

Inequalities in Islamic state and society (A critical review on the thoughts of Bernard Lewis)

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Abstract

Islam and the West are two competitor civilizations of 21st century. West is much fear by the rapid expansion of Islam. It is imagined that very soon Islam is going to become a major religion of the Europe. Now European think tanks are constantly working to present a negative picture of Islam. Bernard Lewis is trying his best to prove that Islam is not a suitable civilization and religion for the world. As there are different classes of citizens within Islamic State and society and all the citizens are not equal in Islamic teachings and practice like women, slaves and Non-Muslims. Whereas, his presented theories are quite different than real teachings and practice of Islam. All the citizens of Islamic State are equal before law but there is difference of responsibilities according to their abilities. This article is presenting a critical and real discussion about the social inequalities blamed by Bernard Lewis, existing in Islamic state and society.

Keywords: Bernad Lewis, Islamic State, Islamic Society, Inequalities

1. Introduction

Bernard Lewis is a representative, British-American scholar of eastern studies and western thoughts, and his thoughts play an important and vital role in academic and social life of the west. He belongs to a Jewish family and has served as professor of Islamic history, international affairs and religious studies in SOAS, Princeton University and at the same time director of *The Chair in Near and Middle Eastern History*.¹ He has wrote numerous books and articles regarding the politics, history, culture and social life of the Muslims. One of his famous book is *The Jews of Islam* published in 2008, in which he discussed about the social inequalities existed in Muslim state, society and Islamic teachings. In

the following paragraphs his thoughts will be criticised in the light of Islamic teachings.

2. Classification of believers

2.1. The rank of first class citizens

According to him there are three basic qualities for being the citizens of first class rank.

“The rank of first class citizen of society was confined to free male Muslim.”²

The individuals who did not have any of these key capabilities - that is, the slaves, the lady, or the unbeliever - were not equivalent.

2.2. Earlier Arab Muslims and newly converted

But in general, these early distinctions were forgotten, and in most times and places the perceived differences between old Muslims and new converts did not go beyond the bounds of familiar social snobbery:

“True, in the earliest Islamic period there was some social differentiation between the Arab Muslim who founded the Empire and the non-Arab convert who appeared among their subjects, and traces of these differences remained in the formulations of the law.”³

The early companions of the Holy Prophet (ﷺ) were the people who have sacrificed their families, wealth and even their lives for the advancement of Islam. Therefore all the Muslim gave them huge respect due to their sacrifices for Islam. It doesn't mean that there classification among newly converted and earlier Arab Muslims.

3. Fundamental disparities of citizens

Three fundamental disparities of master and slave, man and woman, believer and unbeliever, were not only conceded; they were set up and managed by sacred law. Each of three gatherings of inferiors were seen as vital, or possibly as valuable, and all had their places and capacities, regardless of the possibility that intermittent questions were communicated about the third. Though there was general agreement on the need for slaves and women, there was at time some question about the need for unbelievers. The common view, however, was that they served a variety of useful purposes, mostly economic.

3.1 Social status of master and slave

As in pre-Islamic society slavery was legal. There were markets dealing in sale and purchase of human booty. Slaves were treated as animals and goods

of trade and market, there were no social rights for them. First time in human history, rights of slaves were introduced and it was made religious and moral obligation of believers to treat with them on equal basis.

Bernard. Lewis stated that there was inequality in social status of slave and master, but he himself admitted that there was an option for them that with the consent of his lord he can get freedom with payment. So with a contract of payment he can get freedom and can become the citizen of first class rank.

*"A noteworthy distinction between the three is the component of decision: A slave can be freed, but by the choice of his master, not his own."*⁴

Slavery was not introduced by Islam but it was an old custom of Arabs and other world at the time of Prophet (ﷺ). First time in human history Islam introduced the rights of slaves. It is mentioned in the Holy Scripture of Islam to treat them in equal basis. The Prophet of Islam (ﷺ) said:

*"A master of a woman-slave who teaches her good manners and educates her in the best possible way (the religion) and manumits her and then marries her."*⁵

*"They (your servants and slaves) are your brothers. Allah has put them in your care, so feed them with what you eat, clothe them with what you wear. And do not burden them beyond their capacities; but if you burden them (with an unbearable burden), then help them (by sharing their extra burden)."*⁶

3.2 Social status of believers and unbelievers

Second social inequality in Islamic society is because of difference between social status of Muslim and Non-Muslims. There are different kinds of Non-Muslims living in Islamic state and society.

