

Bernard Lewis on “Triumphalist Religions”

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Middle East Resources

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Much as I have been impressed by Bernard Lewis, his many books, and his specific way of telling the story of Islam across the last fourteen centuries, I am dismayed by his silence on certain dark aspects of this civilization, its treatment of the conquered peoples, and the Genocide of the Armenians in Ottoman Turkey, during the First World War.

I was especially distressed by his article that appeared in the May 2003, issue of **The Atlantic Monthly**, under the shocking title, “**I’m Right, You’re Wrong, Go To Hell: Religions and the Meeting of Civilization.**”

Again, I must reiterate how much I like the works of Bernard Lewis. His style, whether in writing, or in speaking, is gripping. He excels in telling the story of different peoples and their specific civilization. His goal is to explain, elucidate, and instruct. This is very praiseworthy at this juncture in world history when so many trouble spots in the world happen to be within the household of Islam.

Having said this, I am both chagrined and disappointed that this great scholar tends, in this **Atlantic Monthly** article, to posit equivalence, between Christianity and Islam, in their respective outlook on the world, and more specifically, as they sought and still seek, to win converts to their specific faiths.

To begin with, Bernard Lewis reminds us that, “*only two civilizations have been defined by religion. Others have had religions but are identified primarily by region and ethnicity.*” These two religions are Christianity and Islam, they “*are the two religions that define civilizations, and they have much in common, along with some differences.*”

Having thus set Christianity and Islam apart from the rest of world religions such as Judaism, Buddhism, and Hinduism, professor Lewis classifies the latter as **relativist** religions, while the former two as **triumphalist** religions. “*For some religions, just as ‘civilization’ means us, and the rest are barbarians, so ‘religion’ means ours, and the rest are infidels. Other religions, such as Judaism and most of the religions of Asia, concede that human beings may use different religions to speak to God, as they use different languages to speak to one another. God understands them all... The relativist view was condemned and rejected by both Christians and Muslims, who shared the conviction that there was only one true faith, theirs, which it was their duty to bring to all humankind. The triumphalist view is increasingly under attack in Christendom, and is disavowed by significant numbers of Christian clerics. There is little sign as yet of a parallel development in Islam.*”

Professor Lewis regards Islam and Christianity as triumphalist religions. Both faiths consider all “others” as infidels. While, according to him, some Christian leaders are nowadays “disavowing” the triumphalism that has marked Christianity throughout

history, there is no such parallel movement among Muslim leaders. In our globalized world, triumphalism (whether Christian or Muslim) is not conducive to world peace. In order to put across his thesis in the clearest way, Bernard Lewis sums up his disapproval of triumphalism, both in Islam and Christianity, with these words:

“For those taking the triumphalist approach (classically summed up in the formula “I’m right, you’re wrong, go to hell”), tolerance is a problem. Because the triumphalist’s is the only true and complete religion, all other religions are at best incomplete and more probably false and evil; and since he is the privileged recipient of God’s final message to humankind, it is surely his duty to bring it to others rather than keep it selfishly for himself.”

The first point I would like to make is that, great as the scholarship of Bernard Lewis is, his lumping together of the “triumphalism” of the two religions is neither proper, nor objective. One has to be careful in categorizing the faith of others. As a Christian, I find the title of his article very offensive. It is a caricature of Christianity to sum up its attitude to the “other” as being, **“I’m Right, You’re Wrong. Go to Hell.”**

Throughout history, Christians, beginning with the apostolic age, sought to win converts through preaching and witnessing. It was none other than the Risen Lord that gave his church the marching orders: *“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I will be with you always, to the very end of the age.”* Matthew 28:18b-20 (NIV)

The greatest missionary of the First Century was Paul. After his conversion, his life was dedicated entirely to the spread of the faith and the organization of churches in the Mediterranean world. He described his mandate in the opening words of his Letter to the Romans: *“I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile.”* Romans 1:16 (NIV)

Paul’s message consumed him. He was absolutely convinced that the Risen Savior had entrusted with the message that brings salvation to all kinds of people regardless of their ethnic or religious background. As to the primary means for converting “others,” God had ordained the preaching of the Gospel. In his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote, *“For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.”* 1:21 (NIV)

