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0521778107 - Edward Said and the Religious Effects of Culture

William D. Hart

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EXODUS AND THE QUESTION OF PALESTINE

There is no Israel without the conquest of Canaan and the expulsion or inferior status of Canaanites – then as now. (Edward Said, “An exchange: Michael Walzer and Edward Said”)

The publication of Michael Walzer’s *Exodus and Revolution* ignited a controversy of extraordinary bitterness between Walzer and Said. At issue is the question of representation. What is the most appropriate way of representing the Exodus narrative and its contemporary political implications? With clarity, subtlety, and simplicity, which are the signature of his neo-Orwellian style, Walzer presents an argument for the Exodus narrative as a paradigm for revolutionary politics. This book might have received little notice (even as I write it has been underanalyzed and perhaps underappreciated) had it not been for a stinging review of the book by Said. Walzer’s book, he argues, is a sophisticated legitimization of contemporary Israeli–Palestinian relations, a historical repetition of the conquest of the land of Canaan. This review led to an exchange of letters between the two men (one a Palestinian American, the other a Jewish American) that is nothing if not vitriolic. The ascending spiral of the vitriol – the review, rebuttal, and surrebuttal – suggests that something very important is at stake in this disagreement. What are at stake, I argue, are not only competing views of how a religious narrative should be represented, but differing views on the nature of secularism and the responsibility of the intellectual.

These views beg to be further sifted, as there is more here than one might imagine. This sifting is made easier by four compound–complex questions that I pose below; they help to clarify just what the stakes are in the Said–Walzer dispute:

- (1) Why is religion a good description of ethnic, racial, and national solidarities? Or, to put this question differently, why do discussions of

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ethnicity, race, and nationalism slide easily into discussions of religion? Do these forms of solidarity enable or disable radical critique? Or is the relation between solidarity and radical critique more complicated?

- (2) Are religious consciousness and critical consciousness incompatible? Do religious commitments compromise radical critique in nontrivial ways?
- (3) In “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction,” Marx says that the criticism of religion is nearly complete. Said has doubts. Let me add to those doubts by asking: will the criticism of religion ever be completed? How would we know?
- (4) What kinds of relationship with religion are appropriate for secular critics? Must they renounce their religious affiliations, scrupulously avoid religious language, regard their religious upbringing with embarrassment or contempt, construe religious affiliations as private matters that are appropriate in their proper sphere, or can they cultivate a playful, skeptical, appreciative but ironic disposition toward them? Which is more radical – that is, more likely to produce the results that we want? Which approach is more likely to undermine the nasty aspects of religious affiliation while cultivating what is benign and even useful?

With these questions in mind, let us begin again. Said’s review essay, “Michael Walzer’s *Exodus and Revolution: A Canaanite Reading*,” reveals a man who is deeply invested, politically and existentially, in his analysis. The exchange of open letters shows two men who are equally invested in their responses to each other. In *Exodus and Revolution*, Walzer makes a historical claim about how the Exodus narrative has been understood and about its observable consequences for radical politics. People as historically and geographically different as the English Puritans, American colonists, South African Boer nationalists, members of the African National Congress, and the religious leadership of the American civil rights movement, found revolutionary inspiration in the Exodus story. For them, it was a this-worldly account of liberation from oppression. As Walzer says in the final paragraph of the book, the message that these diverse people got from the story was this:

- first, that wherever you live, it is probably Egypt;
- second, that there is a better place, a world more attractive, a promised land;
- and third, that “the way to the land is through the wilderness.”

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There is no way to get from here to there except by joining together and marching.¹