The unbelievers are subdivided, in most Muslim theoretical discussions of the subject, by two broad classifications, one theological, the other political:

*"The theological classification is between those who follow a monotheistic religion based on revelation, and those who do not. The possessors of such a revelation are known as *ah al-kitab*, the people of book, a term commonly used for the Jews, but also applied to other religious communities possessing recognized scriptures."*⁷

3.2.1 Monotheists

Jews and Christians in Islamic state were called "*ahal-e-kitab*". They and their religion was respected.

“For the Muslims, Jews and Christians were people who had been offered God’s truth in its final and perfect form, of which their own religions were earlier, imperfect, and abrogated forms, and yet had willfully and foolishly rejected it.”⁸

3.2.2 Polytheists

The Quran perceives Judaism, Christianity, and rather dangerous outsider, the religion of the *Sabians*, as prior, fragmented, and blemished type of Islam itself, and thusly as containing a honest to goodness if contorted awesome disclosure. The inclusion of the not very precisely identified *Sabians* made it possible, by legal interpretation, to extend the kind of tolerance accorded to Jews and Christians much more widely.

“First to Zoroastrians in Persia, later to Hindus in India and other groups elsewhere. Communities professing recognized religions were allowed the tolerance of the Islamic state. They were permitted to act on their religions, subject to specific conditions, and to appreciate a measure of collective self-governance. Those were not all that qualified, those named as polytheists and idolaters, were not qualified to get toleration of Islamic state; for them, surely, as per the law, the decision was the Quran, the Sword, or subjugation.”

3.2.3 Post Islam monotheists

A difficult problem is presented by monotheistic religions that arose after the advent of Islam, especially those that emerged from within the Muslim community, such as the *Bahais* in Iran and the *Ahmadiyya* in India:

The followers of such religions cannot be dismissed either as benighted heathens, like the polytheists of Asia and the animists of Africa, nor as outdated precursors, like the Jews and Christians, and their very existence presents a challenge to the Islamic doctrine of the perfection and finality of Muhammad(ﷺ)’s revelation. Muslim piety and Islamic authority have always had great difficulty in accommodating such post-Islamic monotheistic religions.

“Inferiority of the unbeliever, however, is entirely optional and he can end it at any time by a simple act of will. By adopting Islam he becomes a member of the dominant community, and his status of legal inferiority is at an end.”⁹

This classification was for their recognition. There were no different symbols for *Ahl-e-Kitab* and polytheistic followers. All were called *dhimmi*. Both were equal in Islamic society.

It is universal habit of human societies to divide people into insiders and outsiders, and to find opprobrious names for the later, the two most self-conscious people antiquity called the rest gentiles and Barbarians:

Medieval Islam and Christendom called each other infidels; to most modern societies the term 'foreigner' combines the worst features of both barbarity and unbelief.

*"Within the Universal Muslim community, the Muslim accepted as brothers, at least there theoretically, other Muslim of whatever language, origin, of place of habitation. He rejected as aliens his own compatriots, to might be of the same stock and speak the same language, but professed another religion. He also rejected his own non-Muslims ancestors, with whom he felt little or no sense of identity of community."*¹⁰

*"By Allah, I have preached, commanded and prohibited various matters as numerous as that which is found in the Qur'an, or more numerous. Allah has not permitted you to enter the houses of the people of the Book without permission, or beat their women, or eat their fruits when they give you that which is imposed on them."*¹¹

*"Probably you will fight with a people, you will dominate them, and they will save themselves and their children by their property. The version of Sa'id has you will then conclude peace with them. The agreed version goes: Then do not take anything from them more than that, for it is not proper for you."*¹²

