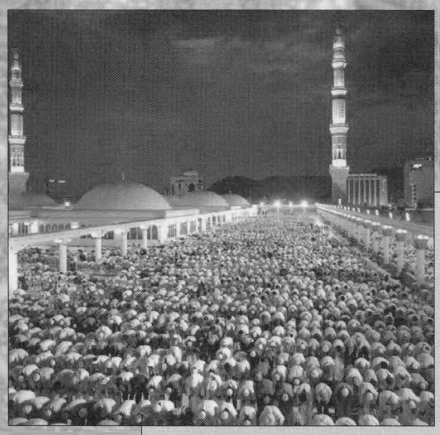
ISLAM AND THE WEST

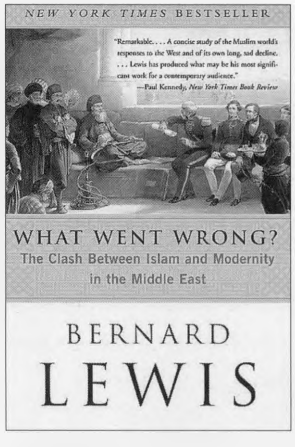


Discussed: exotic languages, neoconservative worldview, Donald Rumsfeld, Islamic empires, freedom seekers, regime change, Six-Day War, Orientalist dogma, Occidentalism, kamikaze pilots, absolute evil, deuce court

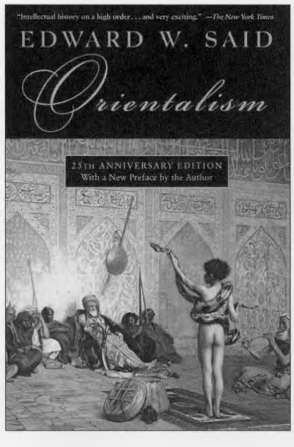
Three Views of Islam

By Terrie Aamodt

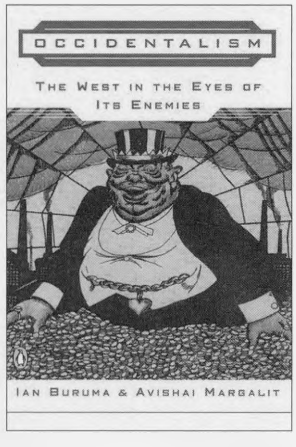
Juxtaposing these three books is a bit like watching a tennis match, with the reader's head swiveling back and forth. Bernard Lewis, a British Orientalist historian, is widely regarded as one of the world's most knowledgeable experts in Middle Eastern and Islamic history. In his recent collection of essays, *From Babel to Dragomans: Interpreting the Middles East* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), Lewis introduces his work with an autobiographical memoir.



Bernard Lewis. *What Went Wrong? The Clash Between Islam and Modernity in the Middle East.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.