Walzer construes Egypt as a “house of bondage” and is quite effective in providing a word-picture of its oppressiveness. Egypt, he writes, “is oppressive like a hot and humid summer day,” except that it is “infinitely worse, of course.” The Hebrews were afflicted, burdened, and caused sorrow; they were tyrannized. Walzer quickly takes back or modifies this claim, in as much as “Pharaoh is never explicitly called a tyrant in the Book of Exodus.” But, these legalities aside, Walzer knows that we will get the point. Besides, he tells us, Pharaoh, in later Jewish literature, is known as the first of the tyrants. Pharaoh is cruel. So is life in the house of bondage. Repression, alienating and alienated work, humiliation, and infanticide are some of many cruelties that the Hebrews experienced. Walzer focuses in particular on the last of this litany, which he construes “as the first of a series of attempts on Jewish peoplehood that culminated in the Nazi death camps.”² While understandable, I find this sort of anachronistic reading of the past, from the perspective of the Nazi holocaust, morally pernicious. It robs history of the innocence to which it is entitled by confounding the singularity of history as this particular “slaughter-bench”³ with other slaughter benches that are totally unconnected. According to this bizarre form of historiography, what the Egyptians did to the ancient Hebrews, the Nazis to twentieth-century Jewry, and what the Arabs are now “doing” to the state of Israel become a single story. Even if Pharaoh was bad, he was not, as Walzer’s reading suggests, a proto-Nazi. To say that he was is to inflate that currency beyond moral use, beyond its ability to provoke indignation. When this historical judgment of Pharaoh becomes, in the hands of Walzer, a judgment of contemporary Palestinians, Said’s ire becomes ballistic. His anger is well justified.

Thus Said is impressed by Walzer’s skills as a writer but not by his skills as a historian and even less as an honest interpreter of the Israeli–Palestinian dispute. The upshot of Said’s review is that Walzer’s text is a thinly veiled apology for the policies of the state of Israel. Walzer recasts the nature of the contemporary Israeli state by recasting the Exodus story as “the birth of a new polity, one that admits its members to a communal politics of participation in political and religious spheres.”⁴ Further, he views Walzer’s reading of the promised-land episode as symptomatic of the book’s apologetic character. I shall have more to say about these matters in a moment. First I note that much in Walzer’s book, and from my perspective some of its most interesting parts, does

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not make it into Said's review or receives little attention. In this respect, his review is not so much unsatisfactory (a review can only do so much) as unsatisfying. But Said is razor sharp when dealing with those parts of the text that he does discuss.

Behind Walzer's deceptive partisanship, Said discerns a complex rhetorical strategy of *découpage* (the selection of evidence and "stage setting"), which Walzer deploys with chatty, disarming style. Through this rhetorical style, Walzer can ignore relevant counterevidence, which exposes the nature of his tactical maneuvers – the tactic of inclusion by deferral and the tactic of avoidance. Thus Walzer, like Foucault whom he criticizes on this very point, can evade by deferral the long arm of "scholarly law enforcement – the presentation of evidence, detailed argument, the consideration of alternative views." Or instead, he can avoid considering the reasons why the Israelites came to Egypt in the first place. What happens to Walzer's account if Egypt was the promised land, an archetype of the promised land? By ignoring this question, he can down play the sense in which Egypt itself was a prototype, an earlier promised land, where the Israelites multiplied and prospered.⁵

Lost in the specificity of Walzer's "stage setting" of the Exodus narrative, which includes Leviticus and Numbers, are many examples of Yahweh's blood lust. Nor is Said just picking on Yahweh when he criticizes the bloodthirsty character of monotheistic politics. Yahweh's blood lust is the Christian God's blood lust and Allah's blood lust too. Said's critique goes to the undesirability of monotheistic politics as such, which he thinks makes the "secular and decent politics" that Walzer wants less likely. Also lost in Walzer's account, less through the strategy of *découpage* than the tactic of avoidance, is how to separate the conquest of the land of Canaan, an essential part of the story, from "the attitudes of the murderous Puritans or of the founders of *apartheid*." This is certainly a hard blow, but not a low blow. I think that Said is right in posing this question, which is not made less right by its sharp tone.

Early in his account, Said refers to a problematic feature of Walzer's style, which is "insistent and uncompromising in places, indifferent and curiously forgiving in others." I do not think that this style is a problem *per se*, but Walzer's now serious-minded, now light-minded and easygoing style is a problem in the particular case to which Said refers. Walzer's style is also a problem when he ignores the "effective history" of the texts that describe the conquest of the land of Canaan. On this point, Said takes Walzer to task, suggesting that right-wing Zionists are better and more honest readers of these texts than Walzer is.⁶ In determining what

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the Exodus story means, Walzer gives greater weight to the later rabbinic tradition than to those traditions that were more contemporaneous with the event. In contrast, Said gives greater weight to the views of Indian-killing Puritans who saw themselves as the new Israelites and Indians as new-world Canaanites. Walzer wants to protect contemporary Judaism from too close an association with the worst part of the Exodus narrative, the divinely sanctioned genocide of the Canaanite nations, and from any associations that might be made with contemporary Palestine. Said wants Walzer to take more seriously the ugly but effective history of this narrative for Indian-killing Puritans, apartheid-practicing South African Boer nationalists, and for contemporary right-wing Zionists. For Said, Walzer's easygoing style, where matters so grave are concerned, shows just how captive he is to the religious effects of culture.

