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Orientalism and the study of religions

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Introduction

How often have you watched a news report on television, read a newspaper article or been exposed to an advertisement conveying some image of 'Eastern' culture? Whether it is a scene of crowds of angry Muslims burning an American flag, a shaven-headed Buddhist monk clothed in a saffron robe and quietly meditating, militant Hindus attacking a Muslim mosque or a billboard promoting a perfume that evokes the 'mystic sensuality' of India, what all of these images have in common is their involvement in a long history of Western representations and stereotypes of Asia as an 'other' – that is as essentially different from the West. One consequence of such images, whether positive or negative in their connotations, is that 'we' (the West) become clearly separated from 'them' (the East). The acceptance of a basic opposition between Eastern and Western cultures characterizes what has been called 'Orientalism.'

Indeed images of the East have often functioned as a means of defining the cultural identity of the West, however differently that has been conceived throughout history. The Christian identity of medieval Europe was bolstered by concerns about the incursion of Turkish Muslims. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Asia represented both a mysterious and timeless realm of wisdom and spirituality, but also the site of unspeakable social depravities and primitive religious practices. In this regard the West was able to comfort itself that it was progressive, civilized and thoroughly modern in contrast to an ahistorical and unchanging Orient. Widespread beliefs about the indolent and despotic nature of Oriental societies also justified a Western sense of superiority and the belief that it was the duty of the West to civilize the savage and aid the Oriental in their progression away from tradition and dogmatism and towards modernity and civilization. In the modern era, whether it is the threat of the 'yellow peril' (Chinese communism) in the 1970s, or the militant Islamic fundamentalist of the 1980s and 1990s, the West has always maintained its own sense of cultural identity by contrasting itself with a radically different 'Orient'.

The latter part of the twentieth century has seen the demise of Western political rule of Asia and the emergence of countries such as India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka as independent nation-states. The British Empire, for instance, has become the British Commonwealth. However, many still question whether the world has really entered a 'post-colonial' era, arguing that Western political, economic and cultural dominance represents continuity rather than a fundamental break with the colonial past.

Are we living today in a *post-colonial* or a *neo-colonial* age? Although the influence of Britain and the rest of Europe has receded to a significant degree since the end of the Second World War, it is clear that with the demise of Eastern European communism, the United States of America is the new global power in the West. Capitalism, consumerism and multi-national corporations continue to influence an increasingly global marketplace. Western dominance is apparent not only on an economic and political level, but on a cultural one also, having an inevitable impact upon traditional beliefs and practices in non-Western societies. What are we to make of the cultural impact of the 'new technologies'? When American television soap operas are beamed into middle-class Asian homes via satellite, punctuated by advertisements for Coca-Cola and McDonalds, where does one draw the line between the modernization of Asia and its Westernization? Is the 'global network' of cyberspace a realm in which Asian and Western cultures can meet as equal participants in a worldwide celebration of human diversity or does the rhetoric of 'globalization' mask the continued dominance of 'the rest' by the West?

What is Orientalism?

Orientalism refers to the long-standing Western fascination with the East and the tendency to divide the world up into East and West, with the East acting as a kind of mirror or foil by which Western culture defines itself. The question of the complicity between Western scholarly study of Asia – the discipline of Orientalism, and the imperialistic aspirations of Western nations became a subject of considerable attention in Western academic circles after the publication of Edward Said's work, *Orientalism* (1978). In this book, Said offered a stinging indictment of Western conceptions of and attitudes towards the Orient. According to Said 'Orientalism' refers to three inter-related phenomena (1978: 2–3):

- 1 the academic study of the Orient;
- 2 a mind-set or 'style of thought' founded upon a rigid dichotomy of 'East' and 'West';
- 3 the corporate institution authorized to dominate, control and subjugate the peoples and cultures of the East.

