CURRENT BOOKS

SCHOLARS' CHOICE

Did God Make Slaves?

RACE AND SLAVERY IN THE MIDDLE EAST: An Historical Enquiry. *By Bernard Lewis. Oxford. 184 pp. $24.95*

THE ARROGANCE OF FAITH: Christianity and Race in America from the Colonial Era to the Twentieth Century. *By Forrest G. Wood. Knopf. 517 pp. $29.95*

Is the master-slave relationship so fundamentally unjust that all forms of slavery are similar regardless of time or place? Or was servitude in the Islamic world—as many Orientalists claim—tempered by humane considerations entirely unknown in the *Uncle Tom's Cabin*-like brutality of American slavery? The authors of these two books provide strikingly different answers, and just as striking are the different ways they reach their conclusions.

Bernard Lewis, the acclaimed Princeton Islamicist, assumes the role of an observer attempting to separate actualities from myths. Forrest Wood, a historian at California State University, sees the scholar as a kind of belated participant who applies current ethical criteria to the activities of the past. Their different historiographical approaches lead to two separate and distinct versions of the past.

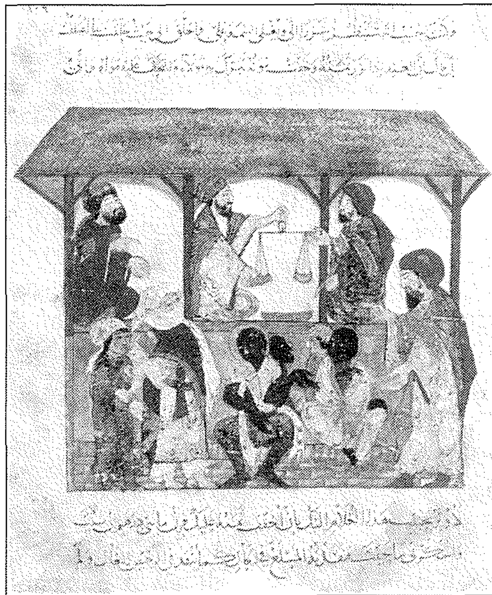
Many scholars, Lewis notes, have sought to embarrass their fellow Christians by celebrating Islamic humanitarianism. Wood is evidently one such scholar. Arabs on *jihad*, Ottoman Turks, and other Muslim true believers knew no color bar, Wood assures us, and their treatment of slaves made the institution almost a blessing rather than a curse. Recognizing talent when they saw it, the Islamic conquerors drafted African slaves to join and even lead their armies—by stark contrast with white Americans, who feared slaves carrying firearms or swords and would have quaked at the prospect of their receiving military training. By such arguments, Wood perpetuates the myth of a corrupted West compared to an innocent East.

And it is precisely such myths that Lewis so carefully takes apart in *Race and Slavery in the Middle East*. To be sure, Lewis sees Islam as a moderating force. Like the Bible, the Qur'an introduced notions of human individuality and the equality of souls. Yet these concepts did not challenge the slaveholding social order in which the faithful lived.

Economics and not religion, Lewis argues, made slavery and race into different propositions in the East and West. In the western hemisphere, slavery was usually a matter of private ownership and was tied to agrarian cash crops and mining and other menial labor. In Arabia, Iraq, and North Africa, slave labor was frequently used for governmental works, such as the draining of swamps in southern Iraq, or for military forces such as the Ottoman janissaries. But in the East castration was frequently the price of a slave's political or military advancement, which explains why ambitious slave soldiers occasionally requested emasculation. Imposed sexual impotence underscored what sociologist Orlando Patterson has called the "social death" of the slave. Cruel as Western slavery was, it encouraged slaves to have families (for economic reasons) and permitted them to develop their own culture. Lewis shows how castration, extraordinary mortality rates, and the use of slave women solely for their masters' sexual pleasure all resulted in there being far fewer subcultures of slave descendants in the Middle East than in the Americas today.

Lewis leaves no doubt that racial preju-

dice in the Muslim world was far more complicated than the simple Western myths about Islamic tolerance would have us believe. A person's color in the pre-Islamic Mediterranean world meant little. In ancient Greece, Rome, and North Africa, slaves had come from outlying populations, and the complexions of these peoples ranged from pale white (once thought an unmistakable sign of inferiority) to ebony. Moreover, in a world where only the mighty enjoyed true freedom, the bulk of mankind placed survival above status. To survive, free people badly in need of protection sometimes sold themselves or their children into bondage.



