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**ORIENTALISM AND RELATIONSHIPS
BETWEEN ISLAM AND THE WEST**

Since the end of the Second World War, a dispute has continued amongst Muslims and Arabs regarding the character of Orientalism. The period during the Cold War played a principal role in the shaping of disparate views when some of the key Arab states leaned towards the former Soviet Union, while others aligned themselves with the United States and its allies. Such alignments resulted in distinctive orientations towards cultural studies that found expression in a ‘soft’ confrontation led by Islamists on one side and leftwing leaders on the other. In exploring these differences, it is important to begin by defining what is meant by Orientalism. To do this, one needs to examine the three main areas of scholarly focus in the last two hundred years: the editing of Arabic manuscripts, historical scholarship on Islam, and Islamic religious studies and its associated branches.

In the first field, the editing of manuscripts, the Orientalists reviewed and studied a great number of manuscripts in European, Asian and African libraries and delineated them into categories. Though some of these studies were not as exhaustive as one would desire, most of these efforts significantly impacted the understanding of Islamic history, and one can only applaud such tremendous undertakings.

The second field is scholarship on Arab and Islamic history, including its sociopolitical and economic aspects. These writings were affected by the predominant thoughts in Europe at that time, which negatively influenced these historical works, and the result was that this field lacked the acuity desired. This was not tied

to religious or racist motives, nor should one tout imperialism or the perspective of an occupational presence as the cause. Instead, one finds a dominate nationalism that pervaded the works of this period, including Western historical works, that was directed towards old Arab civilization. From a literature standpoint, the European writings are clearly biased, but this tendency is a general one towards all non-European civilizations, as also witnessed in writings on the Far East (Chinese and Indian). This is not meant to excuse this weakness, but it nevertheless provides a context with possibilities of positive assessment.

The third field is Islamic studies, with its focus on the Qur'an, the Prophet, and Muslims. In these studies, extremism and biases are found. Sources of such bias are attributed either to a strong tendency toward Christian apologetics or simply to an ignorance of Islam. The result is that very few objective studies are known; instead, a campaign is evident whereby the legitimacy of the Prophet Mohammed and the Qur'an are undermined.

Over the last decades, Islamists have linked all three areas of Orientalism with the Christian agenda of Western missionary activity, which is thus looked upon as a threat. Leftists, on the other hand, viewed Orientalism as a product of the age of imperialism that employed selective and distorted sources to dominate the Muslim and Far Eastern worlds. Edward Said (*Orientalism*, 1979) adds the critique that knowledge of Orientalism is fundamentally a source of power, following Michel Foucault's theory of 'power/knowledge'.¹ According to Said, Oriental studies are about a knowledge that is directed by the West towards domination of the Arab and Muslim world in its confrontation with Islam, seeing it as a resistive factor in gaining and expanding control. It is true that many Orientalists of this period came from a background of Christian biblical scholarship or missionary enterprise, but in the best cases they were scholars of Semitic studies or Roman and Byzantine history.

Out of this, Orientalism emerges as the first source in the anthropological understanding of the Middle East. Edward Said links Orientalism and anthropology not in their origin, but in the course in which they developed. They originated during the colonial period, but in different trajectories that separated themes and sources. In the 19th century, anthropology drew upon observations in North and South America that began in the 16th and 17th centuries, and thus the basis of this discipline became a product of colonialism that continued even when independence was being gained in the 20th century. Orientalism, on the other hand, is linked with the attempt by Catholic and Protestant quests to know more about the Christian homeland. At its inception it specialized in the apologetic concerns of a Christian view, and later its relationship extended to social and historical studies, eventually being associated with colonialism and its authorities. The modus operandi was not one of introspection brought about by intercultural encounter; rather it was one

¹ M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, Routledge 1972; idem, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, Harvest Press 1982.

of truth as understood in the Christian scriptures being the measure against the perceived beliefs of Palestine and the Orient. Because of this, throughout the 19th century and until the first quarter of the 20th century, many studies regarded Islam as errant Christianity or falsified Judaism in attempts to interpret the character of Islam as a heretical post Judeo-Christian development. This began to change as more focus was placed on the study of ancient Semitic languages, archeological exploration, and their own scriptures were placed under the pressure of historical-criticism. Eventually, the theological and apologetic emphases were separated from the discipline of Orientalism.