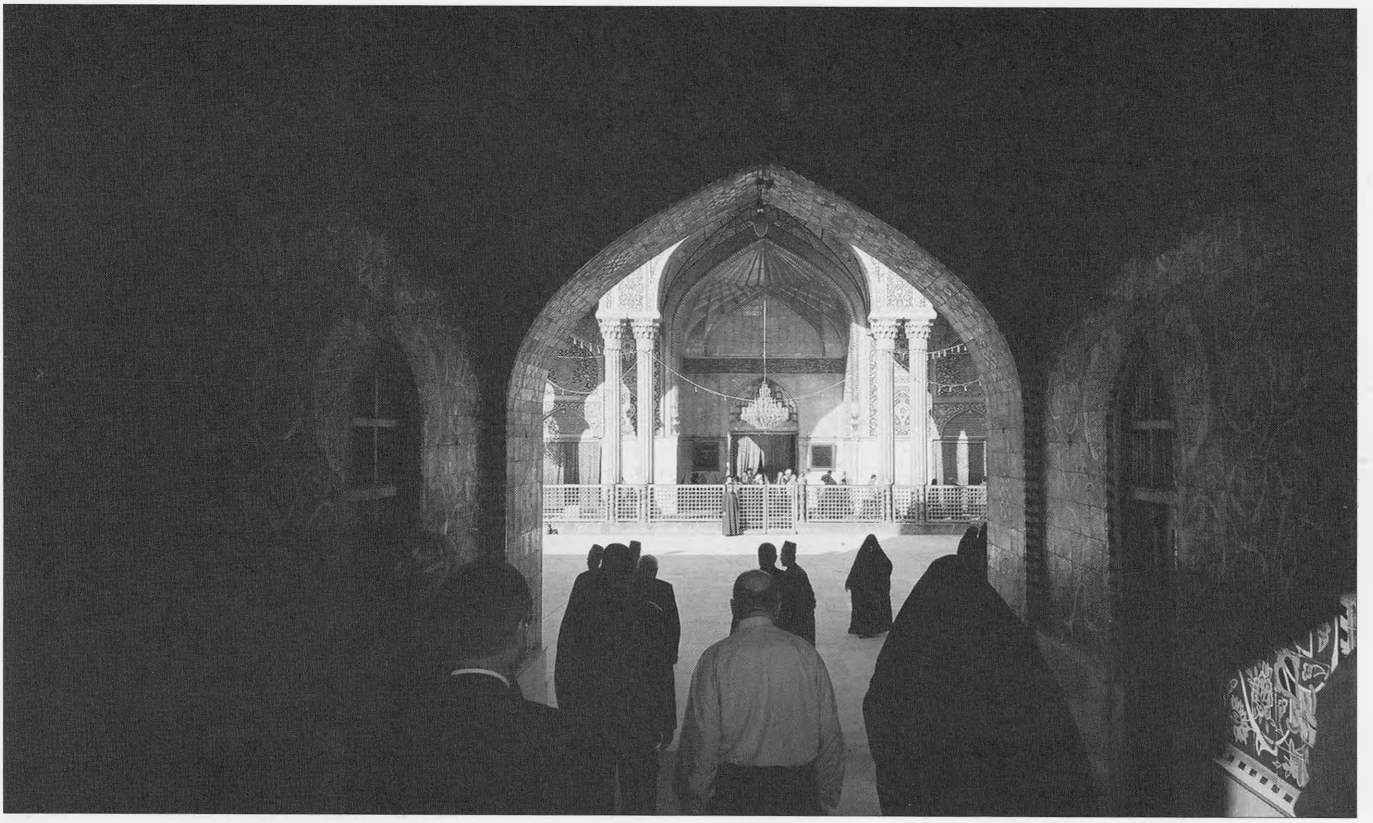
Edward Said. *Orientalism.* 25th anniversary ed. New York: Vintage Books, 2003.



Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit. *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies.* New York: Penguin Books, 2004.

Lewis acquired what he describes as a "fascination with exotic languages" while learning Hebrew as he prepared for his Bar Mitzvah at age eleven or twelve. From there, he moved to Aramaic, Arabic, Greek, Latin, Persian, and Turkish as he studied at the University of London. He traveled widely in the Middle East, and in 1949 he became the first Western researcher admitted to the Imperial Ottoman Archives. His research there created the foundation for several of his subsequent books.

After the September 11 attacks in the United States, countless Americans turned to Lewis' books to understand a part of the world that had previously escaped their attention. The slender book *What Went Wrong?* although based on a series of lectures Lewis delivered in 1999, appeared propitiously in 2002, when general interest in the topic was very high, and it quickly became a best seller.



It is no coincidence that Lewis' works were foundational for the neoconservative worldview that shaped Bush administration policy in Iraq. Lewis had long maintained that the Middle East's intractable problems could be solved with governments comparable to Kemal Atatürk's militantly secular, pro-Western regime that had taken shape in Turkey while Lewis was working in the Ottoman Archives in Istanbul.

In 1998, Lewis joined a host of neoconservative former government officials and advisers (including Elliott Abrams, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, John R. Bolton, William Kristol, Richard Perle, Douglas Feith, Caspar Weinberger, and Robert C. McFarlane) in signing a letter to President Bill Clinton, requesting the development of a broad strategy to dislodge Saddam Hussein from Iraq.

On September 19, and 20, 2001, Lewis was present at a secret briefing in Donald Rumsfeld's Pentagon office as the Defense Policy Board debated the possibility of taking military action against Iraq. Also present was Ahmed Chalabi, who had been touted by Lewis and others as a prime candidate to lead a Saddam-free Iraq to a secular, pro-U.S. stance.

In *What Went Wrong?* which Lewis was polishing for publication when the September 11 attacks occurred, he introduces the title question by describing "the growing anguish, the mounting urgency, and of late the seething anger" (3) in the Arab world. He contrasts the dazzling accomplishments of earlier Islamic empires with the increasingly grim outlines of the Middle East's encounters with Western modernity. He connects the

East-West "clash of civilizations" with religious differences, views of church-state roles, and the treatment of women.

Lewis compares the dysfunctional Middle East with parts of the Orient and South Asia that have beat the West at their own game, "in commerce and industry, in the projection of political and even military power, and, in many ways most remarkable of all, in the acceptance and internalization of Western achievement, notably in science" (148).

