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David Levering Lewis, *God's Crucible: Islam and the Making of Europe, 570 to 1215*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2008. Pp. xxv, 476. ISBN 978-0-393-06472-8.

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In *God's Crucible*, David Lewis recounts the rise of the religion of Muhammad in seventh-century Arabia and the spread of Islamic culture from one end of the Mediterranean to the other. His narrative moves quickly through the political, cultural, and military achievements of the Arabs, Persians, and Berbers who, by turns, gave impetus to the rapid conquests and consolidation of Islam from the seventh through the thirteenth century. At the heart of his analysis lie several historical questions about Islamic expansion into Europe, where Moslem efforts to establish a presence north of the Pyrenees were finally defeated by the Franks. Why, he asks, were the Moslem armies beaten and what were the long-term consequences of their failure?

David Lewis (NYU) is a well known scholar of American history. His biographies of Martin Luther King¹ and W.E.B. DuBois² are highly regarded pieces of scholarship. His exploration of the dynamics of Islam's confrontation with Christian culture on both sides of the Pyrenees, however, shows the strengths and weaknesses of a scholar whose previous expertise is far removed from the worlds of Muhammad, Charles Martel, and Charlemagne. On the one hand, he brings a fresh perspective to a well known story. On the other, his analysis suffers from a lack of appreciation for the *mentalité* of the Franks whose culture he examines, especially in his handling of Christianity.

In his opening chapter, Lewis argues that the astonishing spread of Islam across the Mediterranean coincided with the enervation of the Byzantine and Persian empires, which had exhausted themselves during several centuries of mutual warfare. As Islam developed in the seventh century, it rapidly spilled into the power vacuum left by these moribund empires.

The next four chapters closely examine the flourishing of Islam under the first five caliphs who succeeded Muhammad. Lewis is particularly sensitive to the crucial roles of class and clan in shaping Muhammad's message and the history of early Islam. This attention is well warranted, for it helps explain why the turbulent politics of succession that roiled the Arab world after Muhammad's death did not slow Islam's spread across Palestine, Syria, Libya and into Egypt. Lewis attributes this relentless expansion, at least in part, to the Qur'an's mandate to Moslems to convert non-believers, but not by compulsion. Converts were to enjoy the same privileges and obligations as their Arab conquerors. Those who rejected conversion were permitted to practice their own religion, but had to pay a tax called the *Jizya* to the coffers of the caliph or his emirs. In the case of those rejecting both options, the Qur'an required the faithful to wage war against the infidel until Allah decided the outcome. Hence the notion of *jihad* or war against non-believers was embedded in the Qur'an, legitimating a profitable way of life for Arabs through conquest and plunder.

In his central chapters, Lewis contests traditional scholarship with fresh perspectives on Islam's thrust into Spain and across the Pyrenees. Discussing the invasion of Visigothic Spain or al-Andalus by Islamic forces under Tariq ibn Ziyad at the behest of the Umayyad Caliph in Damascus, Lewis shows himself a champion of Islamic culture: since that culture was far in advance of that of both the Visigoths and the Franks, the coming of Islam to al-Andalus had the potential to revive and revitalize Europe. Moreover, from the very beginning of the Umayyad emirate in al-Andalus under Abd al-Rahman (r. 756-88), the Islamic rulers in Cordoba followed the Qur'an in allowing both Christians and Jews to practice their own religion,

1. *King: A Critical Biography* (1970; 2nd ed. Urbana: U Illinois Pr, 1978).

2. *W.E.B. DuBois*, 2 vols. (NY: Holt, 1993/2000)—Lewis won the Pulitzer Prize for each volume.

provided they paid the Jizya. Such religious tolerance, Lewis is quick to point out, was not found among Visigoths or Franks.

Discussing the Arabs' push into Frankish lands (chapters 6 and 7), Lewis takes issue with much of the traditional scholarship on the Battle of Poitiers, fought over several days in October 732. He sets about to debunk "The Myth of Poitiers," opposing historians like Gibbon and von Ranke who claimed Charles Martel's defeat of the Moslems at Poitiers saved Christian Europe from devastation by the followers of Islam. Lewis counters that Europe would actually have been better off had the Moslems won in 732 and introduced their superior culture to the Franks. While Moslem scholars in al-Andalus continued to make strong advances in science and learning over the next several centuries, north of the Pyrenees, the Frankish victory ensured three centuries of cultural and intellectual stagnation.

