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0521778107 - Edward Said and the Religious Effects of Culture

William D. Hart

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EFFECTS OF CULTURE

This book provides a distinctive account of Edward Said's critique of modern culture by highlighting the religion–secularism distinction on which it is predicated. This distinction is both literal and figurative. It refers, on the one hand, to religious traditions and to secular traditions and, on the other hand, to tropes that extend the meaning and reference of religion and secularism in indeterminate ways. The author takes these tropes as the best way of organizing Said's heterogeneous corpus – from *Joseph Conrad and the Fiction of Autobiography*, his first book, to *Orientalism*, his most influential book, to his recent writings on the Palestinian question. The religion–secularism distinction, as an act of imagination and narrative continuity, lies behind Said's cultural criticism, his notion of intellectual responsibility, and his public controversy with Michael Walzer about the meaning and the uses of the Exodus story and about the question of Palestine.

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Current events confirm the need to understand religious ideas and institutions critically, yet radical doubts have been raised about how to proceed and about the ideal of critical thought itself. Meanwhile, some prominent scholars have urged that we turn the tables, and view modern society as the object of criticism and a religious tradition as the basis for critique. Cambridge Studies in Religion and Critical Thought is a series of books intended to address that interaction of critical thinking and religious traditions in this context of certainty and conflicting claims. It will take up questions such as the following, either by reflecting on them philosophically or by pursuing their ramifications in studies of specific figures and movements: is a coherent critical perspective on religion desirable or even possible? What sort of relationship to religious tradition ought a critic to have? What, if anything, is worth saving from the Enlightenment legacy or from critics of religion like Hume and Feuerbach? The answers offered, while varied, will uniformly constitute distinguished, philosophically informed, and critical analyses of particular religious topics.

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PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
 The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK www.cup.cam.ac.uk
 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA www.cup.org
 10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia
 Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain

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First published 2000

Typeface Monotype Baskerville 11/12½ pt. *System* QuarkXPress™ [SE]

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Hart, William D., 1957–
 Edward Said and the religious effects of culture / by William D.
 Hart.

p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in religion and critical thought; 8)
 Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0 521 77052 1 (hardback). – ISBN 0 521 77810 7 (paperback)

1. Said, Edward W. – Contributions in philosophy of religion.
 2. Said, Edward W. – Contributions in the concept of secularism.
 3. Religion–Philosophy. 4. Secularism. I. Title. II. Series.

BL51.H336 2000
 306.6'092–dc21 99-36183 CIP

ISBN 0 521 77052 1 hardback
 ISBN 0 521 77810 7 paperback

Transferred to digital printing 2003

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Edward W. Said is a celebrated cultural critic and Palestinian activist. He is arguably the most influential American critic of the last quarter century. This book arose from my surprise and bafflement at Said's cryptic, fugitive, but persistent reference to the sacred, religious, theological, and Manichaean. Why these religious references by a self-described secular critic, a thinker whose work, on first glance, seems indifferent if not irrelevant to religious matters? I contend that the presence of these references and others signals the persistence of religion as a Western conceptual category. As with Marx, Nietzsche, and Heidegger before him, religion is the great conceptual dragon that Said must slay. I explore the degree to which religion is as important to Said's critique of culture and imperialism as it is to Marx's critique of capital, Nietzsche's critique of decadence, and Heidegger's critique of metaphysics.

Said is a man of many parts. I highlight some of those parts and leave others in the dark. I give much attention to his Marxism and comparatively little attention to his role as a literary critic. He does not describe himself as a Marxist, but Marxist ideas deeply influence his thinking. As I interpret him, Said reinstates Marx's claim that "the premise of all criticism is the criticism of religion."¹ Radical criticism, therefore, has a necessary relation to religion, not an accidental one. I know of no other contemporary social critic who is more insistent on this point. True, Heidegger makes the criticism of theology and being (ontotheology) the premise of his critique, Derrida, "presence" (another term for ontotheology), and Deleuze, "transcendence." But each, in his own fashion, genuflects before Marx. Where Marx speaks with confidence when he says that "the *criticism of religion* has largely been completed,"² Said is not so sure. He makes religion an issue precisely to remind critics of what criticism is not, lest criticism, despite Marx's confidence, once again becomes theology. He voluntarily assumes a burden that most radical

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critics do not feel or acknowledge: religion being a burden that they take Marx or Nietzsche or someone else to have dealt with definitively. I take Said as qualifying Marx's claim that the criticism of religion is now complete. For him, there are signs everywhere of a "return of the repressed" – an irruption, in ostensibly critical circles, of repressed religiosity. Too many critics are "theologizing" and "demonizing" rather than criticizing. It is against this cultural and critical drift (where the critique of religion as the premise of criticism has been forgotten) that Said conceives his own project as secular criticism.

Except where necessary, I ignore Said's critics. But a brief consideration of how others have read him might help the reader put my interpretation in context. This is important, given what some will see as eccentric if not counterintuitive – namely, the accent that I put on the religious–secular thematic in Said's work. Before I take up these other readings, a quick note. The ideal reader of this book has more than a passing knowledge of Said and at least a passing knowledge of the issues at stake between religion and secularism. But such knowledge is not necessary. The moderately determined reader can educate herself along the way. She will likely come to understand why it might occur to me to think about Said and religion together. For this reader, Preliminary Remarks and chapter 6 will be especially important to understanding why Said feels so passionately about religion and secularism.

