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978-0-521-76725-5 - Orientalism and Islam: European Thinkers on Oriental Despotism in the Middle East and India

Michael Curtis

Excerpt

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Introduction

What's Past Is Prologue

In 1743 Dr. Samuel Johnson commented that “a generous and elevated mind is distinguished by nothing more certainly than an eminent degree of curiosity; nor is that curiosity ever more agreeably or usefully employed than in examining the laws and customs of foreign nations.” Fifty years later he added, “There are two objects of curiosity, the Christian world and the Mahometan world. All the rest may be considered as barbarous.” The six major Western European thinkers from Montesquieu to Max Weber, and other commentators discussed here, exemplify his aphorisms in having been “usefully employed” with their varying “degrees of curiosity” about the Muslim world. This book addresses their perceptions and conclusions about the particular style of politics in the past history of the countries of the Middle East, and the nature of Islam and its impact on political behavior in those countries as well as in North Africa and Mughal India. That style has been characterized as Oriental despotism; a concept derived from the Greek word *despotes*, the master of the household who held complete power over his family and slaves. Using this concept allows one to distinguish analytically that style of autocratic and absolute government from other more moderate forms of rule.

This work is based on the premise that Western analysts and observers of Middle Eastern and Muslim societies can discuss and interpret them without being biased or racist. The discussions by the authors covered in this book implicitly refute the simplistic and reductionist argument that all European writing about the Muslim Orient is racist, imperialistic, or totally ethnocentric. If their views are controversial, they are not examples of historical partisanship. Without claiming that their views and perceptions of Muslims and of the countries in the Orient discussed by our writers are directly relevant to the resolution of current problems in the area, and without making explicit

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comparisons between the past and the present, their perceptions and diverse views are nevertheless helpful in providing a background for understanding the nature of contemporary Muslim societies and the cultural identities of the peoples in the Orient, particularly at a moment when Western countries are being challenged by groups and organizations stemming from the Middle East, and when the number of Muslims resident in Western countries has been increasing.

Clarification of the terms used here is desirable. An epigram usually attributed to Winston Churchill, though by some to Oscar Wilde or George Bernard Shaw, is that the United States and Britain are “two nations divided by a common language.” The term *Orient* exemplifies the jest. American and European, including British, usage of *Orient* often differs on the precise definition of the borders of the Orient, the term adopted from the Latin *oriens*, the land of the rising sun. Traditionally, in Western European parlance the term refers to the area of what is now called the Middle East, or, alternatively, the Near East. The adjective *Oriental* similarly refers to the peoples and cultures of those countries. The French terminology makes the point clear: the Eastern Question, the diplomatic and political issues relating to the decline of the Ottoman Empire, is named *la question d’Orient*. At variance with Western Europe usage is the customary American parlance, certainly since the late nineteenth century, of applying the term *Orient* to East Asian countries, or what is now often referred to as the Far East. What is important in all this is that the words *West* and *East* from the beginning suggested geographical as well as cultural and religious differences, though the frontiers between the two could neither easily be demarcated nor could the terms be defined with precision.

For discussion in this book, the West is regarded as synonymous with Europe, an entity embodying a number of geographical, cultural, political, religious, and moral features. Though divisions and frictions existed, and to an extent still do, among the political components of that entity, a certain sense of solidarity among the peoples of the West has resulted from common historical experiences allowing them to regard themselves as different from most other regions of the world. Europe as we now know it is little more than three hundred years old. It is the progeny of that part of the Western world once known as Christendom, which was a physical area inhabited by Catholics and, later, Protestants but excluding Orthodox, Byzantine Christians, and also a political and social entity in which people shared a common religious heritage and destiny. Acknowledging the complicated history of the area, with its unexpected turns, advances, and retrogressions, it is nevertheless a plausible argument that it was the Muslim attacks on that area and resistance to them

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between the seventh and ninth centuries that, despite lingering theological differences, helped lead to the concept and the realization of a specific physical territorial region with a common Christian community. That region defended itself against the Muslim attacks, and part of it was successful in remaining Christian; by contrast the peoples of Persia and Central Asia were less successful and were conquered and converted by those Muslim forces.