This period saw a misfortune of methodology that was determinative of the development of Orientalism. This came about as a result of Orientalism being regarded as a specialization in the study of an existing society still part of an antiquated world about to fall to the modern influences of Marxism, new religious ideologies, or new political authorities, all of which was assumed to be a *fait accompli*. What evolved was a kind of provincialism in the study of Islamic history and culture that regarded a Muslim as an anthropological being who is not a part of historical development. This methodology continued, with some debate, until the appearance of the Annales School and the School of World History. It was then possible to study the Orient in a way that acknowledged both its particularity and its universality. Perhaps the best evidence of this are the works of Marshall G. S. Hodgson (1974), *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, Fernand Braudel (1949), *The Mediterranean: And the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, and Janet L. Abu-Lughod (1963), *Before European Supremacy: The World System A.D. 1250-1350*, all three focusing on Islamic civilization in the context of world history between the 13th and 18th centuries A. D.

Edward Said is known for his seminal work in challenging the research methods and assumptions of Orientalism, but he was preceded by three scholars, Arab and Western, who examined this area critically. In 1962, Anwar Abdel Malek challenged scholarly assumptions in an article entitled “*L’orientalisme en crise*” published in the journal *Diogea*. In the late 1960s, Abdullah Laroui launched in his thesis *L’ideologie arabe contemporaine* and later *La crise des intellectuels arabes* (1974) an attack on the cultural position of Gustave von Grunebaum’s (1969) *Modern Islam: the Search for Cultural Identity*. Then, at the end of the 1970s, Bryan Turner’s (1979) *Marx and the End of Orientalism* attacked the ideology of colonialism, regarding Orientalism as one such ideology. This was during the time that the Frankfurt School was at its peak of influence in academic circles in its critique of modernity and rationality. With regard to the Annales School, it was rewriting the history of Central Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean, while the Chicago School of History was addressing world history and global implications since 8 BC. Methodological and publishing revolutions in the humanities and social sciences influenced philological, historical, and cultural disciplines, and this resulted in shifting attitudes towards political authority. Students revolted against regimes in

Europe and the US involvement in the Vietnam War, and as the 20th century drew to a close, it appeared that an era of scholarship was ending and a new liberal leftist approach would dominate.

People such as Edward Said, Anwar Abdel Malek, Abdullah Laroui, and Bryan Turner sought to discredit Orientalism on the premise of its imperialist foundation and failure, yet they did not take into account the fact that it had grown beyond its initial foci and extended into three areas. First, the growing emphasis on linguistic studies and the emergence of textual criticism resulted in new theories of structuralism and reconstruction. Secondly, academic institutions incorporated Oriental studies into their programs, which remain today under Islamic or Middle Eastern studies programs. Finally, aspects of Orientalism were subsumed under historical and anthropology departments.

One then can trace a new influence in the 1970s, as it was during this time that Ernest Gellner began his work on fundamentalism in Algeria, and through this his ideas took shape on the roots of Islamic radicalism. His work continued until the mid-1990s, and one can see the substance of his efforts in *Muslim Society; 1981*. Gellner's advocates increased in number when the growth of Islamic movements and ascension of Islamic policies appeared, and his thesis served as a straightforward explanation for this phenomenon. He faced strong opposition, especially in the US, from the likes of Clifford Geertz (1968) and Dale Eickelman, and elsewhere through the works of Fred Halliday, Sami Zubaida, and Talaal Asad. Additionally, the countervailing position of this school continued to function and put forth the critique that the anthropology of Islamic society is an outgrowth of an imperialist understanding.

Gellner sought to establish the basis of Islam as a textual religion that gives no weight to the development of interpretative understandings. The texts of Islam are the basis upon which Islamic leaders and scholars address issues, but this is not always evident in the general development of culture and civilization. However, when a political crisis appears or major societal issues are at stake, the textual nature of Islam becomes manifest in the way in which attempts are made to resolve disputes. It is then that one sees Islamic leaders revert to textual sources from which they espouse stern views that, in their eyes, are unquestionable because of the legitimacy of the source. Therefore the current crisis with the growth of Islamists represents the reversion of Islamic leadership to textual answers to the complexities brought about by modernity.