3. Social inequality in the status of women

*"A woman cannot choose to become a man. Both the woman and the slave are thus in a position of involuntary----for the woman also immutable----inferiority."*¹³

This is a false imagination of western scholars that there are social inequalities in Islamic society. All the citizens are equal in their status but their duties are different according to their eligibility. In Islamic society male members are the responsible for the maintenance of their families and women are responsible for the training and education of their children. Both are equal before God:

إِنَّ الْمُسْلِمِينَ وَالْمُسْلِمَاتِ وَالْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ وَالْقَانِتِينَ وَالْقَانِتَاتِ وَالصَّادِقِينَ وَالصَّادِقَاتِ
وَالصَّابِرِينَ وَالصَّابِرَاتِ وَالْخَاشِعِينَ وَالْخَاشِعَاتِ وَالْمُتَصَدِّقِينَ وَالْمُتَصَدِّقَاتِ وَالصَّائِمِينَ وَالصَّائِمَاتِ
وَالْحَافِظِينَ فُرُوجَهُمْ وَالْحَافِظَاتِ وَالذَّاكِرِينَ اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا وَالذَّاكِرَاتِ أَعَدَّ اللَّهُ لَهُمْ مَغْفِرَةً وَأَجْرًا
عَظِيمًا (Quran 33:35)

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ
أَتْقَاكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ (Quran 49:13)
مَنْ عَمِلَ صَالِحًا مِنْ ذَكَرٍ أَوْ أُنْثَىٰ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَلَنُحْيِيَنَّهٗ حَيَاةً طَيِّبَةً وَلَنَجْزِيَنَّهُمْ أَجْرَهُمْ بِأَحْسَنِ مَا
كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ (Quran 16:97)

Above mention Quranic verses clearly show the importance, status and equality of women in Islamic society. Difference in their duty is the natural demand for the survival of human family system. If both mother and father neglect family life and adopt professions for earning than who will be the responsible for the training of next generation.

“Economically, members of a family depend upon each other to fulfil their necessities. Especially the guardian, guidance and physical stability of children is the moral and economic responsibility of their Parents”¹⁴

In Islamic literature and practice men and women are equal in social, political and economic rights.

“Islamic movements like the Muslim Brotherhoods of Egypt and Jordan and Tunisia’s Ennahda have emphasized increased access to education and employment. Women are becoming more visible in the councils of Islamic organizations. Islamist women are increasingly found in the professions (physician, journalists, lawyers, engineers, social workers, university professors) and as administrators and staff in schools, clinic and social welfare agencies.”¹⁵

Women played important roles in the early period of Islamic. Historical and other evidence indicates that a woman (Muhammad’s wife Khadija) was the first to learn of the Quranic revelation. Moreover, she owned her own business:

“This precedent led jurists to recommend that women could propose to men if they so desired. Women fought in battles and nursed the wounded during the time of the Prophet. They were consulted about who should succeed Muhammad after his death. Women also contributed to the collection and compilation of the Quran and played an important role in the transmission of numerous hadith.”¹⁶

Difference of their duties is natural according to their physical appearance. A man can work hard than a woman. Man can wages wars against enemies but woman cannot. So these are not inequalities but these are different duties for different members of the society according to their capability.

The Quran declare that men and women are equal in the eye of God

"Men and women were created to be equal parts of a pair." (Quran 51:49)

The Quran describes the relationship between men and women as one of "love and mercy." (Quran 30:21)

"Men and women are to be like "members of one another" (Quran 3:195)

"like each other's garment." (Quran 2:187)

"The adherents, male and female, are companions to one another. They offer temperance and preclude bad habit and set up Salah and pay Zakah and obey Allah and His Messenger. Those are the ones whom Allah will favor with kindness. Doubtlessly, Allah is Powerful, Wise. Allah has guaranteed to the adherents, male and female, gardens underneath which streams stream, where they might live perpetually, and great homes in patio nurseries of forever. Also, Allah's pleasure is most importantly. That is the incomparable achievement." (Quran 9:71-72)

Men and ladies are similarly in charge of sticking to the five mainstays of Islam. The adherents men and ladies, are defenders of on another; they urge what is just, and disallow what is deny.

