

Book Review

Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Inquiry

*By Bernard Lewis. New York: Oxford University Press.
1990, 169 pp.*

This book is based mainly on an earlier small book entitled *Race and Color in Islam* that was published in 1971. In this new edition, Lewis added more chapters and expanded the discussion of some of the material that he examined in the earlier edition. He mentions that scholarly work on the topic of slavery received only limited attention from researchers compared with studies on slavery in the Greek and Roman worlds. Only a few number of studies of high caliber could be cited.

The main theme of the book, as Lewis states clearly in his concluding remarks, is that Islam's total racial harmony and innocence is a myth created, maintained, and idealized by westerners as a rebuke to the actions of the white man in the Americas and South Africa. Moreover, the idea found relevance among missionaries in Africa who tried to seek explanations for their failure in contrast to the success of Islam.

In his analysis, Lewis tries to distinguish between three distinct meanings of Islam: 1) Islam as the religion taught by the Prophet and prescribed in the Qur'an; 2) Islam as a larger body including the traditions, works, and fatwas of Islamic scholars and jurists. In this regard Islam includes the Shari'ah as developed over the centuries; and 3) Islam as the counterpart not of Christianity but of Christendom. Here, Islam means not

what Muslims believed or were expected to believe but what they actually did—in other words Islamic civilization as known to us in history” (p. 20). The book is divided into thirteen small chapters with nine documents, some of which have been translated from Arabic and Turkish.

Despite his distinction between the three meanings of Islam, it is clear that Lewis emphasizes the third perception of Islam. His coverage of this era extends from the Umayyād and the ‘Abbāsīd caliphates to the Ottoman Empire. As many of us know, the early years of this period in Islamic history marked the beginning of the gradual shift away from some of the important concepts that used to be practiced during the time of the Prophet and his four immediate political successors. At a later stage, the process of disassociation between the community and its Islamic ideals accelerated, which finally resulted in the degeneration of Islamic civilization. It is during this period and under such settings that a significant portion of Lewis’ hypotheses and conclusions are drawn.

A major shortcoming is the failure to address any historical experiences in race relations that took place when different Islamic empires assimilated many races into the broader banner of Islamic brotherhood. Muslim Arabs spread throughout Asia and Africa and intermingled with the indigenous populations. This is especially obvious in some parts of Africa, where intermarriage between Arabs and Africans produced a new breed. If these historical cases had been included in the book, it would have provided more insight into the study of race relations in Islamic societies. Moreover, these cases may provide evidence contrary to some of Lewis’ remarks regarding the racial behavior of Muslims at that time.

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Islamic Civilization in World History
by Bernard Lewis

By Bernard Lewis, translated by Karen E. Matthews and
John O. Voll, University of North Texas Press, 2002.

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