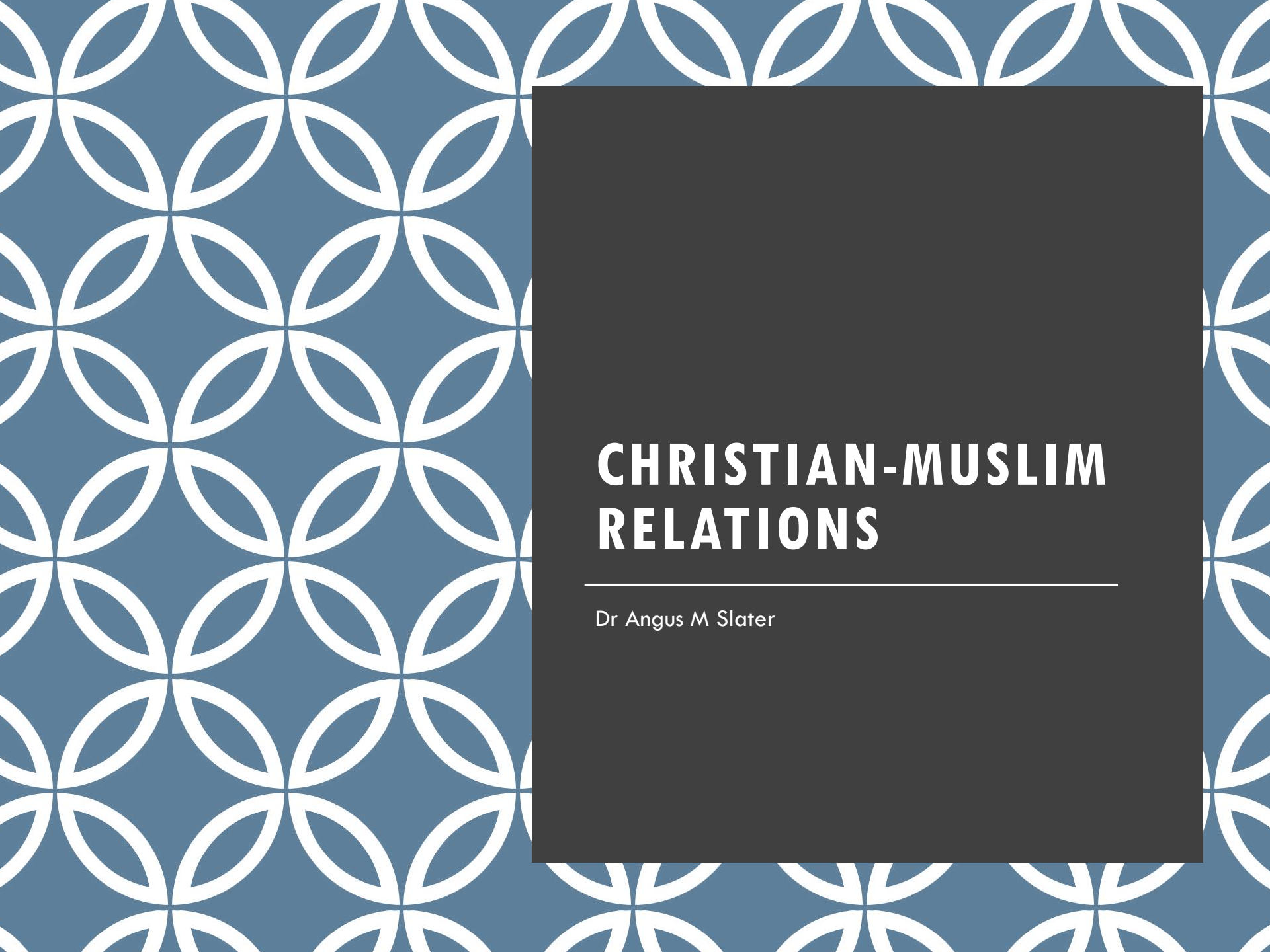




CHRISTIAN-MUSLIM RELATIONS

Dr Angus M Slater

REVISION

In the previous section, we finished examining the place of Isa / Jesus in Christian / Muslim relations, including the theological and popular culture importance of narratives surrounding him in each tradition. We saw that while many aspects of the narrative are shared between the religious traditions, there are also significant divergences that have serious theological import.

This is perhaps most clear in the different versions of Jesus / Isa's crucifixion, death, and resurrection – an issue of central importance to the Christian tradition – but there are also other areas of divergence.

We also looked at some of the ways in which Christian writing and Islamic writings about Jesus / Isa interact and where narrative tropes occur that draw from cross-cultural sources.

In doing so, I hope we have a firm grounding for just one example of the type of cross-tradition comparative work that can be done – there are plenty more areas of overlap and difference between these sibling traditions some of which you will be able to look into during your assessments.



