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# Elected Ignorance

by James Franklin

*The Muslim Discovery of Europe*, by Bernard Lewis; Weidenfeld and Nicolson.

**W**HAT WERE the big events of the 1970's? The end of Maoism and the Indochinese tragedies are contenders, but it looks as if the honours may finally go to the economic recession and the revival of Islam. Both of these were unexpected, and both are still poorly understood. Perhaps it is beyond the collective human intellect at the moment to understand the recession, but Islam can be understood by putting in the necessary work. Any treatment of an aspect of Islam is welcome, if it is accurate and well-written. Lewis's book is both.

Accurate, that is, except for the title. The book describes the relations of the western Islamic countries with Europe in the period 1000-1800. It turns out that, with very minor exceptions, the Islamic world took absolutely no notice of what was happening in Europe. In 1000 AD, Europe was a cultural backwater about to learn the basics of science and ancient culture from translations of Arabic texts; by 1800 it had created all the elements of the modern world. The change passed unnoticed in Islamic lands. The depth of the ignorance they chose to remain in is barely credible, and takes a book to make credible, but a few of the facts Lewis mentions will give an impression. There were no printed books in Turkish or Arabic until 1729, and the first printing press was destroyed by the authorities soon after that date.

No work of European literature was translated into any Islamic language till 1812. In 1770, when a Russian fleet appeared in the Aegean, the Ottoman government formally protested to the Venetian representative, complaining that his government had allowed the Russians to sail from the Baltic into the Adriatic. The first known visit of a Middle Easterner to America was not until 1668, and the visitor was

not a Moslem but a Chaldean priest of Mosul.

It is a sorry record, and Lewis is hard put to it, if the truth be told, to get a whole book out of the few scrappy reports of Islamic visitors and ambassadors to the West. What reports there were had little circulation (there is no Islamic equivalent of Marco Polo's or Mandeville's *Travels*), and in any case largely consisted of predictable xenophobia, like the description of Crusader Acre as a "land of unbelief and impiety, swarming with pigs and crosses", and shock at such European customs as women walking about in public, speaking to men who were not their husbands.

A subtler but possibly more important difference of culture is revealed by the incomprehension of a Moslem envoy who found the House of Commons *making its own laws*. Even today it is often difficult for Moslems to grasp that Christianity is not a religion of law, and that Western law is conceived to follow from agreement by duly constituted human authorities, not from interpretation of the commands of God.

An empire closed in on itself, convinced of its ideological superiority to the West and resisting contact — readers of this magazine will have no difficulty identifying a modern parallel. With that in mind it is interesting to read Lewis's account of how the Islamic world began to open itself to Western influences in the nineteenth century. When the Ottoman rulers finally realised that their military technology was hopelessly inferior to that of the West, they set up military academies on Western lines. An unintended result was that the new academies trained most of the men who later introduced Western ideas.

This is what Sakharov has been saying will happen in the Soviet Union. Soviet military technology is in trouble because of the Western lead in computers and related high-technology areas, and Sakharov has suggested that the Soviet leadership will be forced to give up the present policy of black-market purchases of these items and import Western knowledge itself. This idea has not struck commentators of a more humanist bent as very plausible, but

perhaps the Islamic parallel gives it some support. It seems to me, in any case, a good deal more reasonable than the previous Australian government's notion that banning visits by Russian representatives would help, as if the Politburo might be shamed into submission through its ballerinas and algebraists. What links there are must be preserved, and the Hawke government deserves some praise for adopting a more intelligent policy.

Not that Australia is in a good position to point the finger on the issue of ignorance of foreign cultures. To mention only one of the most scandalous cases, we live next to the world's largest Islamic country, and know virtually nothing about it. Still, we can be thankful that in this country, works by authors of other cultures, and accurate books about other cultures, such as Lewis's, are at least available. One day, someone will read them.

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