

Orientalism and Islamism: A Comparative Study of Approaches to Islamic Studies

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Comparative Study of Approaches to Islamic Studies

This research addresses Western non-Muslims' system of knowledge and ideas about Islam and Muslims ("Orientalism") and radical, activist Muslims' interpretation of Islam ("Islamism"). Revolving around long-held stereotypes, presuppositions and theories, I propose to evaluate, analyse, and enhance their discourses on issues of strategic importance, fostering the necessary nexus of international security and development. Specific issues will include mutual understanding, pluralism, jihadism, and many dimensions of modernity.

The first part of this research is concerned with Orientalism's one-dimensional essentialist's antiquarian archive of superiority attributing irrationality, tyranny, brutality, incorrigibility and other forms of irreversible inferiority to Muslims driven by their belief in Islam. Montgomery W. Watt observes, in 1961, that from the twelfth century onwards scholars laboured to correct "the crudest errors ... yet something of the bitterness of the medieval attitude has continued in Europe till the present day, and the resources of modern scholarship have not eradicated it". Five decades later and particularly with the launching, in 1978, of Edward Said's seminal *Orientalism* the discourse and status of Orientalism have greatly shifted grounds. For example by the mid-1980s in the United States of America, according to a prominent American scholar of Islamic Studies of that era, 'Orientalism was no longer a negotiable credential in one's professional portfolio. A single book changed the meta-discourse on what we were doing and what we should be doing'.² Nonetheless old stereotypes are still discernible and still driving popular attitudes, academic theorisation and public policy. Thus to date, Western political observers, as Roxanne Euben points out, fail to understand Islamic fundamentalism (what I call 'Islamism') because many view it in relation to contemporary political, social and economic challenges and dismiss them as irrational ideas and reactions to modernity.³

The next and comparative part of this research is concerned with similar Islamists' one-dimensional essentialist's archive which dismisses Western thought which shapes Western attitudes, behaviour

and life as, according to Sayyid Qutb, in the thrall of a parochial materialist world of senses devoid of faith and human spirit⁴. Of concern to the research also is Islamists' sense that only their very own interpretation of Islam all knowledge for human life and progress.

Therefore this research will re-examine: i) the evolution of Orientalism and of Islamism; ii) Orientalists' and Islamists' approach to the Islamic texts and iii) policy implications of the relationship between Orientalism and Islamism. The critical issues of concern in all cases are related to peaceful interactions, politics and modernity in general.

Many authors acknowledge the harm Orientalism and Islamism continue to cause to human knowledge and relations. M.W.Watt observes that, "Medieval Christian ideas about Islam were little better than war propaganda. At their worst, they were so palpably false that they damaged the Christian cause."⁵ For Tibawi the problem is that "an uncritical Western Europe obtained its first and fundamental knowledge of Islam from the polemic Byzantine" to which medieval Muslims responded.⁶ Similarly, Edward Said opines that, 'a great deal of what was considered learned Orientalist scholarship in Europe pressed ideological myths into service, even as knowledge seemed genuinely to be advancing'.⁷ Great Britain's Prince Charles finds it "odd" that "misunderstandings between Islam and the West should persist," for that which binds the two worlds together is so much more powerful than that which divides them. He says "a serious mistake" is that even now the common attitude to Islam suffers because understanding it "has been hijacked by the extreme and the superficial" and judgment of it "has been grossly distorted by taking the extremes to be the norm."⁸ Euben suggests that Islamic fundamentalism is "a critique of and rebuttal to rationalist discourse and post-Enlightenment political theories."⁹

The foregoing and similar understanding of Orientalism and of Islamism have their merits in varying degrees nonetheless I argue that the logic and discourses of Orientalism and Islamism are not simply about the tropes of clashing, ideologies, ideas and civilisations.

¹ Watt. W. M. (1961) *Muhammad, Prophet and Statesman*, London: University Press. 3.

² Martin Richard, C. "Islamic Studies in the American Academy: A Personal Reflection". *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. December, 2010, Vol. 78, No. 4. 903.

³ Euben, Roxanne L. (1999). *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of Modern Rationalism: A Work of Comparative Political Theory*. USA: Princeton University Press.