REVISION

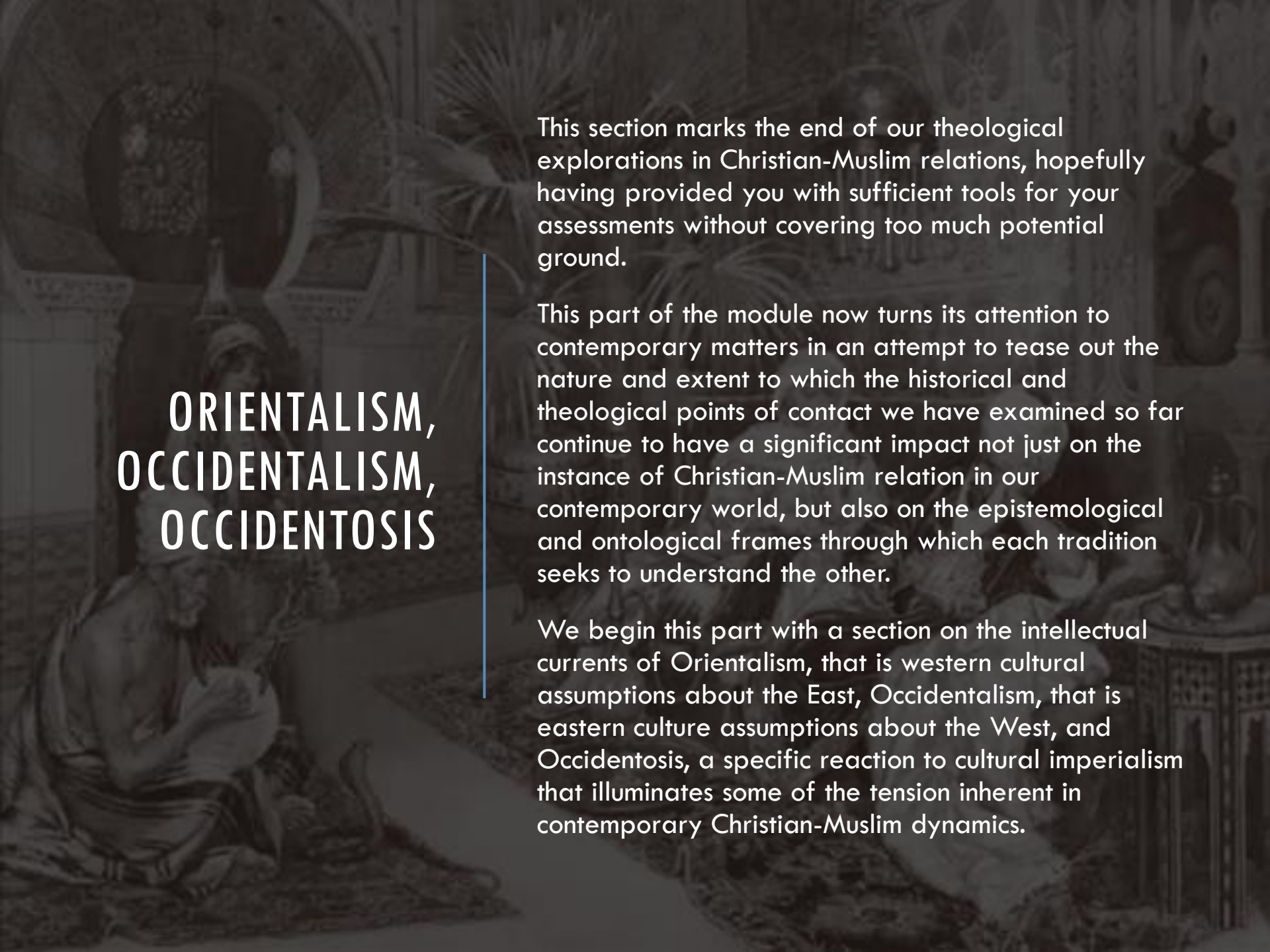
Your readings for the previous section were split between an initial piece giving you the grounding knowledge of differences in the traditions regarding the death of Christ, exploring from a theological perspective the potential responses of each tradition to this divergence of belief.

You then had two pieces which addressed other areas of overlaps between the two traditions – Mary and the Incarnation – in which there are divergent but related theological themes apparent. In both cases we see the importance not just of textual development between the two traditions, the sharing of sacred scriptures as sources between them, but also the importance of the theological development that goes alongside.

The fourth reading aimed to turn your attention to this process – the process by which the words on a page come to have a meaning for believers and the way that this meaning is integrated within the traditions alongside others.



ORIENTALISM,
OCCIDENTALISM,
OCCIDENTOSIS



ORIENTALISM, OCCIDENTALISM, OCCIDENTOSIS

This section marks the end of our theological explorations in Christian-Muslim relations, hopefully having provided you with sufficient tools for your assessments without covering too much potential ground.

This part of the module now turns its attention to contemporary matters in an attempt to tease out the nature and extent to which the historical and theological points of contact we have examined so far continue to have a significant impact not just on the instance of Christian-Muslim relation in our contemporary world, but also on the epistemological and ontological frames through which each tradition seeks to understand the other.

We begin this part with a section on the intellectual currents of Orientalism, that is western cultural assumptions about the East, Occidentalism, that is eastern culture assumptions about the West, and Occidentosis, a specific reaction to cultural imperialism that illuminates some of the tension inherent in contemporary Christian-Muslim dynamics.

ORIENTALISM

ORIENTALISM

I imagine that some of you will already be familiar with the current of intellectual history most commonly described as 'Orientalism', however I want to quickly overview it for those that haven't and as a form of revision.

Orientalism as a term emerges from the work of Edward Said (1935-2003) specifically his essay 'Orientalism' (1979) which critiques the representation of 'the Orient' in western scholarship and culture, particularly from the 18th century onwards.

For Said, this representation extends beyond purely academic considerations and is a critical aspect of the epistemological architecture of the West and its attitude towards the non-West – one that perpetuates an oppositional and adversarial mentality, justifies aspects of colonialism and control, and continues to exert power throughout Western culture.

In its most general application, the 'Orient' comes to represent everything that the 'Occident' is not.





ORIENTALISM

In Said's words:

"The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. Yet none of this Orient is merely imaginative. The Orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture"
(Orientalism, p.1-2)

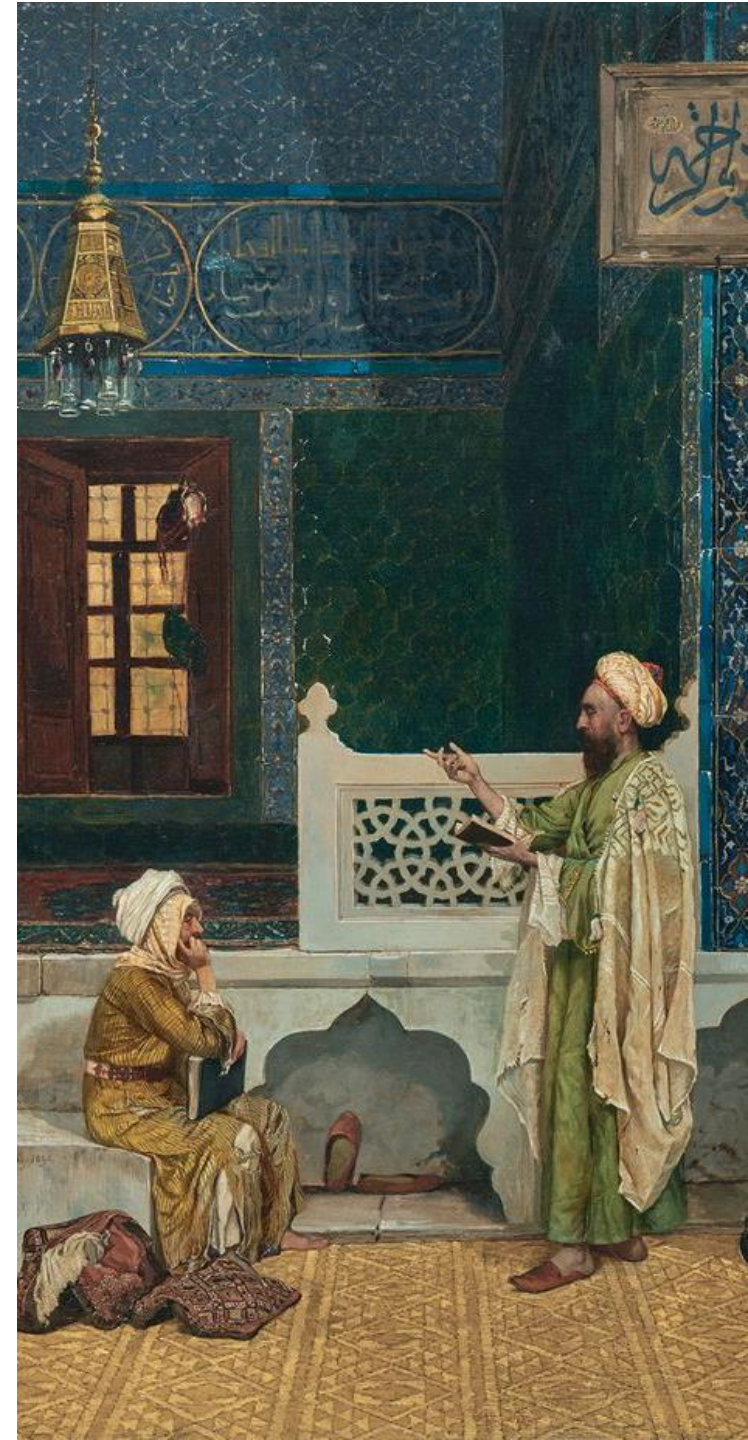
"Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient - dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Orientalism, p.3)