In contrast with this peaceful spread of Christianity, Islam spread primarily through conquest. When studying the history of Islam back in Syria in the late forties, my teachers at the Syrian College used to glory in the **“Futuhāt”** (*Conquests*) of the Arabs. By 732 A.D., one century after the death of Muhammad, Islam had conquered territories stretching from Spain in the west, to India in the east. While Christians and Jews were

allowed to remain in their respective religions, pagans were forced to Islamize. Furthermore, the People of the Book (as Christians and Jews were called) had to submit to some stringent rules that greatly limited their freedoms. Originally, the Christian populations of the Middle East formed the majority of the population, but a few centuries later, they became minorities in such areas as Syria, Palestine, and Egypt.

Professor Lewis should not have posited equivalence between Christianity and Islam as far as the method for gaining converts. As a historian, he should know better than that!

The second point in my criticism of the article of Bernard Lewis is that he fails to see the great contrast between what he calls the “triumphalism” of the two religions. Yes, Christians do believe in the ultimate triumph of the Gospel. Their faith is summarized in these great words of Revelation 11:15b *“The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign for ever and ever.”* (NIV) And in one of the most familiar passages of this NT book, we hear the heavenly choir sing these triumphant words: *“Hallelujah! For Lord God Almighty reigns.”* 19:6b (NIV)

Islam, throughout history, has been triumphalist. Notwithstanding its many setbacks, especially after the leader of modern Turkey, Kemal Ataturk, abolished the caliphate, Muslims have never ceased to believe in the final triumph of their faith. I still remember reading a poster in the window of a Palestinian grocery store in a suburb of Chicago, these Arabic words: *“Al-Islam li-sa’adat al-bashariyya”* i.e., *Islam is for the happiness of all mankind.*

Today, the inevitable triumph of Islam remains the core belief of the radical Islamists. They do not and would not hesitate to use any means to bring about the triumph of Islam, even if that meant total confrontation with the rest of the world.

On the other hand, if Christianity is described as a triumphalist faith, **its triumphalism is related to an eschatological event.** While the gospel has many implications and applications for the here and now, its complete fulfillment takes place beyond the horizon of this world order. Nowhere is this made plainer than in Romans 8. Let’s listen to that great confession of Paul as he describes the ultimate triumph of the Christian faith:

“I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. The creation waits with eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. ... For in this hope we were saved. But hope that is seen is no hope at all. For who hopes for what he already has? But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently.”
Romans 8:18-21, 24, 25 (NIV)

I was on the air for thirty-six years preaching and teaching the Word of God in Arabic. I was fully aware that most of my audience in North Africa and the Middle East were Muslims. I heard from many, many of them, mostly appreciating what I was teaching on

the basis of the Book that their tradition praises. Throughout all these years, both in broadcasting and in correspondence with Muslims, it never, ever, entered my mind that my approach or attitude could have been summed up in the strange formula used by Bernard Lewis in his Atlantic Monthly article. My personal commitment to the Augustinian and Calvinist traditions kept me from ever resorting to such a crude formulation of the Christian message. I could have never even thought of **“I’m Right, You’re Wrong. Go to Hell.”** My method was irenic, and not confrontational, as I proclaimed the *“Injeel,”* the Good News of salvation. My preaching was summed up in the familiar words of John 3:16, *“For God so loved the world...”* My responsibility has always been to be faithful to the Biblical message. I did not coerce listeners to faith in Jesus Christ, since I believe that conversions are the sole prerogative of the Holy Spirit. He is, as the Nicene Creed puts it **“the Lord and Giver of life.”**

Yes, I do believe in the ultimate triumph of my Christian faith. But I know that this triumph will not come because of any military campaign, or through any worldly means. The victory of Christ over the world will become visible to all at his Second Coming. Paul described the triumph of Jesus Christ in these memorable words: *“Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father.”* Philippians 2: 9-11 (NIV)

Therefore, there is no equivalence between Christianity and Islam, neither in their core beliefs, nor in the way they conceive of history, and its End. Much as I still appreciate the works of Bernard Lewis, I was compelled to write this article because his thesis in this article is flawed, both historically and theologically.