In his conclusion, he contends that the root of problems in the Islamic world is not the residue left by the Mongols, the Turks, Western imperialists, or Jews, but rather "the lack of freedom," which will set up the Middle East once again to be dominated by another alien regime: perhaps Europe, Russia, or a new Eastern superpower.

In a post–9/11 afterword, Lewis reiterates his point about freedom. Instead of outsiders, the Islamic world's prime enemy is "their own rulers, regimes that maintain themselves by tyranny at home and terrorism abroad and have failed by every measure of governmental achievement except survival."

The number of "freedom seekers" in these failed regimes, says Lewis, is unknown because they live in constant danger, receiving scant help "from those who present themselves as their friends and advocates, but who prefer to deal with corrupt tyrants, provided that they are amenable, rather than risk the hazards of regime change" (165).

The inescapable solution, according to Lewis, is for troubled Middle Eastern countries to adopt secular, Western-style governments and for sympathetic Western friends to help them do so. The rest, as they say, is history.

Actually, for another prominent authority on relationships between East and West, the rest is literature—and language. Edward F. Said was a professor of English and comparative literature at Columbia University when he died in 2003. Born in Jerusalem, Palestine, in 1935 to Protestant parents, Said and his family fled to Cairo when Jerusalem was captured by Zionists in 1948. Educated in Cairo and the United States, he adopted a secular world view and became the leading exponent of the poststructuralist left in the United States.

The 1967 Six-Day War reignited his interest in his Palestinian roots. One result, *Orientalism*, was published in 1978 and became a foundational document for postcolonial studies. (Said followed this rather broad-based critique of the language of Oriental studies with a specifically literary analysis, *Culture and Imperialism*, in 1993.) In the 1978 book, Said maintains that the Western enterprise of studying the East, which for centuries has been labeled "Orientalism," is inherently biased by cultural chauvinism and a host of other blind spots, even when the Orientalist claims sympathy with his subject.

For Said, the primary offender has been Bernard Lewis. Said dissects Lewis's claims to scholarly objectivity in a particularly scorching passage (314–22), where he insists that Lewis follows an agenda of depicting Islam as "an anti-Semitic ideology, not merely a religion" (317). Said maintains that the roots of Orientalist dogma come from the enterprise of philology, specifically the Western analysis of the Arabic language as a "dangerous ideology" (320).

According to Said, "the reliance of today's Orientalist on 'philology' is the last infirmity of a scholarly discipline completely transformed into social-science ideological expertise" (321). Said carries out his own philological exercise on the language of Orientalism:

> "It brings opposites together as "natural," it presents human types in scholarly idioms and methodologies, it ascribes reality and reference to objects (other words) of its own making.... [O]ne does not really make discourse at will, or statements in it,

without first belonging—in some cases unconsciously, but at any rate involuntarily—to the ideology and the institutions that guarantee its existence. (321)

Orientalism is a blatantly visible, extended polemic, written to counter what Said identifies as the hidden polemical purposes of Lewis and other Orientalists. Said's diatribe, intense as it is, makes it difficult to read Orientalist scholarship, or, for that matter, accounts of the colonialist aspects of Christian mission projects in the non-West, with any degree of complacency.

In early 2003, writing a preface for the twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Orientalism* in the context both of the September 11 attacks and his own losing battle with leukemia, Said made explicit a comparison with the invective satire of Jonathan Swift, a kindred polemic that must have been on Said's mind from the beginning:

> There has been so massive and calculatedly aggressive an attack on the contemporary societies of the Arab and Muslim for their backwardness, lack of democracy, and abrogation of women's rights that we simply forget that such notions as modernity, enlightenment, and democracy are by no means simple and agreed-upon concepts that one either does or does not find, like Easter eggs in the living room. The breathtaking insouciance of jejune publicists who speak in the name of foreign policy and who have no live notion (or any knowledge at all) of the language of what real people actually speak has fabricated an arid landscape ready for American power to construct there an *ersatz* model of free market "democracy," without even a trace of doubt that such projects don't exist outside of Swift's Academy of Lagado [a hilarious sendup of "serious science" in Part III of *Gulliver's Travels*] (xix).

Said has literally been on the front lines himself. His always-controversial advocacy for a Palestinian viewpoint led someone to set his office on fire at Columbia. In a highly publicized, highly criticized move in 2000, he heaved a rock at an Israeli guard station near the Lebanese border as a gesture of solidarity with the stone-throwing teenagers of the first *intifada.*

As provocative as some of his actions have been, Said's presence as the Palestinian "Other" in the United States supplies a sobering counterpoint to any tendency to overgeneralize or oversimplify the current war on terror.