ORIENTALISM

Said therefore identifies in Orientalism the twin role it plays in both historical and contemporary relations between the West and the East – first, it allows for the understanding and control of the East by the West, and second, it provides the oppositional grounds on which Western cultural superiority can be upheld.

The Orient was presented and constructed as the object of knowledge, silent and passive, while the West was represented as the subject, the knower and controller of knowledge. Representation, is therefore about the exercise of power – who gets to represent and construct whom, according to their desires. This is a classic example of Foucauldian power discourses you may be familiar with.

This identity formation can be most clearly seen in the oppositional mechanics of cultural associations perpetuated about the East (and concomitantly, their opposites about the West).



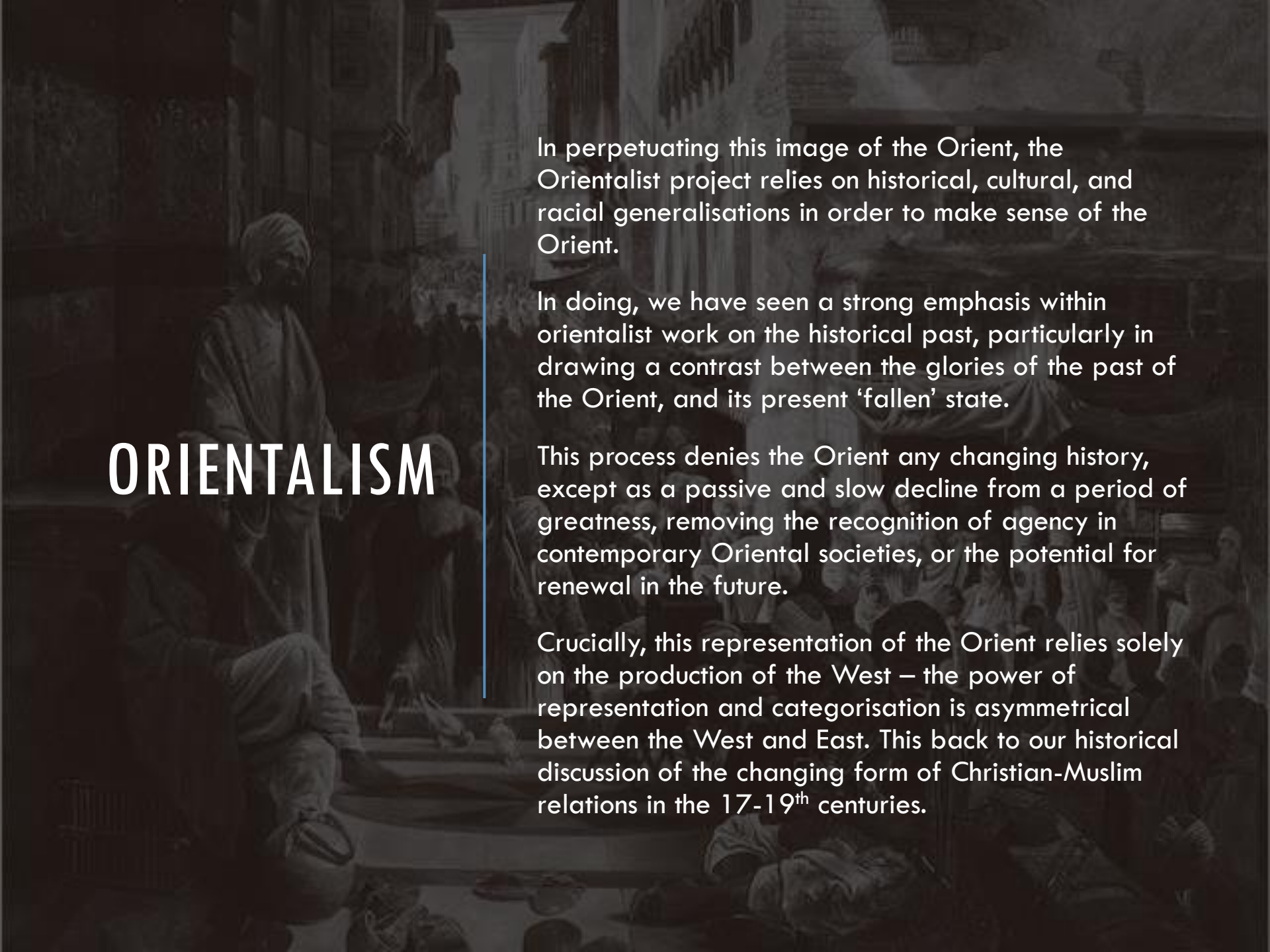
ORIENTALISM

Orientalism, as an enterprise undertaken in literature, linguistics, the University, missionary activity, art and sculpture etc, identifies within the Orient certain characteristics, that are presented as stable and inherent qualities of the East.

These have included associations with sexual decadence, falsehood and deceit, despotism, material extravagance, homosexuality and deviant masculinity, social passivity, and cultural and religious stasis.

For most of these characteristics, they are the inverse of the self-associated ideals of the West, serving to draw a firm and ontological distinction between the nature of the East and the nature of the West. Even where positive associations are imputed onto the Orient, such as an association with mystical insight, these are generally secondary forms of being when contrasted with similar processes in the West, e.g. technology.





ORIENTALISM

In perpetuating this image of the Orient, the Orientalist project relies on historical, cultural, and racial generalisations in order to make sense of the Orient.

In doing, we have seen a strong emphasis within orientalist work on the historical past, particularly in drawing a contrast between the glories of the past of the Orient, and its present 'fallen' state.

This process denies the Orient any changing history, except as a passive and slow decline from a period of greatness, removing the recognition of agency in contemporary Oriental societies, or the potential for renewal in the future.

Crucially, this representation of the Orient relies solely on the production of the West – the power of representation and categorisation is asymmetrical between the West and East. This back to our historical discussion of the changing form of Christian-Muslim relations in the 17-19th centuries.