According to Quran: men are responsible for their wives, on the grounds that Allah hath made one to exceed expectations the other.

However the "superiority" ascribed to men over ladies is best comprehended as starting from their more noteworthy obligation as defenders and maintainers inside of the financial connection of Arabian culture amid the Prophet's period:

"Men are overseers of ladies, since Allah has made some of them exceed expectations the others, and on account of the riches they have spent." (Quran 4:34)

Right of divorce and Quranic teachings

The religious and social equality of women with men is well-documented theme in the Quran:

Equality is specifically affirmed in the area of divorce, what's more, ladies might have rights like the rights against them, as indicated by what is impartial.

"Divorced ladies might keep themselves sitting tight for three periods, and it is not passable for them to disguise what Allah has made in their wombs, in the event that they have faith

in Allah and in the Last Day. Their spouses are best qualified for take them back meanwhile, on the off chance that they need a settlement. Ladies have rights like what they owe in perceived way however for men there is a stage above them. Allah is Mighty, Wise.” (Quran 2:228)

While this verse supports the license of divorce presently awarded to males.

Equality of divorce rights is further exemplified in hadith literature. The Sunnah of the Prophet embodied in these hadiths provides a record of the Muslim community’s lived experience of Quranic values. Where possible, then, while grounding legal changes in Quranic values, reformers can also utilize the traditions of the Prophet to ascertain how these values were understood and thus exemplified through the actions of the Holy Prophet(ﷺ) :

One noteworthy tradition dealing with women’s right to dissolution is that of Aisha, the wife of the Prophet, who reported:

“A girl came and stated that her father had given her in marriage and told her to wait till the Prophet arrived. When the Prophet came, I told him the full story of the girl. He at once sent for the father of the girl and inquired of him whether the fact stated were true, after which he told the girl that she was at liberty to choose or repudiate her husband. The girl replied saying that she chose to retain her marriage, and that she wanted only to know whether women had any rights in the matter.”¹⁷

Women’s right to a dissolution of an unfavourable marriage is cited in a report from Imam Malik and Abu Daud:

“The wife of Thabit bin Qais, Habibah bint Sahil. . . told the Prophet ‘I and Thabit cannot pull together.’ When Thabit came to the Prophet said to him: this is what your wife says about you, so leave her.”¹⁸

The Quran had presented changes in pre-Islamic Arabian rehearse by confining the common practice and constraining the quantity of wives allowed a man to four. But even this permission was contingent upon the just treatment of each wife. As the Quran says:

“Marry women of your choice, two, three, or four. But if ye fear ye shall not be able to deal justly then only one” (Quran 4:3).

The contemporary resurgence of Islam and attempt to re-Islamize have heightened concerns about women’s progress and development of women vis-

à-vis the reforms made in the 20th century in education, employment, and gender relation:

Women and gender relation have been central to Islamic law and Muslim society. The family is the basic unit of the Islamic community, long regarded as the locus for the training of the next generation of believers. Thus, ladies' status and part have been of focal concerns and issues all through Islamic history. Their hugeness is reflected in Quranic content, prophetic conventions, and Islamic law, specifically family laws (marriage, separation, and legacy).

4. The political classification

The political grouping was between the individuals who had been vanquished or who had submitted themselves to the force of Islam and the individuals who had not. In Muslim law and practice, the relationship between the Muslim state and the subject non-Muslim groups to which it broadened its resilience and security was directed by an agreement called dhimmi, and those profiting from this settlement were known as Ahl al-dhimmi (individuals of the agreement) or all the more quickly, dhimmis:

“By the terms of the dhimmi, these communities were accorded a certain status, provided that they unequivocally recognized the primacy of Islam and supremacy of the Muslims. This recognition was expressed in the payment of the poll tax and obedience to a series of restrictions defined in detail by the holy law.