A second "myth" that Lewis disputes holds that Charles Martel's victory was pivotal in the defeat of the Moslems in France. Far more important than Poitiers, he believes, was the victory of Duke Odo of Aquitaine over Islamic forces at Toulouse (9 June 721). So complete was the rout of the massive Islamic army that eleven years passed before the Moslems in al-Andalus again ventured into France. In that interval, Martel had time to raise, equip, and train the fearsome levy of Frankish foot soldiers that overmatched the Islamic cavalry at Poitiers. Hence for Lewis, Toulouse—not Poitiers—was the key battle in the eventual defeat of the Moslems.

Lewis also explodes the myth that the victory at Poitiers was secured by heavily armed, mounted Frankish troops, whose use of the stirrup gave them an edge over their opponents. He believes the evidence shows that the main Frankish force in fact comprised heavy infantry.

Jihad met its match on the slopes of Moussais-la-Bataille as wave after wave of al-Ghafiqi's horsemen caromed off the Austrasians' human berm. Eventually, momentum tipped, and the Franks pressed forward in lethal lockstep like a giant scythe slicing through high grass. A Catholic monk somewhere in al-Andalus left a fitting description of the astonishing situation of the day: "The men of the north stood as motionless as a wall," wrote Isidore Pacensis in the Mozarabic Chronicle of 754. "They were like a belt of ice frozen together, and not to be dissolved as they slew the Arabs with the sword. The Austrasians, vast of limb and iron of hand, hewed on bravely in the thick of the fight" (171).

Lewis further maintains that revolution and turmoil within the Islamic world played a far greater role than Poitiers in preserving Europe from another large-scale Moslem invasion. In al-Andalus, the Berbers revolted against their Arab rulers beginning in 741, while at the opposite end of the Mediterranean the Abbasid overthrow of the Umayyads in 750 crippled any major initiative by the caliph.

Despite downgrading the importance of Poitiers, Lewis recognizes the long-term consequences of the victory—the Franks emerged as the most powerful group in Europe. But their culture and society were closely tied to the papacy in Rome and permeated by Christianity. This Frankish-papal alliance formed the bedrock of medieval European culture. Further, the victory at Poitiers gave Europeans a strong sense of solidarity based on a shared faith and a common enemy. Again, though, Lewis cautions against seeing these developments in a positive light: "The new Carolingian order ... was religiously intolerant, intellectually impoverished, socially calcified and economically primitive" (286).

Over his last several chapters, Lewis contrasts bleak, feudal Europe with the splendid, sophisticated, and highly tolerant Islamic al-Andalus. He particularly praises the practice of *convivencia* under the Moslems, which allowed Jews and Christians not only to practice their religion, but also to contribute to the culture and society they lived in. He also notes that as many as 40 percent of the non-Moslem population of al-Andalus embraced Islam. Many of these, however, converted out of convenience: "A declaration of faith was also a tax statement that sought release from or alleviation of sumptuary, conjugal and legal restrictions" (316). At the same time, Lewis is sharply critical of Frankish society for its growing intolerance and "religious fanaticism" (217).

It has become fashionable in recent scholarship to treat the Islamic faith and culture sympathetically, while representing medieval Christian culture as singularly aggressive and bigoted toward non-Christians.³ Yet such judgments fail to explain *why* Frankish society embraced a combative Christianity under Charles Martel and Charlemagne, or why the latter mounted many campaigns to punish neighboring Germanic tribes who lapsed with disturbing regularity from Christianity back into paganism. Charlemagne and his warriors would have thought it foolish not to wage war under the banner of their militant God, who, time after time, granted them victory in battle. To criticize these men and their society for their intolerance of other religions shows a failure to grasp how the medieval mind of these Franks worked and attributes to them shortcomings that derive from modern sensibilities and attitudes.

Despite these reservations, I find much to like about *God's Crucible*. Lewis's provocative thesis that Europe would have been better off had the Moslems from al-Andalus succeeded in advancing beyond the Pyrenees is well worth pondering. That such an argument would have been unthinkable twenty five years ago says a great deal about the recent seismic shift in western attitudes toward Islamic culture and toward religion as well, both Christian and Islamic. While the book was written for a learned lay audience, it is suitable for advanced undergraduate and graduate-level courses. It provides a fine survey of Islamic expansion and cultural development across the Mediterranean and in al-Andalus.⁴ And Lewis's views on the failure of the Moslems to establish a permanent presence north of the Pyrenees require a serious reevaluation of the "success" of Frankish culture.

3. One thinks of the numerous works of Karen Armstrong, which appear prominently in Lewis's bibliography; see, e.g., her *Islam: A Short History* (NY: Modern Library, 2000).

4. The book includes fifteen illustrations, five maps, and a helpful five-page chronology; the map entitled "Middle Eastern Empires, Late Sixth Century CE," wrongly locates Gaza in Egypt, at or near present-day Port Said.