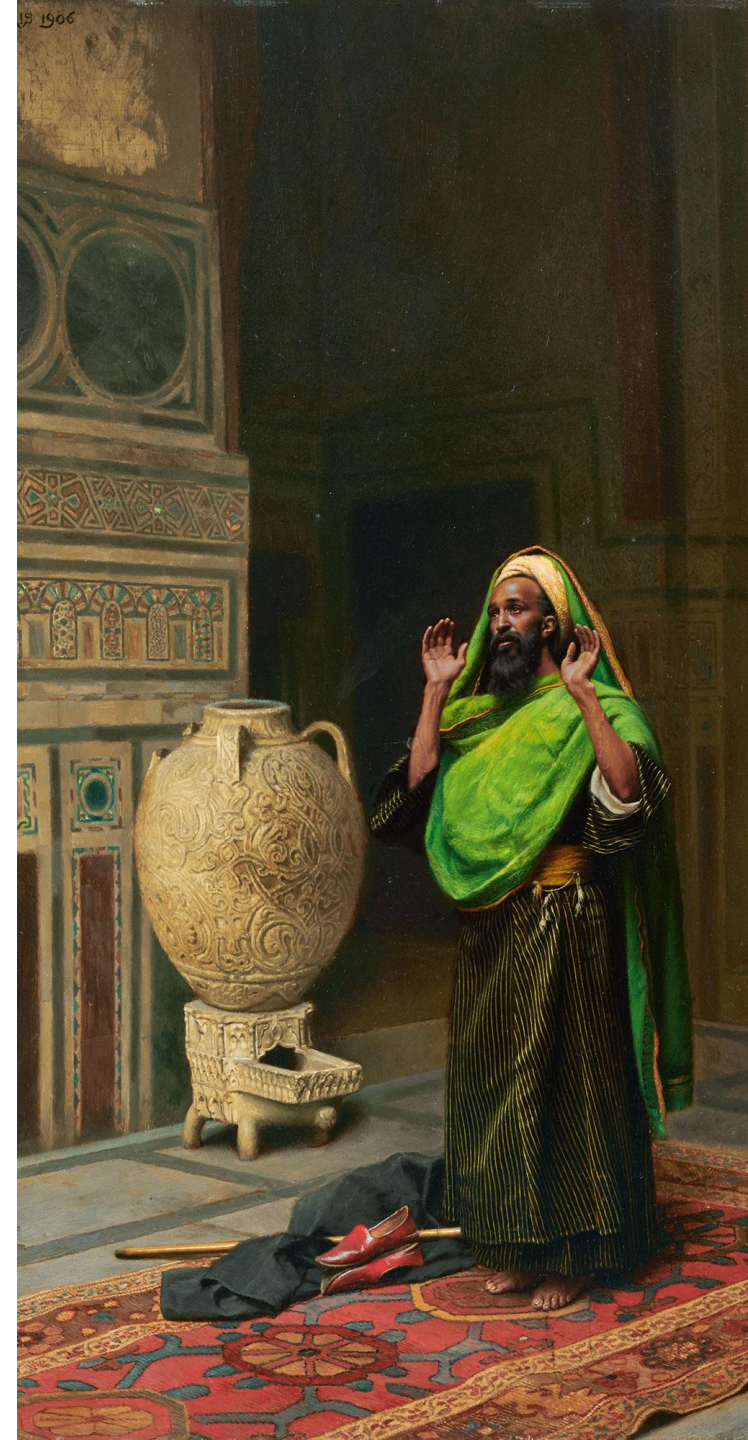
ORIENTALISM

We have seen, in recent decades, a crisis emerge in contemporary Orientalist ways of thinking, which still hold huge sway in the western cultural imagination.

The emerging disparity between the cultural project of the Orient and the reality of a changing world as meant that the established forms of seeking to understand the Orient have broken down.

Changing events, such as post-colonial independence movements, anti-colonial and anti-racist rebellions, increased economic and cultural power in non-western locations, and the excavation of alternative narratives of non-western history have come to continually challenge the image of the Orient projected by the West.

In doing so, not only has the ability of the West to categorise the East been weakened, but a crisis has emerged in the self-definition of the West itself.