⁴ Sayyid Qutb, *Fil Dhilal al-Qur'an (In the Shade of the Qur'an)*, commentary of Q2:3. Trans. Adii Salahi and A. Shamis (2002-9). Leicester, UK: The Islamic Foundation. See also Sayyid Qutb's concept of *Jahiliyah* (lit. ignorance) in Qutb, Sayyid. (1964). *Ma'alim fil-tariq Signposts along the Road*. Cairo: Dar al Shuruq. Trans. Ahmad Zaki Hammad. (1990). *Milestones*. Indianapolis: American Trust.

⁵ Watt. W. M. (1961) *Muhammad, Prophet and Statesman*, London: University Press. 2.

⁶ Tibawi, A. L. (1959) "English Speaking Orientalists", *The Islamic Quarterly* vol. v. 187.

⁷ Said, Edward (1978). *Orientalism*. London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul. 63.

⁸ Charles, Prince (1993) *Islam and the West*, Oxford <http://www.oxcis.ac.uk/mpl/xt.htm#prow&prow>.

⁹ Euben, Roxanne L. (1999). *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of...* 2.

Similarly Said, concludes his preface to the 2003 edition of *Orientalism* insisting that: the terrible reductive conflicts that herd people under falsely unifying rubrics like "America," "The West" or "Islam" and invent collective identities for large numbers of individuals who are actually quite diverse, cannot remain as potent as they are, and must be opposed, their murderous effectiveness vastly reduced in influence and mobilizing power. We still have at our disposal the rational interpretive skills that are the legacy of humanistic education, not as a sentimental piety enjoining us to return to traditional values or the classics but as the active practice of worldly secular rational discourse.¹⁰

Said also suggests that not all academic discourse in the West has to be Orientalist; and I suggest that, not all discourse in the Muslim world is Islamist. The research takes seriously the intellectual history of Islamic thought and the nature of the contact and intellectual dialogues shaping Islamist and Western intellectual discourse. It moves beyond essentialist, purist and homogenizing antimodernist assumptions and reflects the real measure of religious and intellectual influences in which Islamist and Western thinkers operate.

Euben's work is the closest in the literature to this research. It claims to hold "a mirror up to anxieties within contemporary Western political thoughts about the nature and limits of modern rationalism--anxieties common to Christian fundamentalists, postmodernists, conservatives, and communitarians." Her arguments "bear on broad questions about the methods Westerners employ to understand movements and ideas that presuppose non rational, transcendent truths."¹¹ This research builds upon Euben's by: i) broadening the focus beyond Euben's concern with the role of political theory in understanding political phenomena; ii) exploring non-Western perspectives on fundamental debates about coexistence, thereby enriching Western political theory.

Edward Said's *Orientalism*, though severely criticised (Ibn Warraq, Varisco, Lewis),¹² is widely accepted as "ground breaking" and "profoundly influential in a diverse range of disciplines,"¹³ and "remains a major work."¹⁴ My research arose partly because of the growing concern of Muslim scholars in Nigeria with 'Orientalism' generally and in particular the growing influence of Said's *Orientalism*. Undergraduate students of Islamic studies are required by the Nigerian Universities Commission to take a course titled 'Orientalism and Islamic Studies'. In my experiences as a student and as a lecturer I have observed that Said's *Orientalism* provides the guiding philosophy and

framework for the studies. It clearly overshadows the earlier and shorter Muslim critique of Tibawi,¹⁵ and the huge Western critique (both scholarly and polemical) of Said's *Orientalism* seems not to be keeping abreast of nor appreciating its growing influence.¹⁶ The growing influence of Said's *Orientalism* in Nigeria should be considered against the backdrop of Said's own 'hope' that his study, for readers in the third world, "is to illustrate the formidable structure of cultural domination and, specifically for formerly colonised peoples, the dangers and temptations of applying the structure upon themselves or upon others."¹⁷ Thus the Nigerian intellectual context and nuanced view, as a case for the third world, would add value to the research.