The Muslim advances and repulsions in the West had important consequences. Whether or not one accepts the controversial argument of Henri Pirenne, best expressed in his influential book, *Mohammed and Charlemagne*, that it was the rapid advance of Islam in the West that caused the break in the Mediterranean-based trading economy, the countries in the European peninsula developed an economy in which wealth was derived from land rather than water, thus leading to a feudal system.¹ More important for our present purpose was the emergence of a more distinctively Western type of Christendom that included the non-Roman as well as Roman areas but excluded Byzantine territory. Its earliest important manifestation was a Christian universality and orthodoxy with Charlemagne, the king of the Franks, being crowned on Christmas Day in 800 as Holy Roman Emperor by Pope Leo III, who switched his allegiance away from the Byzantine emperor in Constantinople. Pirenne's own famous conclusion is still worth pondering: "without Islam, the Frankish Empire would probably never have existed; without Muhammad, Charlemagne would have been inconceivable."

Christendom as a political unit gradually became more ineffectual as a result of significant events and changes: the Reformation, the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, which recognized the right of each prince to determine the religion of his own state, the decline of the Holy Roman Empire as an effective political unit, and the rise of sovereign nation-states. In its place, modern Europe, the West, emerged, the historic result of diverse factors beginning with the polities of ancient Greece and Rome, and developed into advanced, increasingly democratic states. This book deals with some prominent intellectuals in this political West.

Marcel Proust once remarked that the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new lands but in seeing with new eyes. In these days when many perceive the possibility of a hostile and dangerous confrontation between Islam and the West, and when the figure of Osama bin Laden is at least as challenging today as the Great Sultan of the Ottoman Empire was in the past, it is beneficial to examine how the two sides have perceived each other over time and what can be learned from those perceptions. The premise of this book is that the study of past perceptions represented here by six major Western European thinkers, from Montesquieu to Max Weber, and the observations of travelers, Western

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scholars of Oriental societies, and earlier political theorists from Aristotle on, who influenced those major thinkers, shed light on the true picture of political and religious life in the Middle East, still useful for understanding that area today, and on the nature and motivation of Islam.

The six major Western theorists examined here were all brilliant and celebrated figures who made important contributions to intellectual history and to political discussion in general. Here, in their contributions to the advancement of knowledge of, and conclusions about, politics and societies in Muslim countries, they address and provide an understanding of a specific type of political regime and a set of relations between ruler and ruled that are significantly different from those in their own countries, Britain and France. Their contributions have been important for the variety and perspicacious nature of their ideas, which incidentally reveal that the Western attitude to the Orient was not monolithic; the depth and range of their influence in the continuing Western discussion, perceptions, and opinions of despotism in the Orient and of the impact of Islam on societies and cultures; and their assessment of the meaningful differences between East and West.

Our six writers illustrate a syndrome of characteristics of political beliefs, leadership, and administrative and government structure in the Orient that contrasts sharply with the values and principles of Western systems. The Western world, usually understood as an amalgam of influences – Greek philosophy, Roman law, the concept of a legal person, Judeo-Christianity, secular Enlightenment, and political development leading to the creation of territorial nation-states – has incorporated values and ways of life different from both the historical and contemporary Orient. In the West, understandably imperfect as are all systems, one finds democratic principles, individual rights, balance of power, division of power, and limits to authority. One is aware of the past glories, the prominent role played in the past, or the multiple contributions to knowledge, art, scholarship, and science made by Oriental societies. One such contribution was that, between the eighth and tenth centuries, almost all nonliterary and nonhistorical secular Greek books available in the area of the Middle East were translated into Arabic. The subjects covered included astrology, alchemy, geometry, astronomy, music, Aristotelian philosophy, physics, and medicine. Five centuries later, sultan Medmed II (1541–81) called for Arabic translations of Greek works.² Nevertheless, the Western political and cultural values were absent or negligible in Muslim Oriental regimes where individuals were subject to rulers whose power had fewer institutional restraints. The Koran (4:59) makes this latter point clear: “Obey God, obey his Prophet and those who hold authority over you.”

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In contrast to the normal Western relationship of religion and politics the Prophet Muhammad was a political and a spiritual leader, promulgating the holy law of Islam and founding and ruling the first Muslim state. Within a few years he had unified the Arab tribes in Arabia around his persona and the religion he founded, and warred against Bedouin and Jewish tribes and the Byzantine Empire. He had fused the two spheres of politics and religion in such fashion that separation of them in later Muslim states has been difficult. In another telling contrast between East and West, while Muslims are not forbidden from Christian and Jewish holy places, non-Muslims by the edict of Caliph Umar, the second successor of Muhammad, were not allowed to live in, or even visit, the holy places of Islam, Mecca, and Medina.