Clifford Geertz's view challenges this supposition. Geertz suggests that if Gellner's view was correct, neither changes in society and culture nor differences between Islamic civilizations would be possible. On the contrary, one should note that Islamic societies, like other societies in the world, have been subject to change and development, and differences do exist between these societies. Though they share a unity of reference, that which is being referenced should be understood as symbolic. The terminology used may remain constant, but the meaning attached

changes as crises and challenges are encountered in society. Therefore, a single society of the Islamic world does not exist; instead there are diverse cultural and societal expressions of Islam united through higher symbols. Thus there is no relation, for example, between what is happening in Morocco and what is happening in Indonesia.

Geertz and Gellner's theses spread over the past three decades in the field of Islamic anthropology. However, a new generation of Orientalists looked less to Geertz and Asad, and more to Gellner. They were of the opinion that Gellner's views provided a superior interpretive framework because of their comprehensiveness and ability to be a tool of direct application to any situation. From an academic standpoint, this found the support of those who seek universal theorems that are able to direct one's understanding in social sciences. From a practical standpoint, Gellner's thesis was easy to use because of its simplicity in application. One need not get caught up with the complexities of society, but rather to look to the texts themselves as the source of understanding. However, a weakness is evident in such a simplification because of the need to explain exceptions. Gellner himself had to note exceptions to his theory, such as with the Ottoman Empire's policies and authority structure as related to textual sources.

This dispute and criticism continues to the present day, and from it a new trend in Orientalism has emerged. This development bases its method on textual criticism rather than flowing from historical studies. Out of this emerged several young Orientalists in the 1980s who depicted Islam as the accretion of religious development owing its roots to Christianity and Judaism. Such a turn in the scope of Oriental studies can only be viewed as a tendency towards a radicalism that results in the disintegration of the other and effects much discord. One can see this in the scholarship of John Wansborough (1978) in his *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, later on in Michael Cook and Patricia Crone's (1979) *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*, and also in the work of G. R. Hawting (*The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*: 2001) and Fred Donner (*The Early Islamic Conquest*: 1981). It is a trend that has affected most Oriental scholarship, especially in the UK and US. If we look to Crone and Cook as an example, they use textual criticism to discredit traditional Islamic sources from the first and second centuries, including the Qur'an, suggesting that they are the accretion of tradition added as needed by an expanding empire. Thus 'divine' sources are created over time to suit the needs of authorities. Particularly problematic in this position is the use of traditional Jewish and Christian references from the seventh and eighth centuries AD as a basis from which to assess the early history of Islam. Based on their understanding, Crone and Cook, both together and separately, have published works that question why Islam is opposed to change when its history is the result of initiating and adapting to change.

In the last two decades, the students of Crone, Cook, and Wansborough have authored hundreds of works critiquing the text of the Qur'an and the Sunna of the

Prophet Muhammad. This has resulted in a growing tendency in Islamic studies in American and British universities to view the foundational sources of Islamic society as having questionable veracity. Some of this arises from a secular perspective, while other criticisms contain a religious bias that gave greater credibility to Jesus and viewed the tradition of the Prophet Mohammed as an imitation of the biblical accounts of Moses. This leads one to conclude that Islam is a fabrication drawn from Jewish and Christian sources. The origin of the Qura'n is presumed to be a post-Prophet development occurring in the beginning of the second century of Islam. Likewise, Islamic jurisprudence is believed to be rooted in Roman and Jewish law and unrelated to the Qur'an and Sunna. Unfortunately these claims have been levied without reply from other segments of the scholarly community, including Muslim scholars, and thus the assumption that the first century of Islam is largely without historical documentation remains to this day.

These presuppositions lead to limitations in scholarly work on Islam. First, in the last two decades there has been more intensive focus on the texts of early Islam, but this misses the broader historical context and interdisciplinary expertise that is needed to evaluate this material. Scholars too quickly employed hypothesis and presumptions to refashion and dismantle the meta-narrative of the tradition without employing all the scholarly tools and sources available. Within a short time, these new views became accepted facts, though they are not the result of broad-based scholarly enquiry. This leads to the second limitation: these views are then perpetuated to students who hold them as sound scholarly data. The result is that current trends in Islamic studies need to be reevaluated to assess to what degree there is a scholarly basis to hold and perpetuate such views. For example, in the introduction to the *Encyclopedia of the Quran* it is clear that a revisionist approach is assumed. This can also be seen in the forthcoming edition of the *Cambridge History of Middle East*, edited by Michael Cook.