Said was concerned with "the power of the discourse of Orientalism." He believed that when one is thinking about Islam, and the Orient, there are words one constantly has to use with "no knowledge that isn't codified." Thus for Said, *Orientalism* is a pervasive Western academic tradition, of prejudiced outsider interpretations "shaped by the attitudes of European imperialism." Said argues for a paradigm shift in Orientalist reading and understandings of Islam; but Reichmuth notes that the "mediatory commitments" of Said "had been strongly battered ... almost without any further response."¹⁸ Yet Said had his problems. One, as Malcolm Kerr points out, is that, 'In charging the entire tradition of European and American Oriental studies with the sins of reductionism and caricature', Said 'commits precisely the same error.'¹⁹ Second, Said's discussion of academic Orientalism is almost entirely limited to late 19th and early 20th century European scholarship. Now, there are widespread claims that most Area Studies programs, especially in the United States, had already abandoned the 'imperialist or colonialist paradigm of scholarship'. Said himself acknowledged this fact by admitting that, the work of Bernard Lewis, which he pointed out as an example of the imperialist paradigm, was already somewhat of an exception by the time of his writing (1977). Third, Said only covers historical occurrences that happened up to 1977, and he repeatedly admits his study's shortcomings. Also, Ibn Warraq claims that, in responding to widespread and enormous criticisms, Said admitted that he had "no interest in, much less capacity for, showing what the true Orient and Islam really are."²⁰ By 1993, Said developed and modified his ideas in his book *Culture and Imperialism*.²¹ Nonetheless, *Orientalism* and its subject matter continue to inspire Muslims' responses to Western writings regarding Islam and Muslims.

¹⁰ Said, Edward (2003). *Orientalism*. London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul. .xxii.

¹¹ Euben, Roxanne L. (1999) *Enemy in the Mirror: Islamic Fundamentalism and the Limits of...* 4.

¹² Ibn Warraq (2007) *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism*. Varisco, Daniel (2007) *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid*, University of Washington Press.; Lewis, Bernard. *Islam and the West*, Oxford University Press, 1993.

¹³ Asad, T. Remarks on Edward Said's *Orientalism* in the 'Short Notices' section, *The English Historical Review*, Vol. 95, No. 376 (Jul., 1980), pp. 648.

¹⁴ Landow, George P. (2002) *Political Discourse — Theories of Colonialism and Postcolonialism*. <http://www.postcolonialweb.org/poldiscourse/said/orient14.html> . Acc. June 2013.

¹⁵ Tibawi, A. L. (1959; 1963) "English Speaking Orientalists", *The Islamic Quarterly*, vol. v. 187.

¹⁶ For the debate see Macfie, Alexander Lyon. *Orientalism*. London: Longman, 2002. See also MacKenzie, J.M. (1995) *Orientalism: history, theory and the arts*, Manchester University Press.

¹⁷ Said, Edward (1978). *Orientalism*. London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul. 25.

¹⁸ Reichmuth Stefan 2005. *Facets of Orientalism—Introductory Remarks*, Bochum Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, *Die Welt des Islams* 45, 3, www.brill.nl. Accessed 24th March 2013.

¹⁹ Kerr, Malcolm. Edward Said, *Orientalism*, "International study of Middle eastern studies. 544-547, <http://www.geocities.com/orientalismorg/Kerr.htm>. 1980. Accessed 24th March 2013.

²⁰ Ibn Warraq (2007) *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism*.

²¹ Said, Edward (1994) *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books.

Edward Said's seminal *Orientalism* seems to have culminated the assault but not the de-construction of Orientalism. Said's 'assault' aims, according to him, 'not so much to dissipate difference itself ... but to challenge the notion that difference implies hostility, a frozen reified set of opposed essences, and a whole adversarial knowledge built out of those things.' Said says he calls for 'a new way of conceiving the separations and conflicts that had stimulated generations of hostility, war, and imperial control.'²² This study shall fill the gaps in the deconstruction of faulty arguments of Orientalism that drive threats Western imperial domination not along the trajectory of the depiction of Orientalism as a synonym of Western domination but by a simple scholarly mining of errors.

Regarding Islamism, Euben and Zaman has so far presented the most comprehensive, in one volume, writings of 19 Islamist intellectuals and activists. The anthology illustrates distinctive features regarding especially modernism of Islamist discourses. The central concern of anthology is to present a clearer wide range of Islamist discourses such as to deconstruct discourses (which I call Orientalism) that impede clearer analysis of Islamic and Muslim discourses and which drive the Islam-West dialectic. My study aims to fill gaps still apparent in terms of authors and issues so far highlighted in the literature, in terms of the approach of authors to the texts of authority and in terms of comparing the contestations of Islamism with those of Orientalism.