Said's critique continues relentlessly along similar lines and at a similar pace. One gets the sense that Said is circling his prey, reconnoitering and reconnoitering again before going in for the kill. He regards as bizarre Walzer's effort to derive "a realistic, secular paradigm for 'radical politics'" from the Exodus story. He sneers when Walzer "combines sacred and profane in equal doses." He can barely contain himself when Walzer maintains that the Exodus story is progressive, its account of "deliverance" unique, Western, and revolutionary. He compares Walzer unfavorably to others who have explored biblical narratives. And he questions Walzer for failing to consider the philo-Semitic context of Puritan ideology, not to mention the anti-Exodus strain in some Puritan writings. If the Exodus story is revolutionary, he asks, then why does it merit at most a passing reference in the writings of revolutionary thinkers such as Vico, Marx, Michelet, Gramsci, and Fanon? Why does Walzer fail to consider the relations, if any, between the Exodus narrative and actual events? Antonio Gramsci's "The Revolution Against 'Das Kapital'" might provide a model for this approach. There Gramsci shows the gap between the idea of *Das Kapital* and its historical instantiation or transubstantiation in the Bolshevik Revolution. Why is there no "Revolution Against Exodus?" Perhaps Walzer has not written such a piece because the logic of the red terror and the golden calf episode of the Exodus narrative (where Moses purged, in the most gruesome way imaginable, those who were responsible for this act of idolatry) is the same. Here Said disagrees with Walzer's attempt to give a social democratic⁷ interpretation of the purges where Lincoln Steffens', *Moses in Red*, had given a Bolshevik reading. Said's approach, one might say, is to

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“search and destroy,” which is not to say that intellectual search-and-destroy missions are not appropriate, sometimes.⁸

The “proof text,” as it were, for Said’s critique of *Exodus and Revolution* refers to “the destruction of the Canaanite nations.” According to Walzer, “the movement from Egypt to Canaan is taken as a metaphor for a transforming politics.” The focus of the narrative is the internal “purges of the recalcitrant Israelites” and not the conquest of Canaan. The conquest is not an important part of the story; it is not, following biblical precedent, part of the story that Walzer wants to tell. “[F]or the Canaanites are explicitly excluded from the world of moral concern. According to the commandments of Deuteronomy they are to be driven out or killed – all of them, men, women, and children – and their idols destroyed.”⁹

Said construes this passage, indeed, Walzer’s entire account, as a pseudo-secular reading. Walzer’s interpretation, he argues, can only serve to justify contemporary sectarian claims that are expansionist (read imperialist) in nature, much as the text itself justifies the many ramified exclusion of the Canaanites from the world of moral concern.¹⁰ In his exchange of letters with Said (see Appendix B), Walzer rejects this reading as exemplary of Said’s method of “perverse attribution.” He goes on to say that Said knows full well that he opposes this kind of moral exclusion, as should be obvious, even on a “Canaanite reading.”¹¹ Despite Walzer’s objections, Said presses this point in his reply. Indeed, he anticipates Walzer’s objection in his review article, where he notes the rhetoric of self-description used by Zionist writers during the period when the state of Israel was established. He claims that this rhetoric was generally religious and imperialist in character and not the rhetoric of national liberation. Zionists did not see themselves, and were not seen by their European sponsors, as a national liberation movement, but as an eccentric, though like-minded, version of European colonial undertakings such as Vietnam.¹² He cites Walzer’s 1967 article “Israel Is Not Vietnam” (co-written with Martin Peretz) as a pioneering attempt to minimize the conventional interpretation of the establishment of the Jewish state. He describes Walzer’s method of analysis as sophisticated obfuscation. He later calls it sophistry, when Walzer takes Camus as exemplary of intellectual responsibility within the context of colonialism and national liberation.

