George W. Bush Administration is increasing its threats against Iraq and Iran.

Diplomacy and Murder in Tehran, the first full biography in English of the Russian playwright and diplomat Alexander Sergeyevich Griboyedov, is an account of critical events at the time when Russia was launching its full-scale imperial expansion into the regions Washington is eyeing today. It is also an account of a remarkable generation of Russians, led by the great national poet Alexander Pushkin, who created a revolution in language, literature, and history—although their efforts for republican political revolution were cut short.

‘Woe From Wit’

The book starts with a poignant event in Russian political and cultural history. In the Spring of 1829, Alexander Pushkin was travelling in the Caucasus, when he met an oxcart and drovers, who were bringing the corpse of his fellow poet,