If we look more generally at the contemporary development of Oriental studies, we find three foci: 1) the emergence of Islam, 2) the history and ideology of contemporary Islam, 3) the focus on religious dialogue by joining Oriental studies with theological departments. In one sense, these foci have widened the scope of Islamic studies, yet this has also shifted scholarship away from the main areas of Islamic history, such as the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, as well as jurisprudence (*fiqh*), linguistics, the prophetic tradition, and Quranic interpretation. The exception is the sizable research on the Ottoman period due to its intertwined history with Europe.

The current foci combined with the ideological shift in Oriental studies have spurred intellectuals towards political assessment of the Middle East and Islamic world. This is seen in the works of Bernard Lewis, representing the conservative movement, and Maxime Rodinson, representing the leftwing socialist movement. The political emphasis began in the early 1960s and gained significant momentum due to the Arab-Israeli War (1967), the Iranian Islamic Revolution (1979), and the

assassination of Anwar Sadat (1981). The political attention on Islam subsequently influenced the international and economic arenas, but this was done on differing platforms—e.g., Lewis approached it from a historical perspective and Rodinson from the politics of socialism and regionalism. As the Cold War came to a close, the influence of this approach acquired full force in the 1990s with the development of a conservative approach that replaced the ‘red menace’ with the ‘green’ one. Therefore the ideology of Huntington’s ‘clash of civilizations’ and Fukuyama’s ‘end of history’ bolstered the notion of Islam as the next threat. The 11th of September, 2001 only served to spread this view, and soon it became the mantra of politicians and reporters.

Apart from this, during the last two decades too there have been serious concerns about studies of the Qur’an within Theology or Linguistics sections at the level of academic studies. A more serious cause for concern is the renewed studying of Islamic Law, particularly in the economic and legislative fields. One thing that can be seen is the worldwide popularity of Islamic banks, and this has a direct effect on studying of Islamic commercial law, showing a switch from oriental studies to economic fields. Some universities have in fact begun to take up academic programs on understanding and developing the area of studies of Islamic banks. With regard to the legislative side dealing with family law, this is what is passed through the new Islamic migrants in Europe and the convention of their customs and attitudes.

With respect to the issue of theology, and following the long years in which the end of classical and traditional orientalism was feared, it is noticeable that during the last five years researchers have again become concerned, although not widely, with the issue of Islamic theology. For this reason seminars, dialogues and debates between the main religions have begun to take place and had a serious impact again on Islamic, Jewish and Christian’ texts in the early period of Islam.

With the rise of this ideology and the imbalance in Islamic studies, an important question is raised: how does this impact understanding and relations between the Islamic world and the West? It is clear that after the Cold War the gap in understanding has widened. The assumption of a ‘clash of civilizations’ coupled with the act of terrorism on the 11th of September has only served to encourage a confrontational stance towards Islam. Therefore, it is fair to say that the revisionist and disparaging approach in Western Oriental studies has been used to worsen the relationship between Islam and the West. With the present geo-political situation, the role of Islamic studies in general and the study of the contemporary Islamic world in particular are in a decisive period. Tensions in East-West relations have grown and the understanding of Islam will shape how this is handled within societies and between nations. Therefore the importance of fair, balanced, and interdisciplinary approaches to scholarship is of utmost importance.

Fortunately, there are signs that efforts are being made to bridge this gap. This is evident in many of the newly established institutes that aim to facilitate

communication between Muslims and the West. One can also see works being published to this end, such as the recent book by Fritz Steppat, *Islam as Partner*, which was well received in the Muslim world. There is a great opportunity here. Just as in medieval history, Hellenistic culture created waves of interaction between Islam and Western thought, so too it is hoped that Orientalism will do the same by providing a suitable medium to bridge this gap and enhance communication and mutual understanding.

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