Understanding the relationship, logic and discourses of Orientalism and Islamism would enhance knowledge of and from seemingly clashing ideologies, ideas and civilisations. Thus this research is about reading beyond "Orientalism" -- as Varisco²³ of American scholarship, the project will correct 'errors' of Orientalism and of Islamism. This way knowledge shall be enhanced for international peace and development.

Given its repercussions on contemporary international security, understanding the intellectual, doctrinal and practical currents of Islamism, particularly in the context of its reaction to corresponding trajectories of Orientalism, is of utmost intellectual as well as practical importance.

Thus this research aims to: i) understand the interaction between Orientalism and Islamism and how the discourses evolve and how each shape the other through reaction to the perceived 'other'; ii) evaluate and analyse, the discourses with particular attention to harmonious understanding and peaceful interactions, modernity and development, tolerance and esteem; iii) show how Western scholarship on Islam is evolving with attention to contrasting European and American scholarship, and ultimately to contribute to creating productive dialogue about the relationship between Islam and the West.

The research essentially employs discourse and textual analysis and draws on critical theories, Islamic studies and development studies. With regards to critical theories, I will be particularly concerned with approaches to reading, interpretation and understanding in the light of Skinner's discussion on 'the framework for understanding the relationship between the reader and his text.'²⁴ Prime attention is given to objectivity, values, perspectives, methodological orientation, and what Said calls 'contemporary realities' and 'lived experiences'²⁵ of authors engaged in this research as well as mine as a researcher. The research aspires to differentiate among traditional, modern, clerical, pseudo-scientific, scientific, rational, irrational, radical, and counter-radical religious discourses.

Dealing with Orientalism (as well as Islamism) will always present the problem of what Edward Said refers to as 'cutting down a very fat archive to manageable dimensions.'²⁶ Thus this stage of the research is focussed on Orientalism in the United States of America (USA). There are four principal reasons to justify the present focus on USA. First, in relation to the European, the American tradition of scholarship proposes to be objective and value neutral, an issue playing such a large role in many relevant debates. Whatever the case is, it is intriguing that, despite the perceived reign of Islamophobia in the West generally, there still exist positive perspectives of Islam in many academic works in the USA. Second, the USA offers that particularly valuable context in which researchers and writers across a wide range of disciplines are drawn from so many different cultures of the world and the 'American melting point' promises the widest variety of scholarly discourses. Third, for this research the American scholarly archive is probably the best and the largest in the world. For example, the American Oriental Society, founded in 1842 has been publishing its enormously rich quarterly academic journal since 1843. Fourth, it will be of global interest to have a scientific study of Orientalism and Islamism from a Muslim scholar outside 'the West' and outside 'the Orient' but carried out in the intellectual environment of contemporary Western civilisation par excellence that the USA represents. Particularly so since in many of these intellectual currents, whether Orientalist or Islamist, the USA occupies an important position in the popular imagination in places where these debates are lively. Thus just as it is significant that the task is carried out by an "outsider" to the West and to the Orient it is significant to focus on the environment that lays claims to global pluralism and value-free intellectual tradition and resources. It is hoped that the foregoing reasons, among others, will guarantee the discovery of and greater focus on themes of Western as well as global interests and concerns. The research hopes to find in 'the American dream' further inspiration for its logic of keeping contending traditions in dialogue with one another as essential to enhancing human knowledge and relations.

²² Said, Edward (2003). *Orientalism*. London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul. 352.

²³ Varisco, Daniel Martin (2007) *Reading Orientalism: Said and the Unsaid*. Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, : 304.

²⁴ Skinner, Quentin. "Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas" *History and Theory*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (1969), pp. 3-53. Blackwell Publishing for Wesleyan University. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2504188>. Accessed: 21/06/2013.

²⁵ Said, Edward (1978) *Orientalism*. 8-28.

²⁶ Said, Edward (1978) *Orientalism*. 16.