For Said the mutual intersection of these three dimensions of Orientalism demonstrates the complicity between Western discourses about the Orient and Western colonialism. Orientalism then is primarily a 'Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient' (Said 1978: 3). Although credit has usually been given to Said for highlighting this dimension of the Orientalist enterprise his work was certainly not the first to suggest complicity between scholarly analysis of the East and Western imperialist aspirations. Said's work is also clearly indebted to earlier studies (Schwab 1950; Pannikar 1959; Abdel-Malek 1963; Steadman 1970).

The study of religion, both in the concern to explore comparative and cross-cultural issues and themes, and in the more specific attempt to understand and examine the religions and cultures of Asia, has had a seminal role to play in the development of Western conceptions of and attitudes towards the Orient, particularly from the nine-

teenth century onwards. Western intellectual interest in the religions of the East developed in a context of Western political dominance and colonial expansionism. It is perhaps surprising then to discover that it is only in recent years that the discipline of religious studies has begun to take seriously the political implications and issues involved when Western scholars and institutions claim the authority to represent and speak about the religions and cultures of others. Recent collections of scholarly articles such as *Orientalism and the Post-colonial Predicament* (1993) and *Curators of the Buddha* (1995), explore the impact of Western colonialism upon South Asia and the study of Buddhism respectively. Such developments have occurred in response to the growing post-colonial agenda to be found in other academic disciplines such as literary studies, anthropology and history. Specific studies such as Philip Almond's *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (1988), Talal Asad's *Genealogies of Religion* (1993) and Richard King's *Orientalism and Religion* (1999) have taken up the mantle left by Edward Said and applied it to the disciplines of Buddhist Studies (Almond), anthropology (Asad) and religious studies/Indology (King). It is likely that the trend toward post-colonial approaches to the study of religion will continue, if only because the issues highlighted by such an orientation remain central to international politics and debates about globalization, modernity and the future of cross-cultural analysis in a post-colonial world.

Knowledge and power

Edward Said (1935–2003) was a diaspora Palestinian educated according to Western conventions and standards. He was a professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Columbia from 1963 until his death in 2003. This background in Western literary studies is reflected in Said's work, which displays the influence of a number of Western theorists and writers, most notably the French poststructuralist Michel Foucault (1926–84). The importance of Foucault in this context resides in his comprehensive analysis of the relationship between power and knowledge. In a number of critical studies on the history of madness, the birth of the clinic and the history of sexuality in the west, Foucault argued that all claims to knowledge involve an attempt to establish a particular set of power relations. Foucault described his method as a 'genealogy of knowledge' (supplementing what he describes in his earlier works as an 'archaeology of knowledge'). This involves an examination of the socio-historical roots of an ideology or institution in order to highlight the ways in which certain groups within society have constructed discourses which have promoted their own authority (Carrette 1999).

The impact of Foucault's work has grown as postmodernist and poststructuralist approaches have gained support in contemporary academic circles. Critics of Foucault's approach have questioned his apparently relativistic stance towards all knowledge and truth claims. Foucault seems to be arguing not just that knowledge is always associated with power, but that knowledge is power, i.e. that what we call knowledge is merely a manifestation or reflection of the will-to-power within any given society. It is this aspect of his approach, clearly influenced by the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), which has drawn the fiercest criticism of his work, with the suggestion that Foucault's approach makes it impossible to establish any definitive truth about the nature of reality. From Foucault's perspective

the concern is to overturn the modern ideal of an objective and value-free knowledge of universally applicable truths. But as other critics have argued there are many notions of truth at work in Foucault's writings (Prado 1995: 119). Nevertheless, in place of the notion of absolute and universal 'truths', Foucault advocates an approach that focuses upon a diversity of localized 'truths' and a concern to explore their complicity with power structures within that specific locality. Thus, for Foucault:

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its own régime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true.