Since the advent of Islam in the seventh century, political leaders in Middle Eastern societies have linked religion and politics in formulating policies toward everyone but especially toward Christendom and the Western world, which was seen as Islam's only serious rival. The fact that this is still the case suggests that the contemporary Middle East and the nature and significance of Islam today can only be fully understood in the light of evaluations of past history. The discussion in this book of Oriental despotism is not simply an episode in intellectual history but is a reminder that thoughts and events have antecedents as well as consequences.

Certain questions, relevant for our own times, can be posed. In view of the analysis and conclusions about past despotism in Muslim societies, are contemporary Arab Muslim societies compatible with democratic political systems or with governments based on principles of human rights? Are those societies willing or able to follow the path of modernization? If mainstream Muslim societies signify loyalty to Allah and to the Prophet Muhammad (570–632) and are based in practice on the *sharia* (the law that, in principle, regulates all aspects of Muslim communal and private life and is derived from the Koran, a text in Arabic, and amplified by the words and deeds of the Prophet and later by Islamic jurists) can they owe genuine allegiance to a territorial state not constructed on a religious basis or to a national civic society?

A challenging contemporary issue is how Muslims, if religion essentially defines their identity, should live and behave in a community under non-Muslim rule. In a manner still relevant today, our six main writers and their predecessors discuss these questions that concern, among other things, the relation between religion and political power, the parameters of religious zealotry, the role and place accorded to women, the degree of civil liberties, and political participation in the Orient. Whether these contemporary problems should be regarded as illustrative of a clash of civilizations between an Occidental and an Oriental, largely Muslim world is arguable, but less disputatious

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is recognition that meaningful differences did and still do exist between the two worlds.

These questions were long considered, usually in nonsystematic fashion, by the numerous early European travelers, missionaries, diplomats, cultural historians, and political theorists, many of whom had firsthand information and observations of Eastern countries they visited or wrote about, especially regarding the Ottoman Empire and Persia. This book's first chapters focus on these observers not only because of their own inherent interest but also because of their considerable influence on our six main writers. These figures, some highly learned, some captivating because of their attention to detail, some eccentric, provided important contributions to European understanding of the nature of Eastern societies and the continuing encounters and conflicts between Christian Europe and the Muslim East, particularly the Ottoman Empire, which at one point stretched from the frontiers of Persia to those of Morocco, and from Hungary to Yemen. In the early encounters, the West's problem was how to resist the Muslims, not how to impose imperial domination over them.

Before turning to actual Western perceptions of the Orient it is pertinent to suggest that the study by Westerners of Eastern countries is not inextricably linked to desire for power over the Orient, which implies a hegemonic imperialist or colonial attitude. Nor is it axiomatic that knowledge and perception of truth are inherently linked to the desire to impose power. Obviously scholars and commentators reflect the values and cognitive styles of their own cultures, but many, including myself, come to the study of other cultures out of enthusiasm and curiosity.

However, a now widely held and influential view is that such study by Westerners of Eastern systems cannot be truly objective.³ Inherently such study, it is postulated, contains cultural bias and inability to form conclusions in a disinterested fashion. An Arab proverb asks what camel ever saw its own hump. One can agree that the observer's subjectivity and cognitive biases inevitably influence political, ethical, or aesthetic judgments that stem from a wide range of variables, beliefs, customs, and circumstances. This is true no matter how sincere the observer's attempt to be objective, how rigorous the mastering of relevant empirical data, how careful the analysis of political, social, economic, and religious issues, and how scrupulous a comprehensive gaze cast over an intellectual landscape. An early warning came from Gunnar Myrdal, in his magisterial study, *The American Dilemma*, which stated that bias in social science cannot be erased "simply by keeping to the facts."⁴ Another came from George Orwell who, in his graphic essay, "Looking Back on the Spanish War," feared that the very concept of objective truth was fading

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out of the world, and who, in another essay, “Why I Write,” declared that no book was genuinely free from political bias.

Nevertheless, it is one thing to acknowledge that the values and the preferences of an analyst may shape the outcome of an inquiry, or end in a debatable interpretation, or even at an extreme, into a distorted presentation of reality. However, it is another matter to contend that objectivity is a concept that is only relative to the contingent schemes of individuals, or that what is called truth is merely the outcome of the subjectivity or the “narratives” of the writer.⁵ It would appear prejudiced and arrogant for critics to imply that Westerners are ignorant of or lack appreciation of cultural diversity in the world in general or cannot be objective about conditions in the Orient in particular. This would be to deny Westerners the right to search for new knowledge or ignore their concern to correct inaccurate information, an activity inherent in Western scholarly enterprise. That search is pertinent to Pascal’s aphorism: it is not certain that everything is uncertain.