Making cross-cultural explanations may be complicated and dangerous, but there is no shortage of people willing to try, despite Edward Said's assertion in 1994 that "words such as 'Orient' and 'Occident' correspond to no stable reality that exists as a natural fact" (*Orientalism* Afterword, 331).

In January 2002, the *New York Review of Books* published an essay, "Ocidentalism," by Ian Buruma, a British journalist and scholar currently teaching at New York's Bard College, and Avishai Margalit, a professor of philosophy at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Later that year, the two collaborated in Jerusalem to expand their essay into a small book, *Occidentalism*, published in 2004.

In this book, Buruma and Margalit set out to turn Orientalism on its head in an attempt to understand the attitude of the Orient toward the West, or Occident. In their view, Occidentalism is not the same as criticism or even hatred of the West. Rather, it is hatred based on an inaccurate impression of what the West is, and it is "like the worst aspects of its counterpart, Orientalism, which strips its human targets of their humanity....To diminish an entire society or a civilization to a mass of soulless, decadent, money-grubbing, rootless, faithless, unfeeling parasites," as the authors describe the Occidentalist enterprise, "is a form of intellectual destruction" (10).

They begin their analysis by revisiting Japanese perceptions of the United States during World War II. At a scholarly conference in Kyoto in July 1942, Japanese intellectuals debated "how to overcome the modern." They concluded that modern science, capitalism, technology, democracy, and Hollywood films had created a "poisonous materialist civilization" based on Jewish financial capitalist power.

What resulted as the war worsened for Japan was the establishment of the Tokkotai (Special Attack Forces) kamikaze pilots and human torpedoes, who left last words such as "To die while people still lament your death; to die while you are pure and fresh; this is truly Bushido" (quoted on 60). The suicide pilots and torpedo riders believed the purity of their motives would ultimately defeat the decadent West.

The authors show first how various Eastern groups from the kamikaze warriors to members of Al Qaeda shared a scorn for the Occidental city as an unspiritual

place, the source of Western "machine civilization" (31). Secondly, the Occident is defined by its enemies as culturally soft, a decadent threat to believers in a rigorous, ascetic faith. This attitude gave young Taliban warriors confidence as the armed conflict began in Afghanistan in the autumn of 2001; they believed they would prevail because, whereas their American opponents loved Pepsi-Cola, they were in love with death.

A third pillar of Occidentalism, according to Buruma and Margalit, is the disdain for Western intellectual constructs. According to this view, having a Western mind is "like being an idiot savant, mentally defective but with a special gift for making arithmetic calculations. It is a mind without a soul, efficient, like a calculator, but hopeless at doing what is humanly important....[I]t lacks spirituality and understanding of human suffering" (76). Finally, Occidentalism depicts the capitalist West's interest in matter and materialism as idolatrous (102).

As the authors build their description of these pathological attitudes toward the West, a crowning irony emerges: Occidentalist notions are not even native to the East; they were borrowed from various European entities that were disillusioned with mainstream Western modernity. Some concepts came from German idealism and Romanticism, appropriated and repackaged by the Nazis; others depended upon the disillusioned grandson of a Jewish rabbi, Karl Marx; still others took shape in Russia, based on a combination of Slavophilic notions and borrowed German romanticism.

These nationalistic forms, or "secular Occidentalism," contrast with "religious Occidentalism," which privileges Islam, State Shinto, or some other religious system "in Manichaean terms, as a holy war fought against an idea of absolute evil" (102). Manichaeism developed in Persia as a rival to early Christianity, but its vocabulary is familiar to anyone who has heard the world described in terms of black and white, us and them, the children of light vs. the children of darkness, the "evil empire," or the "axis of evil" (106). Manichaeism's separate, independent realms of good and evil are antithetical to all monotheistic religions, including Islam.

As they conclude, Buruma and Margalit ask how the "idea of the West," or liberal democracy, can be protected from its enemies. In their view, the conflict does not come down to a clash of civilizations: "although Christian fundamentalists speak of a crusade, the West is not at war against Islam....There is indeed a worldwide clash going on, but the fault lines do not coincide with national, ethnic, or religious borders" (147).

Rather, the primary conflict these authors see is within the Muslim world, between mainstream institutions and an underground, borderless revolutionary movement. For Buruma and Margalit, Western guilt about colonialism is also misplaced: "To blame the barbarism of non-Western dicators or the suicidal savagery of religious revolutions on American imperialism, global capitalism, or Israeli expansionism is not only to miss the point; it is precisely an Orientalist form of condescension, as though only Westerners are adult enough to be morally responsible for what they do" (148).