(Foucault 1977, translation in Gordon 1980: 131)

Said found Foucault's analysis and his equation of power and knowledge useful conceptual tools for articulating his own conception of Orientalism as the West's exercising of its will-to-power over the East. He remained unwilling, however, to adopt Foucault's general stance since it seemed to allow no room for ethical judgments based upon universal truths and humanistic principles. Moreover, if there is no truth 'out there' one can offer no basis for a critique of Western representations of the Orient on the basis of their *unrepresentative* nature. Thus, Said argued that:

It would be wrong to conclude that the Orient was *essentially* an idea, or a creation with no corresponding reality ... But the phenomenon of Orientalism as I study it here deals principally, not with a correspondence between Orientalism and Orient, but with the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient (the East as career) despite or beyond any correspondence, or lack thereof, with a 'real' Orient.

(Said 1978: 5)

The truth is out there or is it?

The ambiguities of Said's analysis and methodology have been a central theme of many of the responses to his work. Some critics have argued that *Orientalism* reflects theoretical inconsistencies in Said's account (al-'Azm 1981; Lewis 1982; Clifford 1988; Ahmed 1992), with the author arguing on the one hand that 'the Orient' is constructed in Western imaginations and yet attacking Western characterizations of the East as misrepresentations of a real Orient 'out there'. Other reviewers have celebrated such ambiguities as deliberately disruptive and anti-theoretical (Behdad 1994; Prakash 1995), a position that Said himself came to endorse when reflecting, some years later, upon his own work (Said 1995: 340). Indeed, Said's reluctance to offer an alternative representation of 'the Orient' is grounded in his firmly held belief that the division between 'East' and 'West' is an act of the imagination, and a pernicious one at that. This, however, does not mean that the social and human realities that these images of 'the Orient' are meant to refer to are also imaginary. Far from it, it is precisely because representations of the Orient are essentially imaginary that they can be said to be unrepresentative of the diversity of Asian peoples and cultures (King 1999: 209). Said's challenge to his successors, therefore, is to find alternative

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and ever more nuanced ways of representing cultural diversity to replace those founded upon a simplistic and oppositional logic of 'Occident vs. Orient' – of 'us' and 'them':

Can one divide human reality, as indeed human reality seems to be genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races, and survive the consequences humanly? By surviving the consequences humanly, I means to ask whether there is any way of avoiding the hostility expressed by the division, say of men into 'us' (Westerners) and 'they' (Orientals).

(Said 1978: 45)

Other scholars, however, have been more willing to embrace a postmodernist or poststructuralist view of knowledge, with its rejection of any unproblematic appeal to a reality 'out there' beyond the play of representations. Anthropologist Ronald Inden, for instance, agrees with Foucault in rejecting a representational view of knowledge. There is no privileged or unmediated access to reality.

[K]nowledge of the knower is not a disinterested mental representation of an external, natural reality. It is a construct that is always situated in a world apprehended through specific knowledges and motivated by practices in it. What is more, the process of knowing actively participates in producing and transforming the world that it constructs intellectually.

(Inden 1990: 33)

Inden maintains that the study of South Asia has been based upon a misleading search for essences such as 'the Hindu mind,' 'the Indian village,' 'caste' and 'divine kingship' – as if entire cultures could be represented by such basic categories. These approaches also imply that the Western scholar has some special ability to discern the central features of Asian cultures in a way that is unavailable to Asians themselves. Inden advocates the abandonment of approaches that search for cultural essences and 'fundamental natures' because they ignore historical change and cultural diversity and therefore provide stereotypes of Asian culture. In their place Inden proposes an emphasis upon the historical agency of indigenous Asians. This approach, he suggests, would avoid the tendency to conceive of the Orient as an unchanging and timeless realm – as if Asian cultures and peoples were *subject to* rather than *agents of* historical change. The critical response to Inden's work has been varied. Some scholars have questioned his universal indictment of Western scholarship on the East as an example of the very essentialism that he attacks: 'If, as Inden says, India and the Indians were "essentialized" by the Indologists, it is certainly no less true and obvious that Indology and Indologists are being essentialized by his own sweeping statements' (Halbfass 1997: 19).

