

Book Review - The Middle East, 2000 Years of History from the Rise of Christianity to the Present Day (Bernard Lewis)

For an authoritative and yet readable discussion of the history of the Middle East, it is hard to do better than this work by the famed British Middle East historian, Bernard Lewis. The importance of the region is beyond doubt, and everyone, whether missionary, politician, or ordinary man seeking to understand the news, should have an idea of what is happening, and has happened, there.

Lewis begins in the most common of places, a coffee house, and describes what a typical tourist might see there. It is a fascinating amalgam of Western clothing, traditional head gear, Western furniture, traditional writing, Western media (newspaper, television, radio), and traditional coffee. Lewis sees the coffee house as a microcosm of the conflicts that have torn the Middle East, and the world of Islam, for over 200 years.

The author briefly describes the Middle East before Christ, in the days of Greeks, Romans, Hebrews, Arabs, and Persians. He then covers the monumental impact of Christianity, displacing earlier faiths and subduing the Roman Empire. Trade from China grew in importance, the Western Roman Empire died, and the Eastern Empire was locked in a perpetual death struggle with Persia.

As the biggest event in 600 years, Islam swept onto the scene from the unlikeliest of places. One of the most ancient of civilizations, Persia, was carried away like chaff in a tornado. Lewis states a Quranic perspective when he writes “only religion can justify empire; only empire

can sustain a religion.¹”He surveys the Umayyads, the Shia, and other groups, going into fascinating detail about where they came from and why.

Lewis describes the Abbasid revolution as a victory of Persians over Arabs; “a new Iranian Empire under a veneer of Persianized Islam.²” The capital moved from Syria to Iraq, and the empire reached its pinnacle under Harun Al-Rashid (763-809 AD). The Shia Fatimids gained power in Egypt and North Africa in this interval.

By the 11th century, though the Abbasids were weakening. The Turks adopted Islam and began moving into the Middle East, especially Syria and Anatolia. Adopting the Sunni brand of faith rather than the Persian Shia, they defeated the Byzantines and Abbasids. In 1258 the Mongols under Hulagu destroyed Baghdad and the Abbasid Empire was through; the age of Turkish leadership within Islam had begun.

The author describes how the advent of gunpowder weapons forever changed the balance of power against the steppe nomads and towards civilization. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453 AD, the Ottoman Turks freely continued their move into Eastern Europe. From their victories over the Iranians at Chaldiran (1514) and the Hungarians at Mohacs (1526) until their final defeat at Vienna (1683), the Ottomans were the greatest power in Europe and the Middle East. Their defeat was final, however, as the West gained the upper hand, and kept it.

The next portion of Lewis’ book is a look at important cross sections of Islamic society. The key is to understand that Islam is that it is not merely a religion, it is also a state. Unlike Christianity, in Islam there is no distinction between God and Caesar. Historically, political Islam is often prerequisite to religious Islam. Economically, trade has always been an important

¹ Bernard Lewis, *The Middle East: 2000 Years of History from the Rise of Christianity to the Present Day*, New ed. (London: No Imprint, 1996), 70.

² *Ibid.*, 75.

activity for Muslims, situated as they were on important Middle Eastern trade routes, and Lewis describes some of the trade goods and means of transport over the centuries.

The elites of Islam became so in the old fashioned way; wealth, power, marriage, lineage, education, and accomplishment. Government in Muslim lands was comprised of the bureaucracy, the military, and the religious leaders. Islam taught that everyone was equal before Allah, but there were in practice many levels of hierarchy. Commoners were divided by sex, by race, by occupation, by belief, by status (slave or free), and a score of other factors.

Lewis' treatment of religion and law emphasizes the fact that in Islam they are inseparable. The mosque was the center of activity in the town, whether religious, cultural, political, or judicial.³ Importantly, one key characteristic of Islam is its rejection of innovation (bida) in theology and even in culture. Culturally, only literature was worthy of respect; musicians were likely to be slaves. Sculpture was forbidden, and painting infrequent, but poetry was hailed.

The author's final section covers the challenge of Modernity. The Muslim culture, more than the Japanese, Chinese, Russian, South American, or any other, seems to have difficulty adjusting to the modern world. While the 16th century was the height of Muslim power, the 18th century was the beginning of the end of Islamic might. Europeans, Americans, and later others around the world, have colonized Muslim-majority countries, or worse, ignored them.

In summary, *The Middle East, 2000 Years of History from the Rise of Christianity to the Present Day*, is an outstanding summary of this volatile region in the world. Lewis has written a comprehensive and accurate account which is nonetheless readable and even enjoyable. It fills a hole on the bookshelf of scholars of Islam and the Middle East alike.

³ Ibid., 222.