I am a partisan of Said in this dispute. But here I want to take my distance. The measure of this distance is the difference between Said’s understanding of secularism and my own. Here I want to preview some

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conclusions that I develop more extensively in Concluding Remarks. Said and I disagree about the meaning of secularism and about the sort of relations that a secular critic can properly have with religion. Said thinks of secularism as religion-abolished or as religion-strictly-quarantined. I think of secularism as a complex relationship with religion that entails an equally complex art of separation. I cannot imagine secularism without religion; they are symbiotic. I can imagine a time (with great difficulty) where it would no longer make sense to talk about secularism precisely because religion had lost it sense. So while I agree with Said's claim that the Exodus is not about revolution, I cannot accept the claim that the story has not inspired "revolutionary" forms of politics. But Said rightly questions the moral quality of the Exodus story's political and ethical legacy. On this matter, I take Said as denying Walzer's claim that social democracy is an aspect of that legacy. Said's wholesale rejection of the story, however, need not be accepted. On the retail level, there are resources for a progressive politics in the Exodus story, but these resources are accessible only after a thoroughgoing critique of considerable subtlety and dialectical skill. This critique, Walzer's failure aside, is precisely the job of the critic, even the secular critic. We begin where we are with the resources at hand, including religious narratives! We make connections and render judgments. Sometimes the connections we make are slippery and dangerous. How could they not be potentially dangerous? Some connections that we draw, like the revolutionary appropriation of the Exodus, obscure other connections, like divinely sanctioned genocide. If criticism is inherently slippery and dangerous, then there can be no safe positions. Nontrivial forms of criticism are necessarily troubled and troubling; they dance, so to speak, on the edge of the abyss. Radical criticism *is* a slippery slope. This is reason for caution, but not for dispensing with the critical task of trying to make ethical and political sense of the storied-traditions that history has given us. On my view, we have to make retail sense of these stories because we cannot abandon them wholesale. On occasion, however, we may be required to abandon particular stories, when we are convinced that they are more likely to sanction evil than good. Perhaps the Exodus is that kind of story? On the other hand, perhaps the legacy of this story and Said's exchange with Walzer say something about the limitations of Said's notion of secularism – but more about that later.

For now, the following observations will do. The Said–Walzer exchange is a sad and strange spectacle in which two ostensibly secular intellectuals find themselves locked in a tendentious contest of wits over

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what is (literally and figuratively) religious ground. As secular intellectuals, how could they not be shaped by cultural practices shot through with religious sentiment? Walzer tries to make a particular kind of sense of his religious heritage, one that is compatible with his secular, social democratic politics. Where Marx (whose family converted from Judaism to Christianity) takes Judaism as a simile for capitalism, Walzer takes it (or at least the Exodus narrative) as the birth of revolutionary politics. Said (who was baptized in Jerusalem, in St. George's Anglican Cathedral) has long since rejected his Christian upbringing – Anglican on one side, Baptist on the other. He makes a different kind of sense of his heritage. The only good option, as he sees it – for a conscientious secular critic whose religious heritage is circumscribed by bloody conflict between Jews, Christians, and Muslims, on the one hand, and, on the other, between Israelis and Palestinians – is strict rejection.

RELIGIOUS–SEULAR HIEROGLYPHICS AND THE ROSETTA STONE

I regard “Secular Criticism” and “Religious Criticism,” the introduction and the conclusion to *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, as a dossier that contains the spirit and broad outline of Said's cultural critique. These documents have a special place, an interpretive preeminence in my account. I return repeatedly to these documents, which I take as synecdoches – parts that represent the whole – of Said's cultural critique. I also regard these documents as a Rosetta stone that helps to decipher the hieroglyphic character of Said's use of terms such as sacred and profane, religious and secular, Manichaean and theological. These documents-as-Rosetta-stone allow us to read and to understand what we may previously have regarded as merely a curiosity of Said's style, a rhetorical flourish. I take them, on the contrary, as keys to what Said desires and to what he fears. To that extent, they are keys to his cultural critique.

In “Secular Criticism,” Said tells a complex and arresting story. He speaks of the humanist scholar Erich Auerbach's Nazi-enforced exile in Istanbul, where, without the benefit of a library, he wrote *Mimesis*, one of the most influential books in Western literature. According to Said, Auerbach's exile, his national and cultural homelessness, and the cosmopolitan spirit that it produced, made this great book possible. But the freedom and critical distance that are available in a condition of exile and homelessness are always threatened by the recuperating and dog-

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matic powers of culture. Culture is fluid-like; it saturates “everything within its purview.” But it does so by separating the best from the “not best,” the normal from the abnormal, the insider from the outsider. Cultural judgments, the distinction between good and bad, enlist the enforcement power of the state. Culture and the state – as Matthew Arnold argues approvingly in *Culture and Anarchy*, which I discuss in chapter 1 – cover each other with a sacred veneer, with what Said disapprovingly calls a “quasi-theological exterior.” Those who are inside are comfortably at home, and those outside are homeless. Culture is a sacred canopy that includes and excludes simultaneously:

in the transmission and persistence of a culture there is a continual process of reinforcement, by which the hegemonic culture will add to itself the prerogatives given it by its sense of national identity, its power as an implement, ally, or branch of the state, its rightness, its exterior forms and assertions of itself; and most important, by its vindicated power as a victor over everything not itself (*WTC* 5–14).