Worst of all, they say, would be yielding to the temptation to fight fire with fire. "Religious authority, especially in the United States, is already having a dangerous influence on political governance. We cannot afford to close our societies as a defense against those who have closed theirs. For then we all would become Occidentalists, and there would be nothing left to defend" (149).

Buruma and Margalit avoid the pitfalls of Occidentalism, but their enterprise may not be as diametrically opposed to Orientalism as they claim. It is difficult to cover as much ground in a small book as Lewis does, or as Burunda and Margalit do, without dealing in broad generalization.

As the global matchup veers from the deuce court to the ad court and back again, Edward Said's 2003 reiteration of the foundational point of Orientalism is made more poignant:

> There is a difference between knowledge of other peoples and other times that is the result of understanding, compassion, careful study and analysis for their own sakes, and on the other hand knowledge—if that is what it is—that is part of an overall campaign of self-affirmation, belligerency, and outright war. (xix)

Sometimes, as we rush to make up our minds, we would profit from a more deliberate, careful examination of claims by all sides.

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Two Adventist Views of Islam

Adventists officially began to address relations with the Muslim community in 1990 with the creation of the office of Global Mission within the General Conference. Børge Schantz was chosen to be the first director of an Islamic Study Center because of the years he had spent as a missionary in Islamic countries, and the center was placed at Newbold College in England.

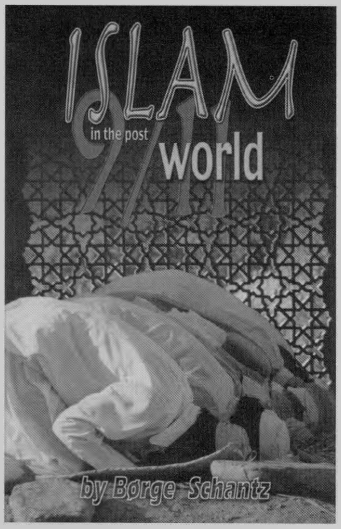
A missiologist with a doctoral degree from Fuller Theological Seminary, Schantz continues to write and lecture on the topic of Islam, even though he has retired from his position at the Study Center. In 2004, he published a book, Islam in the Post 9/11 World, that has gone through three printings in Danish and soon may enter a second printing in English.

In the introduction, he writes, "*Islam in the Post 9/11 World* is not a completely neutral book, even though I have been as objective as possible in my description of Islam and my comparisons with Christianity. The undeniable fact that I am a Christian missionary, who has worked for many years in Islamic areas, and studied Islam as a specialist subject, has inevitably influenced my approach to this book. *Islam in the Post-9/11 World* is a book written by a Christian for Christians." (*Spectrum* carried an interview with Schantz in its summer 2002 issue.)

However, in the post 9/11 world, Adventists have changed their approach to Islam. What was formerly the Islamic Study Center has become the Global Center for Adventist-Muslim Relations (GCAMR), the director is now Jerald Whitehouse, and it is located in Loma Linda, California.

Under Whitehouse, rather than comparing and contrasting Adventists and Muslims, conversation begins with what the two groups share. In April, Adventists and Muslims met at Newbold to share their perspectives on last-day events. According to a report of the meeting carried by the Adventist News Network, Oscar Osindo, also of the GCAMR, told the assembled group that both Adventists and Muslims look forward to Jesus' second coming and see it as the time when peace and justice will be restored.

Rather than writing about Islam for Christians, Whitehouse has developed in-depth Bible studies for Muslims that incorporate the Q'ran. His purpose is to challenge Muslims to a deeper faith, one that urges acceptance of Jesus as a personal savior and mediator. Yet he assumes that Muslims will stay within their religious and cultural context.



In this introduction to Islam for Christian readers, Børge Schantz covers the books of Islam, Shari'ah Law, the five pillars, and the five articles of Islamic faith. He also describes Muslim lifestyles, diet, and art.

The contrast between the approaches of Whitehouse and Schantz can lead to heated debates. Whitehead, who learned his approach to Islam from Robert Darnell, shuns anything that might be confrontational. His accommodations lead critics of his to ask whether those who complete his studies are Adventists or Muslims. Others question the honesty of his approach.

Schantz is challenged on the confrontational nature of his approach to witnessing. "Evangelism is not a hate crime,..." he told ANN, "to try to convince [others] about false and dangerous teachings and what you believe as a truth from God is a Christian duty."

It becomes particularly evident that there is more than one way to go about the process of witnessing when one considers Islam in the contemporary world.

An interview with Jerald Whitehouse is featured on the *Spectrum* Web site <www.spectrummagazine.org>.