Other critics such as the Marxist literary theorist Aijaz Ahmad (1991) worry that Inden's appeal to indigenous agency lends itself too easily to appropriation by right wing Hindu groups in contemporary India. Indeed, the work of scholars such as Robert Sharf (1994; 1995) and King (1999) demonstrate that indigenous spokesmen for Asian religious traditions, such as D. T. Suzuki (Zen Buddhism) and Swami Vivekananda (Hinduism) were implicated in their own forms of 'internal colonialism'

in the manner in which they represented their respective religious traditions at home and abroad. Moreover, many scholars have highlighted Western colonial influences upon contemporary forms of Hindu nationalism and communalism (Pandey 1990; Thapar 1992; Chatterjee 1986; van der Veer 1994).

Questions have also been raised about the poststructuralist theory of knowledge expounded by Inden. Is it possible, following Inden, to make any sort of appeal to a 'real India' underlying the various representations of it? In a similar fashion David Ludden criticizes Edward Said for believing that 'there is to be found in the East a real truth' (1993: 271). What we are dealing with are more or less powerful images of the Orient and not a 'real Orient' out there. Indologists such as Wilhelm Halbfass (1997: 16–17) have been quick to reject this approach on the grounds that it is self-refuting. Such a claim, he argues, prevents any critique of Orientalism based upon the misleading and *unrepresentative* nature of Orientalist accounts. How can one offer a critique of representations if there is no way of appealing to a real Orient or India 'out there'?

Orientalism in South Asia: the Asiatic Society of Bengal

Such has been the influence of Said's work in the decades succeeding the publication of his study that 'Orientalism' has now become a pejorative term, suggesting academic complicity with Western colonialism, rather than a neutral designation for the Western study of the East. For critics such as Bernard Lewis and David Kopf, Said's work has meant that the term 'Orientalist' is now 'polluted beyond salvation' (Lewis 1982: 50), representing 'a sewer category for all the intellectual rubbish Westerners have exercised in the global marketplace of ideas' (Kopf 1980: 498). Indeed before the publication of Said's study, the term 'Orientalism' had a specific meaning in a South Asian context, referring to the academic discipline which came into being as a result of the work of Sir William Jones, judge of the East India Company. Orientalism began with the formal establishment of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in Calcutta in 1784. The administrative and academic work of the Asiatic Society has been credited as the prime instigator for the Bengali Renaissance, a resurgence of intellectual interest in Hindu culture and reform among the Hindu intelligentsia of Bengal in the nineteenth century.

William Jones, the first President of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, is best known for his early work on Sanskrit – the ancient sacred language of the Hindus. Jones was a founding father of comparative linguistics and established links between Sanskrit and the European family of languages. In this sense he was an important catalyst for the explosion of interest in the cultural splendor of India's past, and also in the Romanticist tendency to conceive of India as the cradle of European civilization. Indeed under the influence of Romanticism India increasingly functioned as the canvas upon which a number of idealized representations and images were painted in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. India represented 'the childhood of humanity', an image which had positive as well as negative connotations. For the German writer Schlegel, India was 'the real source of all tongues, of all thoughts and utterances of the human mind. Everything – yes, everything without exception has its origin in India' (cited in Iyer 1965: 194). For his contemporary the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, however, the infantile nature of Indian culture meant

that it had nothing to teach Europeans about modernity. India remained lost in an ancient fog of unprogressive mythologies and superstitions.

The Anglicists and the Orientalists

Assessment of the role, impact and motivations of Western Orientalists in India has become a subject of considerable debate in South Asian studies in response to Said's indictment of the Orientalist project. Historian David Kopf suggests that Said has missed his target with reference to the South Asian context. The Asiatic Society of Bengal, far from being a handmaiden to European colonialism, 'helped Indians to find an indigenous identity in the modern world' (Kopf 1980: 498). Early Orientalist scholarship on India, Kopf argues, was overwhelmingly attracted to and fascinated by its object, and defended the study of the indigenous traditions and languages of Asia when criticized by anti-Orientalist groups such as the Anglicists. This latter group, best exemplified by Lord Thomas Babington Macauley (1800–59), argued that the most expedient means of educating Indians was to introduce them to Western ideas and literature and to teach these through the medium of the English language. Babington believed that 'a single shelf of a good European library was worth the whole native literature of India and Arabia', a view that he claimed would not be refuted by the Orientalists themselves. In his famous 'Minute on Indian Education' (1835) Macauley declared his vision for the transformation of India under British imperial rule:

We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect.