This process inspires resistance, the most important of which (for Said’s purpose) is offered by the intellectual, not the party man or woman, but the isolated individual consciousness. Said, as we shall see, is torn between this solitary, romantic-individualist, Julien Benda-like intellectual and Antonio Gramsci’s organic intellectual who, as the word organic suggests, is a component of a larger social organism. The task of this intellectual is to resist the “quasi-religious authority” of culture; the “authority of being comfortably at home among one’s people, supported by known powers and acceptable values, protected against the outside world” (*WTC* 15–16).

Having described the task of the critical intellectual, Said then provides a detailed account of “filiation” and “affiliation,” which he claims are “at the heart of critical consciousness.” Filiation refers to those natural or cultural relations (Said is ambiguous on this point) such as biological procreation and kinship that are authoritative and precritical. Affiliation refers to those relations that compensate for and criticize the failure of filial relations. Said takes T. S. Eliot’s conversion from “mere” Protestantism to Anglicanism (or Anglo-Catholicism) and the changes that occur in his poetry from *Prufrock*, *Gerontion*, and *The Waste Land* to *Ash Wednesday* and *The Four Quartets* as exemplary of the shift from filiation to affiliation. Eliot subscribed to the antecedent authority of Anglican divines such as Lancelot Andrewes, who was “able to harness the old paternal authority [of Roman Catholicism] to an insurgent Protestant and national culture, thereby creating a new institution based not on

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direct genealogical descent but on what we may call, barbarously, *horizontal affiliation*.” This shift bears “strange fruit” in Eliot’s poetry, which is consummated by the essays in *After Strange Gods*, with its semi-belligerent “credo of royalism, classicism, and catholicism.” This poetry and these essays, and his conversion to Anglo-Catholicism, are compensatory affiliations for the failed filial pieties of Eliot’s earlier republicanism, romanticism, and Protestantism (*WTC* 17–18). The anguish, alienation, orphanhood, homelessness, and critical distance of the earlier poetry gives way before the restored authority of the later poetry. Affiliation as a critical form loses its fluidity and reimprisons what it had once liberated. This return of repressed filial authority is what Said elsewhere calls the return of repressed religiosity.

It helps if we think of Said’s use of religion and associated terms with Emile Durkheim in mind. If for Durkheim religion is the idealism (or moral force) of social life, then for Said it is an immoral and demoniac force. Accordingly, the critic must avoid two formidable temptations, irradiated by religion, that threaten to misdirect their critical attention. “One is the culture to which critics are bound filiatively (by birth, nationality, profession); the other is a method or system acquired affiliatively (by social and political conviction, economic and historical circumstances, voluntary effort and willed deliberation)” (*WTC* 18–19, 24). The failure to resist these temptations is what Said calls religious criticism. Religious discourse is “an agent of closure, which blocks the road of inquiry. Religion and culture are similar in that both provide “systems of authority” and “canons of order” that coerce and seduce a large following. They are charismatic; they produce moments of collective effervescence, divine madness. These “organized collective passions” are sometimes beneficial. They gather and bind people together, and provide them with a sense identity and group solidarity. But these passions often cause deadly harm. They produce large ideas with deadly consequences such as the Manichaeian distinctions between East and West, Islam and modernity, the sons of Enlightened reason and the sons of Oriental despotism. The critique of religious discourse, therefore, is not merely a critique of irrationality, against which “a purely secular view of reality” is no guarantee. The object of Said’s critique, and what he holds to be distinctive of religious discourse, is the appeal to “the extrahuman, the vague abstraction, the divine, the esoteric and secret.”

In contrast, a secular attitude enables one to resist the religious temptation. It encourages a healthy skepticism toward the “official idols” of culture (filiation) and system (affiliation) such as the New Criticism and