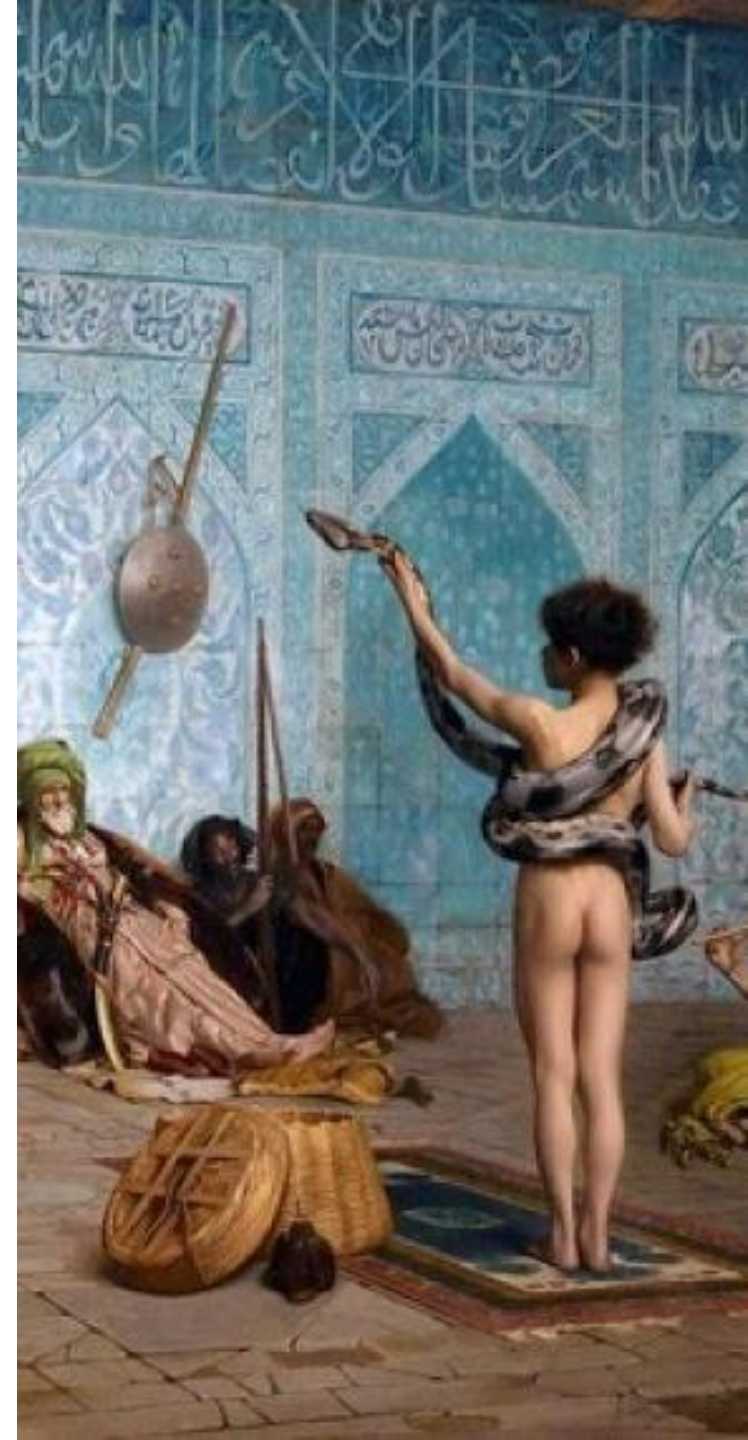
OCCIDENTALISM

OCCIDENTALISM

In contrast, Occidentalism is a term used to describe a similar, but different, process of the construction of knowledge about the West, within and from intellectuals located within the cultural milieu of the Orient.

This process obviously operates within a different context, and at differing historical periods, but the insight that cultures define others, and themselves, through oppositional characterisation holds true in both cases.

While the operation of Orientalism is most easily seen in the process of western colonialism, Occidentalism is perhaps most easily seen in the reaction of non-western societies to forms of western modernity in the 19th and 20th centuries – whether this takes place among non-western cultures like 1930's Japan or 1970's Iran, or among diasporic non-western elites located in western countries.



OCCIDENTALISM

A great deal of occidentalist discourse concerns the identification of the 'West' with forms of technological and epistemological modernity, the impact this 'modernisation' process has had on non-western societies, and how this process can be effectively resisted – often in the face of orientalist / colonialist power.

An example of this was the reaction of the government of Japan to increasing contact and interchange with western cultures in the late 19th / early 20th centuries – in seeking to justify a differentiation between Japanese culture and Western culture, the Japanese government stressed the importance of resistance not just to western political power, but also to western forms of intellectual construction – for example, the specialisation of knowledge in the Western academy was criticised on the basis of fragmentation and an over-reliance on mechanical technology.



OCCIDENTALISM

This vision of the West, and its method of knowledge production, has, in a number of Occidentalist works, been associated with oppositional characteristics that defined the West as inherent opposed to the fundamental character of the non-western society.

These characteristics have included depicting the West, and its subsidiary process of modernity, as shallow, rootless, destructive of the natural environment or established tradition, or an entirely mechanical and technology orientated civilisation.

These characteristics, just as those used within the project of Orientalism, allow the non-western intellectual tradition to both understand, and sometimes, to control aspects of the West within their world.



OCCIDENTALISM

Interestingly, these associated characteristics that commonly operate within Occidentalist discourse, share similarities with internal criticism levelled at modernity from within the West – whether historical, for example critiques of from Russia (19th century) or from the French Revolution (18th century), or contemporary, such as debates over the impact of secularisation, or the distrust of technology displayed by many contemporary conspiracy theories – 5G, COVID-19 vaccines, or QAnon.

As Buruma, a somewhat controversial scholar of Occidentalism has it:

“The Occidentalist view of the West is of a bourgeois society, addicted to creature comforts, animal lusts, self-interest and security.

It is a society of cowards who prize life above death. Americans, say jihad fighters, will never win because they love Pepsi-Cola, whereas the holy warriors love death.”



OCCIDENTALISM

We can also see the historical development of these occidentalist tropes within the Islamic world, spanning from initial reactions to western modernity by thinkers like Al-Afghani (1839-1897) who, while advocating the adoption of Western technology, strongly critiqued the intellectual influence of Western imperialism and proposed a pan-Islamic resistance to it, to revolutionary discourse in 1970's Iran, where clerics led resistance to what seen as a co-opted and western-subverted government of the Shah culminating in the Iranian Revolution of 1978 and deteriorating relations with western countries.

In addition, many contemporary forms of Islamist political resistance draw on the occidentalist understandings of the nature of the West – whether this takes of the form of internet polemics, violent resistance by groups like Boko Haram or Daesh, or encouraged cultural and intellectual production.



OCCIDENTALISM

However, this “sometimes” betrays the fundamental difference in the contexts in which Orientalism and Occidentalism have functioned. While generally Orientalism has functioned from a position of economic and technological power, Occidentalism has largely operated from the inverse situation – a position of a lack of power that must struggle for self-definition, never mind the definition of the other.

In this sense, Occidentalism is a project of resistance – either by accepting the orientalist vision of the Orient and seeking to surpass it (Al-Afghani, somewhat), or by seeking to reject the grounds on which Orientalist visions of the Orient are based (Al-e-Ahmad).

In both cases, Orientalism and Occidentalism, the dangerous notion of the ‘pure’ culture is significant – both processes rely on being able to draw distinct ontological and epistemological lines between the ‘natures’ of the West and non-West.



OCCIDENTOSIS

OCCIDENTOSIS

In this last section, I wish to move us onto what is likely unfamiliar ground in the debates over orientalism and occidentalism.

I want to address a specific form of occidentalism, that draws together much of what we have been talking about earlier in this section and provides an interesting case study for the particular interaction of religion with these processes.

This specific form is the concept of 'Gharbzadegi' or Occidentosis, from the work of Jalal Al-e-Ahmad (1923-1969) who sought to describe and understand the complicated relationship he saw evolving between his home country of Iran and the West during the tumultuous period between WW2 and the Iranian Revolution in 1978/1979.

Broadly, his work situates the influence of the West, economically and intellectually, as a disease on the Iranian people.



OCCIDENTOSIS

Al-e-Ahmad begins his most famous work 'Occidentosis: A Plague From the West' with an attempt to diagnose the symptoms present in Iranian society – that of an increasing decline in the traditional nature of Iranian society – before examining the immediate cause of this decline – the increasing influence of Western forms of economic and intellectual thinking within Iran – and then seeking to investigate the root cause.

As he writes in the passage following, he sees the problem of Occidentosis not only as an externally applied issue, that is western economic superiority, but also arising from the weakening of the structural buttresses of Iranian society, through the influence of Western intellectual systems.

Occidentosis is the outcome not only of economics, but also of epistemology – the ways and systems of knowledge and power that go along with economic domination.



