



Orientalism and Islam: European Thinkers on Oriental Despotism in the Middle East and India

By Michael Curtis

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Through an historical analysis of the theme of Oriental despotism, Michael Curtis reveals the complex positive and negative interaction between Europe and the Orient. The book also criticizes the misconception that the Orient was the constant victim of Western imperialism and the view that Westerners cannot comment objectively on Eastern and Muslim societies. The book views the European concept of Oriental despotism as based not on arbitrary prejudicial observation, but rather on perceptions of real processes and behavior in Eastern systems of government. Curtis considers how the concept developed and was expressed in the context of Western political thought and intellectual history, and of the changing realities in the Middle East and India. The book includes discussion of the observations of Western travelers in Muslim countries and analysis of the reflections of six major thinkers: Montesquieu, Edmund Burke, Tocqueville, James and John Stuart Mill, Karl Marx, and Max Weber.

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Editorial Review

Review

"Michael Curtis has written a discerning, authoritative book of intellectual history. He takes us back to the greats - Burke and Mill and Marx and Tocqueville and Weber - and throws a floodlight on the present. He has read widely and thoughtfully. From his pages, and from the company of those intellectual giants, we return with a new understanding of the civilizational conflicts that mark our contemporary world. This is a book of deep scholarship and learning, but it is written with ease and grace. A book of political theory, and of history as well. An essential book, for it retrieves for us a big piece of Western intellectual history and thought."

-Fouad Ajami, Johns Hopkins University

"This erudite study reveals the nature of oriental despotism through six major Western thinkers, showing a profound knowledge of these major intellectual figures. Michael Curtis draws on a large variety of sources, providing an analysis of their work that is very scholarly indeed. His surprising conclusion is that more often than not the West was the victim of Islamic aggression from the seventh century onwards, and it was not until the nineteenth century that the West became imperialist in its contacts with the Orient. This very important book illuminates the background of the present struggle between the West and militant Islam and should definitely attract the attention of the modern reader. I recommend this book in the strongest possible terms because it is both original and timely."

-Marius Deeb, Johns Hopkins University

"A prodigious piece of scholarship... In this book, Curtis considers the writings of six sets of giant intellectual figures on the subject of the Orient...The theme that unites the writings of each is their understanding of the despotic nature of Oriental regimes. Each also saw, to one degree or another, a connection between that despotism and religion, in most cases Islam."

Paul Mirengoff, Power Line blog

"Michael Curtis's book is not only an example of academic scholarship (though it has remarkable scholarly qualities); it is also a political intervention in contemporary debates."

Perspectives on Politics, Fred Dallmayr, University of Notre Dame

"As a historian, Michael Curtis is particularly well suited to remind us that Western attitudes to the Orient have never been monolithic, and that European travelers have held widely different views on Oriental political, social, and religious systems...The reader will appreciate the wealth of historical details and information and the brief but erudite overview of the ideas on Islam and the Ottoman Empire held by many European writers and thinkers from Giovanni Botero, Pierre Bayle, and Francois Bernier to Henri Boullainvilliers, Paul Rycaut, and Edward Gibbon."

Society, Aurelian Craiutu, Indiana University

"Michael Curtis, a distinguished scholar of political philosophy and political systems, has produced this significant tome at a critical time in the relations of nations...Curtis, the renowned scholar of historic political systems, has given the reader still another exploration into the human condition, and most notably into the revival of true-believer movements that fashion their instruments of discourse not from technological and scientific progress but from the spiritual underpinnings of ancient and often obscurantist belief systems."

About the Author

Michael Curtis is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus of political science at Rutgers University. He is the author of approximately 30 books, most notably *Verdict on Vichy* (2004), *Three Against the Third Republic* (1959), *Totalitarianism* (1979), and *Antisemitism in the Contemporary World* (1973). For many years, he was the president of American Professors for Peace in the Middle East and editor of the *Middle East Review*.

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