But an antipathy toward African blacks gradually emerged in the Islamic Near East, Lewis shows. In the seventh century, the expansion of the Arabian empire led to distinctions between the conqueror and the conquered. When subject peoples converted to Islam (as they inevitably did), social and racial distinctions began to replace religious ones. The conquests also brought Arabs into contact with other Africans besides the Christianized and politically sophisticated Ethiopians, whom they had considered their equals (if not their superiors) in culture and intellect. Most important of all, however, as Arabs moved westward they encountered an African slave trade that had existed since Pharaonic and Roman times. Seeing Africans in bondage confirmed Arab perceptions of black inferiority, and the Muslim Arabs began to equate uncivilized and alien behavior with darker skin color, particularly as enslavement of lighter-skinned people became less common. The word for slave in Arabic, *'abd*, eventually came to refer only to a black slave and even, in some regions, to any black person, whether slave or free.

Lewis is too nuanced a historian to assume that Islam or slavery or even racial prejudice was static. He sees them rather as always in flux. By contrast, Forrest Wood claims that for five centuries, particularly in the New World, the Christian faith has been consistently malevolent. "Christianity," he writes, "has been fundamentally racist in its ideology, organization, and practice." Comprehensive in scope, *The Arrogance of Faith* covers racial offenses of Christian Americans from the killing of the first Indian at home to the last Vietnamese abroad. By no means uninformative, Wood's catalogue nevertheless ignores every advance made under Christian inspiration.

Ignoring half the story, Wood has written a 500-page history that is ultimately ahistorical. From his present perspective, he inserts options for actions into the past that simply did not exist at the time. The question for 17th- and 18th-century Christians was not how to overthrow institutions like slavery but rather how to make the slave's life less brutal and godless. Yet Wood insists that American ministers and Christian laymen consistently promoted the perpetuation of bondage. The conversion of slaves to Christianity, he maintains, was solely designed to inculcate in them values of submission. A more generous view might concede that some clergymen hoped to save a few black souls.

In the late 17th and early 18th centuries, most slaveowners—only nominally

religious themselves and largely unaware that their human chattel had sensibilities nobler than those of their cattle—did not want their slaves converted. Converted slaves might demand their freedom because they had adopted the new faith or else fight for it with Old Testament vigor. Church leaders, to their credit, tried to soften planter opposition to evangelization in the slave quarters. As Wood claims, they argued that Christianity sanctioned slavery and also provided a code of behavior useful for instilling obedience. But these arguments were less a celebration of slaveholding than a strategy designed to gain the masters' acquiescence and thus humanize the whole system.

If, as most human institutions do, Christianity fell short, it also partly succeeded. Post–Civil War church leaders such as Lewis Tappan helped to start hundreds of black schools and scores of colleges. During and after Reconstruction, when secular authorities were indifferent to the plight of African-Americans and white southerners were implacably hostile, the aid of church leaders was indispensable. Yet Wood belabors the missionaries for having sought to "civilize" former slaves whom they saw as a benighted people. Unable to see shadings in the moral landscape, Wood obliterates the very real tension between church and society.

Throughout, Wood shows little charity for the humanness of the past. For that, we must turn to Bernard Lewis. From Lewis's perspective, both Islam and Christianity, though imperfectly practiced and interpreted, provided far more human consolation than their critics will allow. Western Christianity, Lewis further reminds us, was a major factor in the movement to abolish the scourge of slavery. Islam contributed nothing to its demise. "From a Muslim point of view," Lewis declares, "to forbid what God permits is almost as great an offense as to permit what God forbids—and slavery was authorized and regulated by the holy law." Lewis, who writes history, makes possible this kind of insight. Wood, who writes polemics, does not.

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Missionary Positions

THE NATION, 1865–1990: Selections from the Independent Magazine of Politics and Culture. *Edited by Katrina vanden Heuvel. Thunder's Mouth. 534 pp. $21.95*

When I worked at the *New Statesman* in London in the 1970s, there were always those rounds of after-hours self-mockery, during which we subjected the production of a supposedly highbrow leftish weekly to a gin-sodden and masochistic review. One phrase from that period has stuck with me. "We are," said a future editor canting amid the bottles, "nothing more than a missionary outpost to the middle classes." Dismal as this objective sounded—as if some Fabian tutor had us all on a permanent weekend retreat—it still had a certain nobility to it: a sense of calling. Nevertheless, it left open the question of who the missionaries were and how they recognized one another.

The *New Statesman* was founded by Fabian and Bloomsbury types on the eve of the Great War; the *Nation* by Harvard types a half-century earlier, at the close of the Civil War. In both instances a sort of elevated optimism was in evidence that ignored the contradiction of reformist journalism. Most reformist journalists believe in liberty and in human reason, in letting the truth speak, but they also have a mission or policy which directs how that truth shall be used to fight injustices.