My interpretation of Said is an "excessive" act; it exceeds what is explicitly evident in his corpus. It runs, as William James would say, ahead of the evidence, but only slightly ahead, in the manner of a hypothesis. Thus I read Said against the grain, idiosyncratically, by accenting the religious–secular problematic underlying his work, by pushing, stretching, and, perhaps, overinterpreting in that direction. I find significance where others might not. I discern, loosely speaking, a "grammar of motives" underneath his use of religious and secular language. Thus I do not regard his language as merely a curiosity or a rhetorical flourish. Such an approach cannot help but have a certain quality of exaggeration: where the "right" to ambiguity and to "innocent" tropes is now permitted, now prohibited. I think that this approach illuminates Said's work. The ultimate judgment – whether my excesses illuminate or darken a picture that would otherwise be clear – is for the reader to make. This is how I read Said.

But how do others read him? Broadly speaking, there are poststructuralist, Marxist, and area studies (Middle Eastern and Asian) readings of Said. All revolve, to a significant degree, around *Orientalism*, where Said's major claim is this: *Western thought is in the grips of a metaphysics which makes an array of invidious distinctions between a decadent East and enlightened*

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West, and underwrites ideological and military domination of the East by the West. Poststructuralist readings³ of this book are often ambivalently critical: Said is thought to be one of them, but not quite. These readings are primarily aimed at vindicating poststructuralism in the face of Said's "heretical" appropriation of Foucault and Derrida. Either he is not Foucauldian enough or he is not Derridian enough.⁴ In either case, he is too much a humanist. Marxist readings of Said criticize his populist liberalism or his construction of Marx as an Orientalist.⁵ But, where the former criticism (which is largely sympathetic) is concerned, there is not the Stalinist-inflected ranting against Said that one finds in Aijaz Ahmad and his followers. Ahmad belongs to that school of Marxist thinkers that despises Marxist heretics more than capitalist infidels. This inability to tell friends from enemies (friends are always under suspicion as possible enemies) says much about Ahmad's judgment. I am at a loss as to what Ahmad enthusiasts think they see in his account. What is clear to me is that his account is little more than a footnote, a rather odd footnote, to Said. Middle Eastern Area Studies (Arab and Islamic) and Asian Area Studies are a third site from which Said is read. Like poststructuralist and Marxist readers, they do not take seriously the religious-secular thematic in Said's work.⁶ They give it passing attention, a fleeting reference here or there, if it receives attention at all. The predominant response to *Orientalism* by scholars in Middle Eastern Area Studies reflects the apologetic interests of professional Orientalists who are anxious to defend their disciplines from the charge of Orientalism – that is, the notion that such disciplines encode a rank-ordering and invidious distinction between Oriental and Occidental peoples. What is most remarkable, however, is the dearth of engagements by scholars in area studies. Some affirm the importance of Said's work, only to dismiss it as "Occidentalism." Others question his qualifications. Said, appropriately, ignores this type of criticism, which is little more than an attempt to police disciplinary boundaries as a substitute for grappling critically with his arguments. But this attempt to "trump" Said's argument by pulling scholarly rank has proven ineffective. The claim by Orientalist scholars to expertise and the corollary that Said lacks expertise fails because expertise is a presumption. "The proof of the scholarly pudding (whether we should take their presumptive expertise seriously or not) is in the eating." Seldom does one encounter a substantial and sustained analysis. What one gets instead is an uncritical celebration of Said's critique of Orientalist knowledge and power or, more often, an equally uncritical trashing.

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I strive to avoid both temptations – and many others. Accordingly, I use gender-inclusive language where appropriate. But I do not make a fetish of it, which means that I do not put gender-sensitive language into the mouths of those who, for whatever reasons, are gender-insensitive. I hope that I am sensitive. But I hope even more that I am provocative.

The support of many people has left me a debt that I can only pay with gratitude. Without the tireless work of Jeffrey Stout, whose intellectual comradeship I deeply appreciate, this book would have never been published. I was first introduced to the work of Edward Said in a graduate seminar taught by Cornel West, who encouraged my idiosyncratic interest in Said's cryptic references to religion and secularism. My interest was further stimulated by the mutual interest of Tommy Williams, a fellow graduate student. Together, we read Said's work during the summer of 1991. I cannot imagine how things might have been without the support and good humor of my best friend, Victor Anderson, or without the encouragement of my best colleague, Melvin Peters. Each, in his own inimitable way, has kept me sane. To the editors of the series Cambridge Studies in Religion and Critical Thought – Jeffrey Stout, Wayne Proudfoot, and Nicholas Wolterstorff – and to my Cambridge editor Kevin Taylor, many thanks.

An early version of chapter 1 was presented to the faculty-graduate colloquium of Princeton University's Center for Human Values. The sharp and pointed criticism of my fellow participants challenged me to think more critically. I thank the Center for its intellectual and financial support. Part of Concluding Remarks was previously published as "Cornel West: Between Rorty's Rock and Hauerwas' Hard Place" in *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 19:2 (1998), 151–172. I thank Tyron Inbody, editor of *AJTP*, for permission to use this material in an altered form and in a very different context. Also, I thank Edward Said for permission to reproduce an exchange of letters between Michael Walzer and him.

Finally, and most important, I offer special thanks to Carrol, Adrienne, and Kwame, my wife, daughter, and son. Without them, I am greatly diminished.

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Abbreviations

<i>ALS</i>	<i>After the Last Sky</i>
<i>B</i>	<i>Beginnings: Intention and Method</i>
<i>CAI</i>	<i>Culture and Imperialism</i>
<i>CI</i>	<i>Covering Islam</i>
<i>ME</i>	<i>Musical Elaborations</i>
<i>O</i>	<i>Orientalism</i>
<i>PD</i>	<i>Peace and Its Discontents</i>
<i>POD</i>	<i>The Politics of Dispossession</i>
<i>QP</i>	<i>The Question of Palestine</i>
<i>RI</i>	<i>Representations of Intellectuals</i>
<i>WTC</i>	<i>The World, the Text, and the Critic</i>