The late Maxime Rodinson, the distinguished French scholar of the Middle East who was also a committed Marxist and Communist all his adult life and thus no defender of Western imperialism, made the point very well. He understood that “under the influence of decolonization and anticolonialist ideology the great temptation today, especially by the younger generation, is to reject the acquired wisdom of the past as tainted by Eurocentric and colonialist mentality.” This rejection meant forgetting that “until now it has been the West that has applied the most refined scientific methods in its approach, even if the practice of those methods had already been initiated within the non-European civilizations studied.” While acknowledging that an intimate knowledge of a society and its culture by a member of it gives that person a privileged position, Rodinson maintains it is also true that individuals outside a particular society have certain advantages in studying that society, and that an outsider’s distance from prevailing local ideologies is in itself a factor of utmost importance. The consequence of that distance is manifest in the contributions made by European writers, including those in this book, to the study of Muslim societies that include a critical approach to primary sources, recognition of cultural pluralism and its consequences, and a separation of scholarship from religious or political dogmatism.⁶

The core of the criticism of Western views of the Orient stems from post-modern theory. Since Nietzsche, the notion of objective reality, and scholarly attempts to portray that reality, has been regarded as suspect and truth held to be a social construct.⁷ One late-twentieth-century exponent of this school of thought, the influential French philosopher Jean Baudrillard, proffered the concept of “hyper reality,” the view that individuals today can no

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longer discern what reality is because they are lost in a world of “simulacra,” images and signs created and presented as “real” by the mass media, information technologies, and entertainment events.⁸ Spectacle is seen as crucial in creating our perception of the real. At an extreme, Baudrillard’s concept may also suggest that reality does not exist independently of human representations.

If this postmodern view emphasizes the power of seduction, an argument, more polemically pointed regarding the possibility of objective political and historical analysis, is that knowledge and the perception of truth are inherently linked to the seduction of power. In the terminology of the late influential French intellectual Michel Foucault, the production of knowledge and the exercise of administrative power intertwine. For him, knowledge and “discursive practices” are social ideologies that function as forms of exerting power and disseminating the effects of power.⁹

In a more intemperate and polemical fashion this Foucaultian argument has been applied by disciples to the intellectual and cultural interactions between Western Europe (the Occident derived from the Latin *occidens*, west or setting) and the Orient. The basic assertion is that Western Europe, and then an extended West including the United States, has not only dominated and exercised colonial or imperial rule over the Orient but also that, through intellectual and aesthetic means, it has created an essentialist, ontological, epistemologically insensitive distinction between a “West,” materially developed and self-assured about its superior civilization, and an “Orient,” which it regards as inferior, backward, and not modernized. The conclusion of this argument, in reality unwarrantable self-abasement, is that investigation by Westerners of Eastern societies and politics, and the search for knowledge about them is and always has been inextricably linked with desire for power over the Orient.¹⁰ It insinuates that this distorted perspective of Eastern peoples and politics by Western scholarship is, implicitly or otherwise, in essence a justification of imperial control over the Orient.

Yet objective analysts deconstructing this argument may well conclude that it is both a credulous caricature of the true nature of Western perceptions of Eastern systems and a fallacious attribution to them of an Orient that is immutable and inferior. At its most absurd, the children’s picture books of *Barbar the Elephant* that have been written by Jean de Brunhoff since 1931 have been viewed as imperialist propaganda indicating the desirability of French colonialism. For anyone cognizant of the genuine and sincere efforts (many are included in this book) of Western writers in books, articles, reports, journals, diaries, letters to investigate, understand, and interpret Eastern cultures, customs, and political behavior, it is unreasonable to argue that Western study of the Orient is little more than a form of colonial power. Curiosity and a desire to

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contribute to the advancement of knowledge are not tantamount to cultural or intellectual forms of colonialism or disguised Western hegemony. In the main, the serious Western writers here have adhered to the aphorism of Edward Gibbon: the duty of a historian is not to impose his private judgment on an issue.¹¹