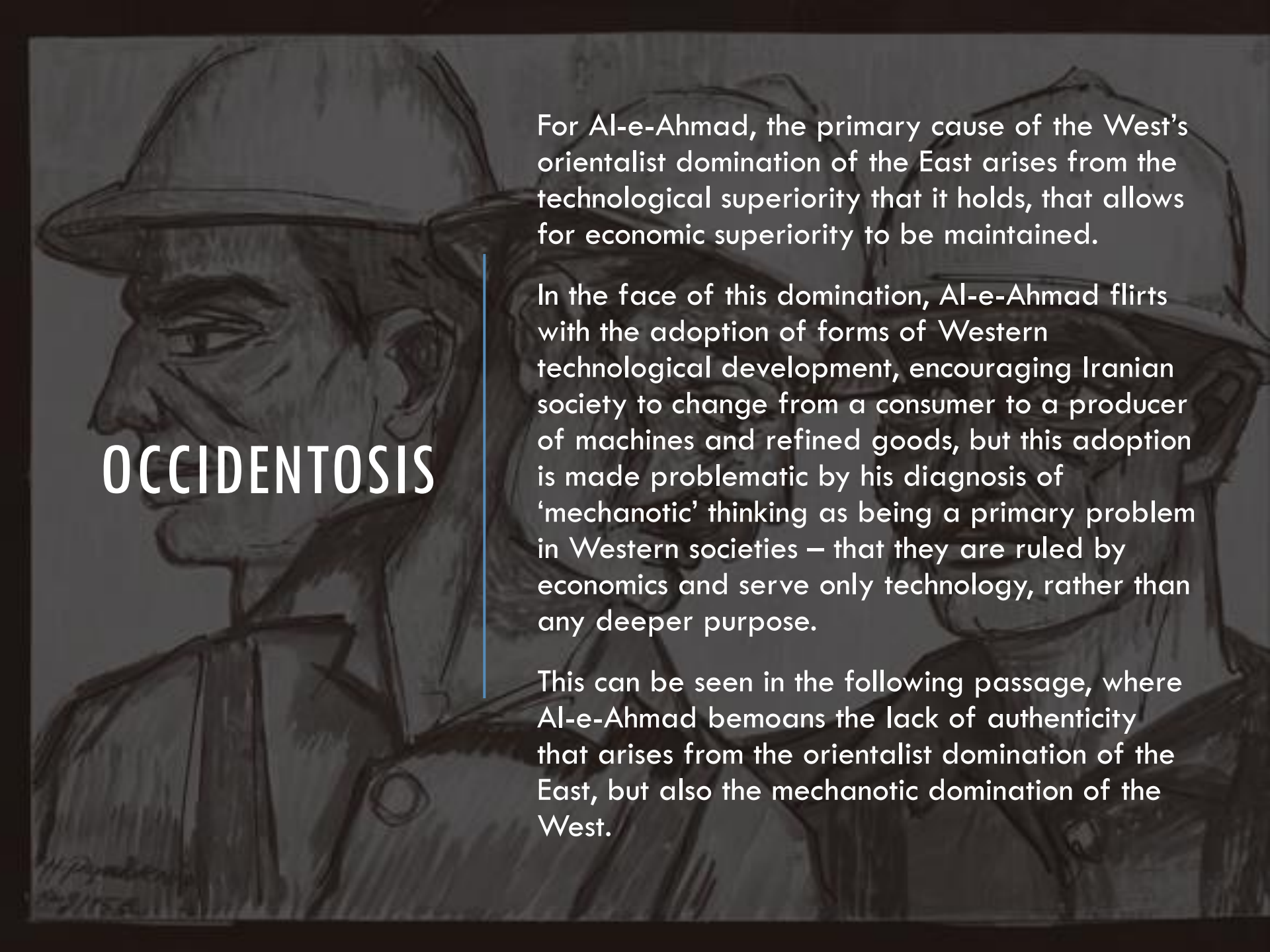
OCCIDENTOSIS

"I speak of "occidentosis" as of tuberculosis. But perhaps it more closely resembles an infestation of weevils. Have you seen how they attack wheat? From the inside. The bran remains intact, but it is just a shell, like a cocoon left behind on a tree. At any rate, I am speaking of a disease: an accident from without, spreading in an environment rendered susceptible to it. Let us seek a diagnosis for this complaint and its causes-and, if possible, its cure.

Occidentosis has two poles or extremes - two ends of one continuum. One pole is the Occident, by which I mean all of Europe, Soviet Russia, and North America, the developed and industrialized nations that can use machines to turn raw materials into more complex forms that can be marketed as goods. These raw materials are not only iron ore and oil, or gut, cotton, and gum tragacanth; they are also myths, dogmas, music, and the higher worlds.

The other pole is Asia and Africa, or the backward, developing or nonindustrial nations that have been made into consumers of Western goods. However, the raw materials for these goods come from the developing nations: oil from the shores of the Gulf, hemp and spices from India, jazz from Africa, silk and opium from China, anthropology from Oceania, sociology from Africa"
(Al-e-Ahmad, 1984, 1)





OCCIDENTOSIS

For Al-e-Ahmad, the primary cause of the West's orientalist domination of the East arises from the technological superiority that it holds, that allows for economic superiority to be maintained.

In the face of this domination, Al-e-Ahmad flirts with the adoption of forms of Western technological development, encouraging Iranian society to change from a consumer to a producer of machines and refined goods, but this adoption is made problematic by his diagnosis of 'mechanotic' thinking as being a primary problem in Western societies – that they are ruled by economics and serve only technology, rather than any deeper purpose.

This can be seen in the following passage, where Al-e-Ahmad bemoans the lack of authenticity that arises from the orientalist domination of the East, but also the mechanotic domination of the West.

OCCIDENTOSIS

"We have been unable to preserve our own historico-cultural character in the face of the machine and its fateful onslaught.

Rather, we have been routed. We have been unable to take a considered stand in the face of this contemporary monster. So long as we do not comprehend the real essence, basis, and philosophy of Western civilization, only aping the West outwardly and formally (by consuming its machines), we shall be like the ass going about in a lion's skin. We know what became of him. Although the one who created the machine now cries out that it is stifling him, we not only fail to repudiate our assuming the garb of machine tenders, we pride ourselves on it.

For two hundred years we have resembled the crow mimicking the partridge (always supposing that the West is a partridge and we are a crow). So long as we remain consumers, so long as we have not built the machine, we remain occidentotic. Our dilemma is that once we have built the machine, we will have become mechanotic, just like the West, crying out at the way technology and the machine have stampeded out of control"
(Al-e-Ahmad, 1984, 31)



OCCIDENTOSIS

So, what is to be done?

For Al-e-Ahmad, a truly Iranian adoption of the machine is impossible, as its intellectual underpinnings emerge solely in the western context. The East cannot simply ape the West until it achieves technological parity – as all that will occur is the westoxification and mechanotic decline of Iran.

It is only by returning to a tradition is authentically part of the Iranian culture, Shia Islam, that an authentically Iranian culture can be saved – one that resists the homogenising and alienating forces of western modernity, in its exported and imported forms. This resistance afforded by religio-cultural identity is the kernel of economic, social, and intellectual resistance to the religio-cultural colonisation of the East by the West.