The second category of unbeliever in this political classification consist of those who have not yet been conquered are not subject to Muslim power.”¹⁹

4.1. Dar al-Islam and Dar al-Harb

Lands where Muslim government and the Islamic law exist are referred to Dar al-Islam, the sacred House of Islam; outside world, occupied furthermore represented by unbelievers, constitutes the Dar al-Harb, of Islam and the domains of unbelief there is an authoritatively required ceaseless condition of war, which will proceed until the entire world either acknowledges the message of Islam or submit to the guideline of the individuals who bring it.

He blamed this on Islam without any reference and evidence. Islam treat equally with all other religions. If this is true he should must be present or add some authentic evidence. All the conquered subjects were offered to embrace Islam, or admit submission or ready fight. As in war, it was not allowed to murder those who are not a part of this war.as women, children and old age non-Muslim were safe in battles.

Non-Muslims in Muslim state are so safe that the Apostle of Allah advised the Muslim to treat well with them. Allah and his Apostle are the responsible for the security of dhimmi.

لهم ذمة الله و ذمة رسوله فلا تخفروا الله في ذمة.²⁰

According to their own statement Christian Europe neither prized not practiced tolerance itself. Contrary to this Islam have great tolerance for other religions as there are rights of non-Muslim minorities in Muslim state and society. They are free to practice on their religion. They are not compelled to convert. Allah almighty said in the Holy Quran:

لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ (Quran 2:256)

Western scholars admit the fact, that Islam was not spread by force or sword. As in above mention paragraph, he said that majority of non-Muslims was convert to Islam, and it is impossible to say, that when and how they convert. It shows that it was the authenticity of Islam that non-Muslim observe the Islam and embrace it as religion.

Islam did not emphasize on Muslims to wage a war against all non-Muslims of the world. It is very clear that all the states wage a war against those to whom it considered its enemy. Just like this Islam wages a war against those non-Muslims who remain contrary to Islam and try to create instability in Islamic state and society. If they want to live in peaceful manners, the Holy Quran advises the Muslims to create peaceful atmosphere.

وَإِنْ جَنَحُوا لِلسَّلْمِ فَاجْنَحْ لَهَا وَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى اللَّهِ إِنَّهُ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ (Quran 8:61)
يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَقَاتِلُوا فِي الدِّينِ وَلَمْ يُخْرِجُوكُمْ مِنْ دِيَارِكُمْ أَنْ تَبَرُّوهُمْ وَتُقْسِطُوا إِلَيْهِمْ
إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ الْمُقْسِطِينَ إِنَّمَا يَنْهَاكُمُ اللَّهُ عَنِ الَّذِينَ قَاتَلُوكُمْ فِي الدِّينِ وَأَخْرَجُوكُمْ مِنْ دِيَارِكُمْ
وَبَدَّوْهُمْ عَلَى إِخْرَاجِكُمْ أَنْ تَوَلَّوْهُمْ وَمَنْ يَتَوَلَّهُمْ فَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الظَّالِمُونَ (Quran 60:8-9)

4.2 Musta'min

A non-Muslim from the Dar al-Harb may be permitted to visit the Muslim lands and even to reside there for a specific period of time, for which he gets what is referred to in Muslim law as an aman, a sort of stipend of safe behaviour:

“The holder of an aman is called Musta'min. The aman was in principle given for a limited period, and the visitor from outside who became a permanent resident changed his status from Musta'min to dhimmi. In fact, however, the aman was normally renewed on a yearly basis and resident communities to foreign merchants were allowed to retain that status.”²¹

Interestingly, the status of Musta'min was on some interpretations limited to the Christian citizen of Christian state:

“European Jews traveling in the Ottoman Empire were sometimes, especially later, treated as citizens or subjects of their countries, benefiting from the collective aman accorded to them at other times as Jews, on the same footing as Ottoman Jews, with both the advantages and disadvantages of this different status.”²²



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³ The Jews of Islam, p:9

⁴ The Jews of Islam, p:9

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⁷ The Jews of Islam, p:120

⁸ The Jews of Islam, p:9

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¹⁸ Ibid, p:109

¹⁹ The Jews of Islam, p:121

²⁰. البخارى، حديث: 391

²¹ The Jews of Islam, p:22

²² The Jews of Islam, p:22