The neo-Foucaultian argument, sometimes couched in arcane opacity, conveys a monolithic and binary view of what has been and remains today, in reality, a complex and knotty process of understanding and interpreting foreign cultures.¹² In this intellectual debate a justifiable response is that if one assumes an essentialist, automatically prejudiced, and unchanging “West” and a hostile “Other,” one also assumes implicitly an “East” that can be seen in equally simplistic and essentialist fashion.¹³

These monolithic and binary views do not take into account the diversity of the historical Middle East political and military reality and the periods of change both in Europe and in the Islamic lands caused by the incorporation of different peoples and cultures. They are a simplification of a complicated series of historical events and encounters. It serves little purpose to posit a perpetual conflict between a “West” and a “Muslim Orient” in simplistic terms. One might recall that the majority of conflicts in which Islamic peoples were involved were with other Muslims. Relations between Europeans and Muslim countries were only part of the network of interactions, and interrelationships between Muslim rivals were often more important. Struggles in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, for example, between the Sunni Ottomans and the Shi’ite Persian Safavids were more intense, continuous, and important than conflict with Europeans.

Earlier, Muslim writers paid less attention to the Crusades when they were occurring than to intra-Muslim rivalries and immediate external enemies such as the Byzantium Empire and the more dangerous Mongol invasions in the mid-thirteenth century, which captured Baghdad in 1258 and slaughtered thousands and destroyed the Abbasid caliphate. The Crusades received so little attention that there was no Arabic term for *crusade* until modern times. Historical analysis also shows alliances changing for geopolitical reasons. France was linked to the Ottomans against the Hapsburgs; Russia was allied with the Muslim Khanates; and the Iranian Safavid dynasty sought alliances in the West. Though the argument has been forwarded for partisan purposes, it appears misguided to posit the relatively short Western dominance in the Middle East in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as if it were the norm of historical relationships.

Another consequence of the neo-Foucaultian argument is the tendency to minimize or even totally neglect the significance of the Byzantine Empire, which

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was the eastern part of the Roman Empire and had been Christian since the conversion of Constantine, who founded a city on the site of Byzantium, and then in 330 made it his capital naming it after his own name. In essence the empire was a Mediterranean state with a common faith that lasted until 1453. The neo-Foucaultian argument thus ignores the reality that the Byzantines dominated the eastern Mediterranean for several centuries and shared with Muslims cultural and economic contacts as well as the conflicts that forced them to surrender territories to the Muslim conquerors. Such a reductionist argument also neglects the impact of the heirs of Byzantium: Greece, Orthodox Christianity, Russia, and the Slavic world. It ignores or denies the coexistence of a fluid interaction and cross-fertilization of cultures with continuing rivalry between Europe and Muslims and the Orient. This has long been the case. The first Islamic dynasty, the Umayyads (661–750), centered in Damascus was influenced by Byzantine traditions as well as by the Zoroastrian Sasanid Empire (224–651) in Iran and Iraq.

A recent insightful view of this cultural interaction is an analysis of the series of thirty-three prints, now known as the *Tauromaquia*, which Francisco Goya began etching in 1815 and which depicts the bullfight in Spain. These etchings reveal sympathetic portraits of Moors within the framework of Spanish history.¹⁴ His analysis suggests that the nine centuries of Muslim presence in the Iberian Peninsula had a considerable role in shaping the identity of the Spanish pastime, that the Moorish past was integral rather than alien to the Spanish national identity. The fluid cultural interaction is apparent in many areas, not only the aesthetic exchanges in Iberia and in Sicily but also in the icons and images shared by the East and the West even in times of conflict. Islamic rugs are prominent in some of the paintings of Hans Holbein and Van Dyck. Other well-known examples include the interaction of Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II with Italian artists, the European-style furniture in part of the Topkapi Palace, and, later, the baroque and rococo style in the Dolmabahce Palace in Istanbul. Cultural cross-fertilization in the arts and architecture between East and West, and the interaction of cultural counterpoint and conformity illustrate the permeable boundaries and shared undertakings between the two sides.¹⁵ A familiar illustration of this is the culture between the tenth and thirteenth centuries of Andalusia (al-Andalus) in Spain with its cross-fertilization of Islamic, Jewish, and Christian thinkers. In Spain, especially in Toledo, and in other European countries, Western scholars benefited from translations of Islamic scientific texts, including those on mathematics, into Latin. Historians have noted that ideas from the East permeated the Renaissance in Europe. William McNeill wrote that at that time “Westerners discovered that the Muslims possessed a