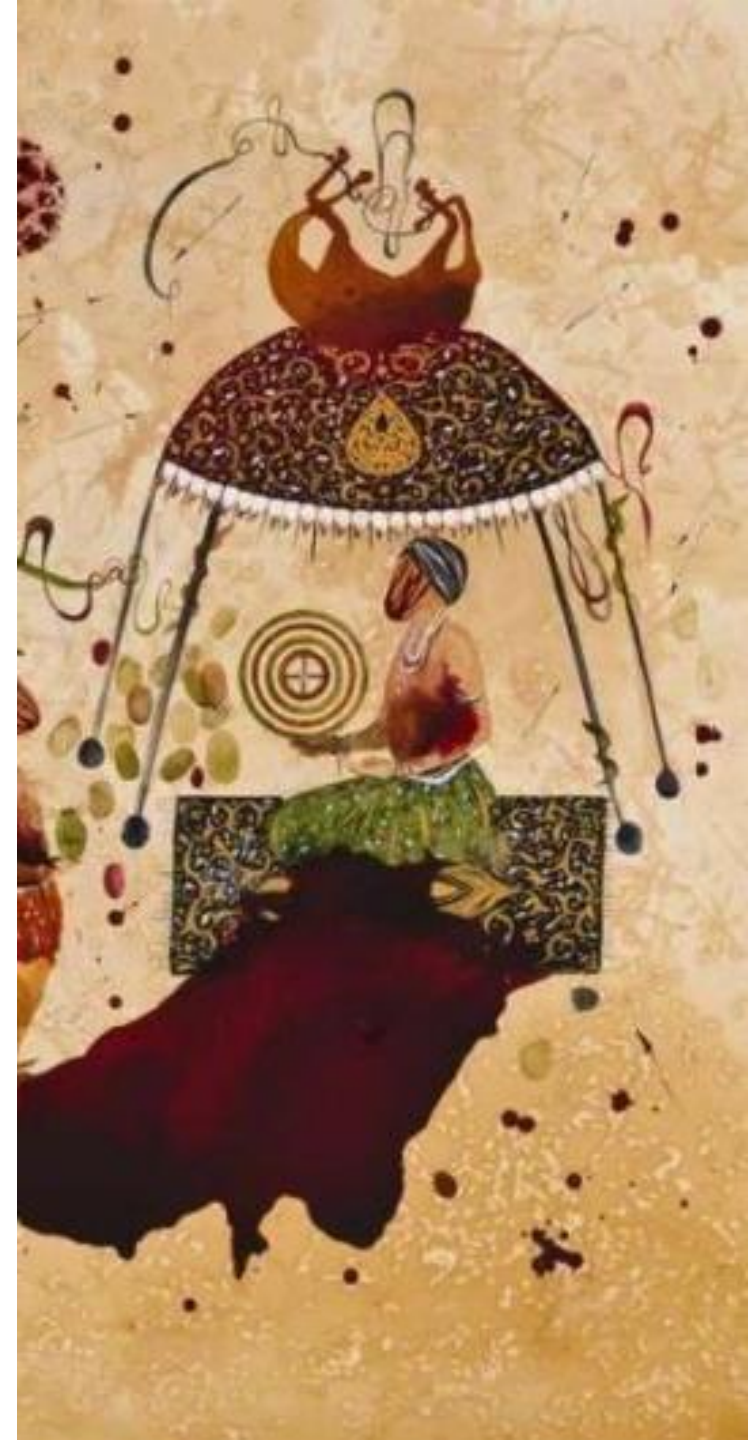


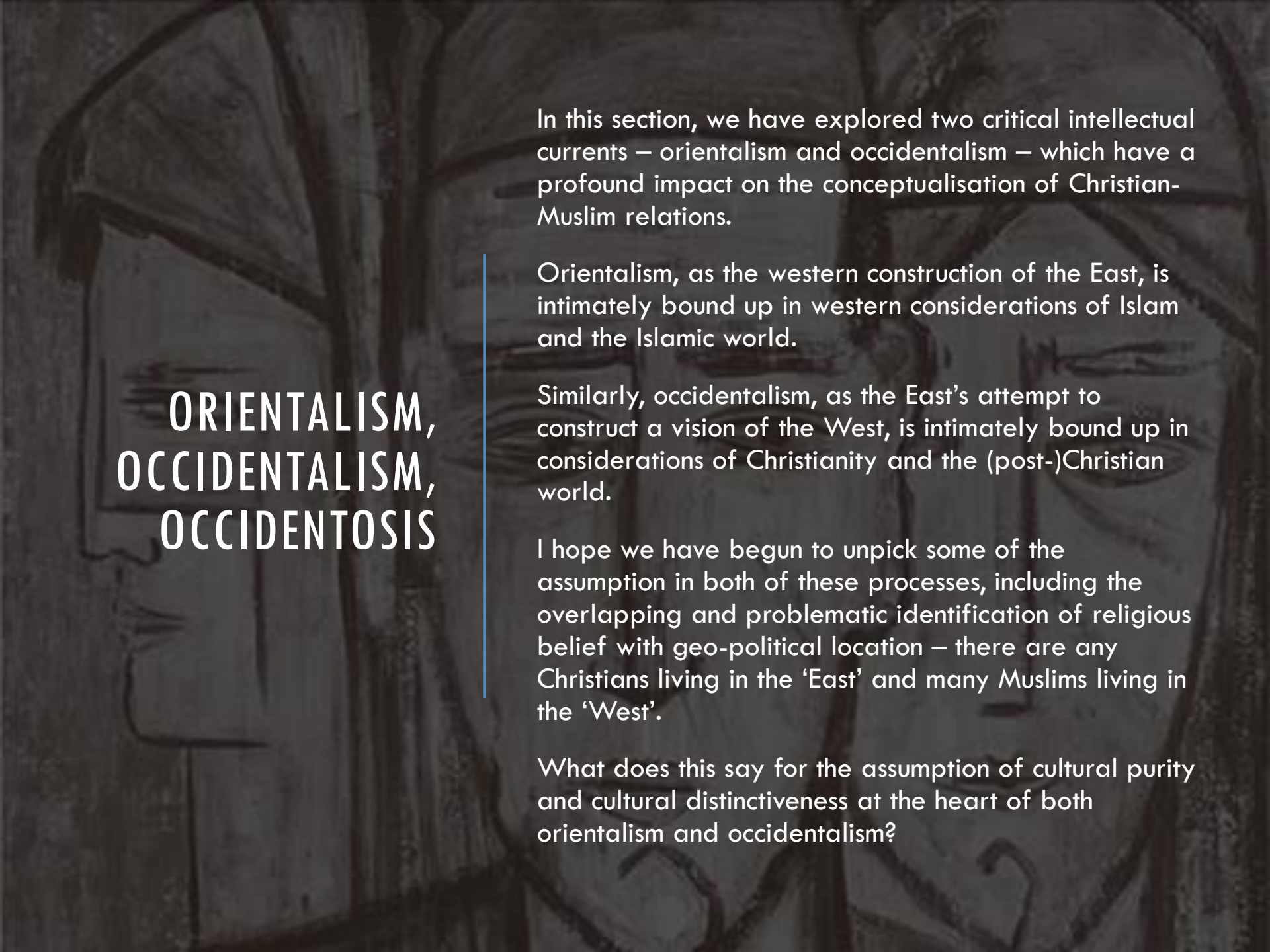
OCCIDENTOSIS

As Al-e-Ahmad writes, discussing the success of the Islamic world at resisting colonialism:

“Thus only we in our Islamic totality, formal and real, obstructed the spread (through colonialism, effectively equivalent to Christianity) of European civilization, that is, the opening of new markets to the West's industries. The halt of Ottoman artillery before the gates of Vienna concluded a process that began in 732 C.E. in Andalusia. How are we to regard these twelve centuries of struggle of East against West if not as the struggle of Islam against Christianity?”

For Al-e-Ahmad, just many scholars in the West, cultural and religious identity is so intimately bound up with each other that they merge – the West becomes Christendom, the East become the Caliphate – even where this religious character is not borne out by geo-political reality.





ORIENTALISM, OCCIDENTALISM, OCCIDENTOSIS

In this section, we have explored two critical intellectual currents – orientalism and occidentalism – which have a profound impact on the conceptualisation of Christian-Muslim relations.

Orientalism, as the western construction of the East, is intimately bound up in western considerations of Islam and the Islamic world.

Similarly, occidentalism, as the East's attempt to construct a vision of the West, is intimately bound up in considerations of Christianity and the (post-)Christian world.

I hope we have begun to unpick some of the assumption in both of these processes, including the overlapping and problematic identification of religious belief with geo-political location – there are any Christians living in the 'East' and many Muslims living in the 'West'.

What does this say for the assumption of cultural purity and cultural distinctiveness at the heart of both orientalism and occidentalism?

READINGS

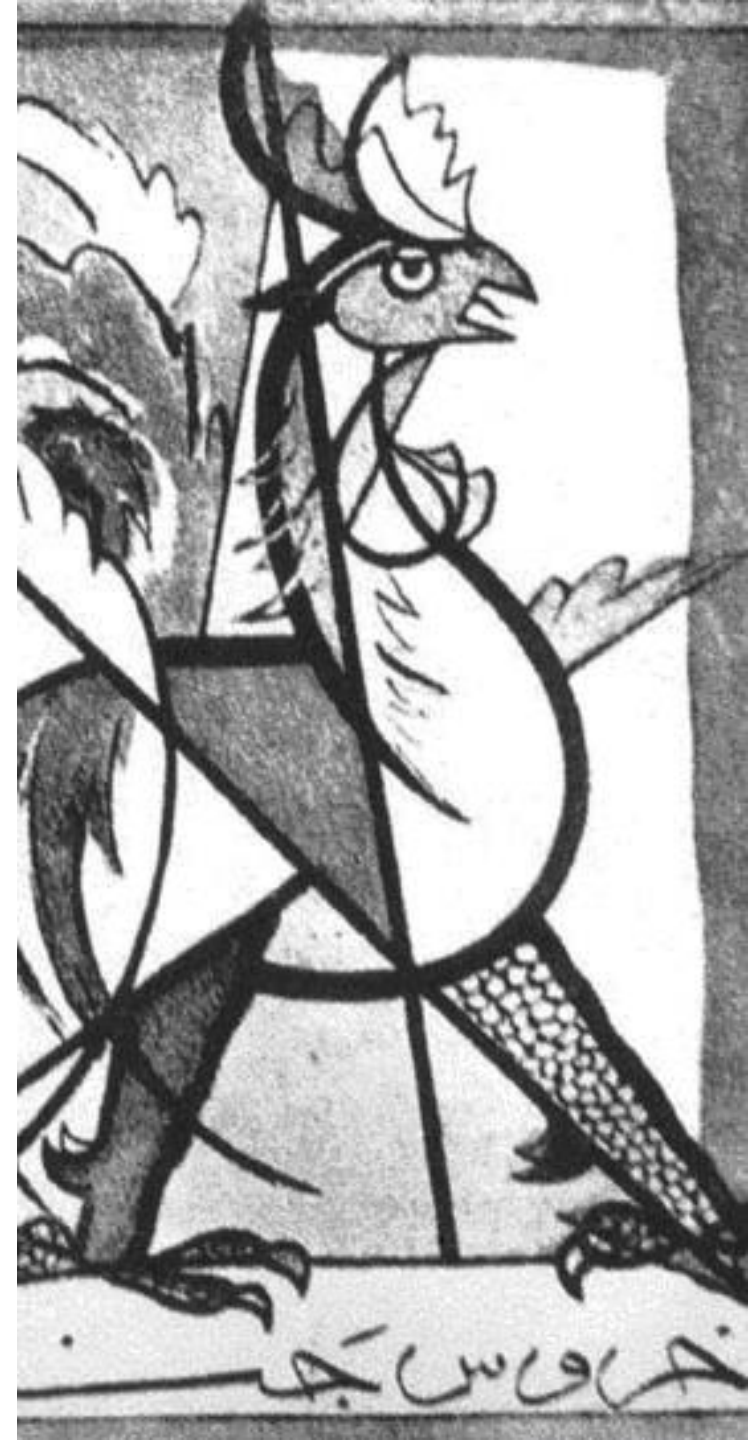
READINGS

I have set quite a significant amount of reading for this section as it seeks to cover an introduction to these complicated intellectual trends.

The first reading is attempts to provide further grounding for why the association between the West and forms of modernity is so strong – this will return in the Methods and Approaches to Interfaith Study module where we will examine modernity and post-modernity in further detail.

You then have a piece of primary literature from Edward Said's *Orientalism* – just the introduction and initial section will give you a flavour of his position.

I have also set a journal article that attempts to similarly define and interrogate the use of the term 'occidentalism' – something useful for the last reading, a section of Al-e-Ahmad's *Occidentosis*. This section not only deals with the symptoms of orientalism on Iranian society, but also contains his reflections on the problems facing Western societies.



READINGS

Mirsepasi, A. (2000) *Intellectual Discourse and the Politics of Modernization*. (Cambridge University Press : Cambridge) – Chapter 1

Said, E. (1978) *Orientalism*. (Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd : London) – Introduction and Knowing the Oriental

Metin, A. 2020, "Occidentalism: An Eastern Reply to Orientalism *", *Bilig*, vol. 93, pp. 181-202.

Al-e-Ahmad, J. (1984) *Occidentosis: A Plague From the West*. (Mirzan Press : Tehran) – Chapters 1 + 10.