

Today, I have the privilege of presenting one of the most influential and debated figures in the modern study of Islam and the Middle East — **Bernard Lewis**. His life's work spanned nearly a century, shaping how generations of scholars and policymakers understood — and sometimes misunderstood — the Islamic world.

---

## Early Life and Academic Foundations

Bernard Lewis was born in **London in 1916** to a middle-class Jewish family. From an early age, he displayed an extraordinary fascination with history and languages.

He studied **history at the University of London**, later earning his PhD at **the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS)**, where he mastered **Arabic, Persian, Turkish, and Hebrew** — a rare linguistic pedigree even among Orientalists.

By the 1940s, Lewis was already part of a distinguished generation of **British Orientalists**, who sought to understand the East through meticulous study of its languages, texts, and archives.

He joined the **University of London's Department of History**, where he began producing pioneering works on **the Ottoman Empire, Islamic law, and medieval Muslim societies**.

Lewis's early scholarship, such as *The Arabs in History* (1950) and *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (1961), established him as a **meticulous historian and expert on Islamic civilization**.

His research combined traditional philology with a broad historical scope, making him both a **linguist and a historian of civilization**.

---

## Intellectual Pedigree and Method

Lewis belonged to what was then called the **Orientalist school** — scholars who believed that the non-Western world could be understood through the disciplined study of its languages, archives, and traditions.

He approached Islam not merely as a religion but as a **civilization** — one with its own legal, political, and intellectual structures.

For Lewis, Islam represented a **total worldview** — encompassing the religious, social, and political life of its adherents.

He admired its achievements, particularly during the Middle Ages, but he also sought to explain what he called its **later decline** in comparison to the West.

This led him to one of his most enduring — and controversial — questions:

“What went wrong?”

Why did Islamic civilization, once at the forefront of science and philosophy, fall behind the West?

His search for answers often pointed to **internal cultural and institutional factors** rather than external colonial domination.

This view would later make him a target of postcolonial criticism.

---

## The Encounter with Edward Said and the Orientalism Debate

In 1978, **Edward Said** published *Orientalism*, a book that changed the academic landscape forever.

Said accused Western scholars — including Lewis — of producing knowledge that **served imperial interests**, portraying the East as backward, irrational, and inferior.

For Said, Orientalism was not neutral scholarship, but a **discourse of power**.

For Lewis, this was an unforgivable attack on the very **foundations of objective scholarship**.

He responded sharply, writing in *The New York Review of Books* in 1982 that Said’s work was, quote, “a form of intellectual vandalism.”

Lewis argued that Orientalism was not a colonial conspiracy but a **branch of human inquiry**, grounded in love for the subject and devotion to accuracy.

He insisted that **truth existed independently of politics**, and that the historian’s duty was to **seek it without ideological bias**.

Thus, the Lewis–Said controversy was not merely personal; it was **epistemological**.

It pitted the **empirical historian** against the **critical theorist**, the

Enlightenment ideal of objectivity against the postmodern notion of power and discourse.

---

## Post-Said Era: From Scholar to Public Intellectual

In the decades following the Orientalism debate, Lewis transitioned from an academic figure into a **public intellectual and political commentator**.

After moving to the **United States** and joining **Princeton University**, he became a respected adviser on Middle Eastern affairs, particularly in Washington circles.

His 1990 essay, *“The Roots of Muslim Rage,”* introduced a concept that would later echo in **Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations.”**

Lewis argued that the hostility between Islam and the West was not merely political but civilizational — a clash of worldviews.

After the attacks of **September 11, 2001**, his writings gained renewed attention.

He advised U.S. officials and was seen by some as an **intellectual architect of Middle East policy** during the early 2000s.

Supporters praised him as **a realist who understood Islamic civilization**; critics accused him of **reinforcing stereotypes** and **providing scholarly cover for interventionism**.

---

## Later Years and Legacy

Bernard Lewis continued to write well into his 90s, publishing *What Went Wrong?* (2002), where he revisited his lifelong question about the decline of the Islamic world.

The book reflected his conviction that **self-critique and reform** were essential for renewal in Muslim societies — a theme consistent throughout his career.

He passed away in **2018**, at the age of 101, leaving behind a legacy that is **profound, complex, and polarizing**.

---

## Evaluation and Status Today

Today, Bernard Lewis stands as both a **giant of Middle Eastern scholarship** and a **symbol of its deepest controversies**.

- To his admirers, he was a **master historian**, a bridge between civilizations, and a guardian of scholarly rigor.
- To his critics, he embodied the **Orientalist gaze**, a man whose work reflected the asymmetries of Western power and knowledge.

In the post-Said world, his name remains **synonymous with the old Orientalist tradition** — disciplined, erudite, but also marked by its limitations. Even his opponents acknowledge his brilliance, while his defenders admit that the intellectual world he represented has forever changed.

---

## Closing Reflection

Bernard Lewis's career reminds us that scholarship is never neutral — it is always shaped by the world in which it exists.

Whether one agrees with him or not, Lewis forces us to ask:

Can we truly study other civilizations without seeing them through the lens of our own?

In that question lies the continuing relevance of Bernard Lewis — a scholar who helped define, and divide, how we think about the Middle East to this day.