

The Shaping of Moslem Opinions of Europe

By DANIEL PIPES

Were the Eskimos to emerge in the next few years as leading scholars and artists, were factories in Greenland to out-produce those of Japan and were invaders from the far north to conquer the United States and the Soviet Union, we would hardly be more astonished than were the Moslems of the Middle East 200 years ago as they fell under Europe's control. For over a millennium, West Europeans appeared to the Moslems as primitive peoples of the remote north, "more like beasts than like

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"The Muslim Discovery of Europe"

By Bernard Lewis

men," in the words of an 11th Century document, affected by a cold climate which made their temperaments "frigid, their humors raw, their bellies gross, their color pale, their hair long and lank. Thus they lack keenness of understanding and clarity of intelligence."

Moslems had reason to be so contemptuous. When they first came into contact with West Europe in the 8th Century, the Middle East was a major center of power, wealth and culture, while Europe hosted a crude culture and offered only the barest items for trade (slaves, armaments and wool). Moslems retained an image of the "Franks" as barbarians for the next 1,000 years, ignorant and uninterested in the changes taking place. In "The Muslim Discovery of Europe" (W. W. Norton, 350 pages, \$19.95), Bernard Lewis writes that "the Renaissance, the Reformation, the scientific revolution, and the Enlightenment had passed without effect in the Islamic world, without even being noticed."

As late as the 1790s, Mr. Lewis writes, an Ottoman "knew as much of the states and nations of Europe as a Nineteenth-Century European about the tribes and peoples

of Africa—and regarded them with the same slightly amused disdain." By this time, however, Europe had surpassed the Middle East in power, political stability, standard of living, technology and the arts. Thus, when the French, British and others conquered virtually the entire Middle East in the century preceding World War I, the Moslems were shocked.

Mr. Lewis, professor of Near Eastern studies at Princeton, has combed through Arabic, Persian and Turkish sources to come up with a fascinating study of what little the Moslems did know about Europe before 1800. The experiences of early Moslem visitors to Europe are especially interesting. They couldn't understand why European men would shave their beards, the Near Eastern sign of virility. How could Catholics believe the Pope remits sins, an authority belonging to Allah alone? Moslem visitors were also baffled by elected political assemblies.

The Moslems expressed dismay at the efforts which affluent Europeans devoted to their clothing, wishing instead they spent more time becoming clean. For Moslems, accustomed to strict separation of the sexes, the dancing at balls appeared indecent. They found bullfights disagreeable ("the torture of animals is not permitted either by the law of God or by the law of nature"), and singing by Germans awful ("a humming that comes out of their throats, like the barking of dogs, but more beastlike"), but they enjoyed orchestral music ("an exceedingly attractive, warm and melting sound").

Mr. Lewis's exposition of pre-modern attitudes also helps understand how Moslems today view the West. In the 19th Century the Moslem contempt for Europe was replaced by awe, but still the Middle East clung emotionally to its old primacy. What J.B. Kelley calls "powerful sentiments of grievance and resentment against the Christian West" supplanted the old "slightly amused disdain." European imperial rule, poverty and the encroachment

of Western culture exacerbated this hostility. For decades, however, Moslems could do little to change the terms of their relationship with Europe, beyond winning national independence in the 20th Century.

Then came the 1970s oil boom; because Moslems control most of the petroleum traded internationally, they benefited most from the rise in oil prices, acquiring new power and vast wealth. In the eyes of many Moslems, this change—and especially the ability to humiliate the West—appeared as a first step in the rectification of relations with Europe and a return to Islamic paramountcy. The sense that the tide of history has turned explains much about the Islamic revival of recent years; conversely, if the current oil glut continues and OPEC's income levels off or declines, a new despondency will probably set in.

Bernard Lewis has established himself as one of the outstanding English-speaking historians of the Middle East, a scholar who invariably picks interesting topics, documents them fully, argues them carefully and presents them lucidly.

"The Muslim Discovery of Europe" is marred by editorial sloppiness: Many chapters were first published as separate articles and they have not been integrated. Nevertheless, the book again confirms Mr. Lewis's stature.

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