(Harlow and Carter 1999: 59)

Affirmative Orientalism

Kopf contrasts the attitude of Anglicists such as Macauley with the more enthusiastic and positive attitude towards India to be found in the writings of Orientalists such as Sir William Jones, Max Müller and Henry Thomas Colebrooke. The ensuing debate between these two positions, he argues, demonstrates the diversity of motivations and attitudes towards India at this time. Said's sweeping generalizations about the complicity of Orientalist scholarship with a Western colonial agenda wildly overstep the mark. Many Western Orientalists were often deeply sympathetic towards the object of their study (Clifford 1988; Fox 1992). Richard G. Fox argues, for instance, that Said's own analysis ignores the fact that 'resistance to Orientalist domination proceeds from within it.' (Fox 1992: 153). A similar point is made by Bernard Lewis when he argues that 'The most rigorous and penetrating critique of Orientalist scholarship has always been and will remain that of the Orientalists themselves' (Lewis 1982: 56). However, as Ulrike Freitag notes, this response by Lewis reiterates 'the exclusivist Orientalist stance'. This only serves to reconfirm 'the idea that only outsiders – that is, Orientalists – could really represent 'the Orient' and [are] the only ones competent to review their own scholarship' (Freitag 1997: 630).

Despite its obvious fascination and affirmation of Oriental culture, Ronald Inden (1990) describes examples of 'affirmative Orientalism' as 'the Loyal Opposition'

precisely because they do not question the basic opposition between Eastern and Western cultures that underlies the Orientalist enterprise. Many of the stereotypical presuppositions of the Orientalist project remain intact, even if treated sympathetically. What this demonstrates is that it is misleading to see the critique of Orientalism initiated by scholars such as Said and Inden as a simple rejection of the negativity of Western attitudes towards the East. The love affair that Western Romanticism has had with the Orient (and which persists to this day in New Age conceptions of 'eastern mysticism and philosophy') is equally problematic because it continues to represent the diversity of Oriental cultures in terms of homogenized stereotypes.

Furthermore, in India the nationalist struggle for home rule (*swaraj*) and independence from British rule often built upon the legacy of colonial stereotypes rather than uprooting them. This has led some (mainly diaspora) Indian historians to advocate the writing of a 'history from below' that focuses upon the meanings and actions of 'subaltern' (non-elite) groups within Indian society. The subalternist movement has similarities with Marxist approaches but rejects the universalism of the Marxist theory of 'class consciousness'. Instead the subalternist historians examine the localized context and aims of oppressed groups rather than reduce their history to the grand narrative of Marxism. According to subalternists such as Ranajit Guha (1988) and Partha Chatterjee (1986), Indian nationalist (and Marxist) accounts, like those written by the European colonialist, represent an elitist approach to history because they ignore or suppress the specific agency of non-elite groups within Indian society. The subalternist approach therefore offers a potential 'third way' beyond the options of Orientalism and Occidentalism ('Orientalism-in reverse'). This is achieved by rejecting the elitism of both Western colonial histories and indigenous nationalist histories. The latter, although usually anti-colonial in nature, exercises its own form of domestic or internal colonialism by replacing colonial rulership with a new elite – that of indigenous elite groups.

Hybridity and the diversity of Orientalist discourses

Recent scholarship has also emphasized the diversity of Orientalist accounts. Lisa Lowe (1991) rejects Said's portrayal of Orientalism as a monolithic project. She argues that there are a number of factors impinging upon Western representations of the East, including race, nation, gender and sexuality. Similarly, Homi Bhabha (1996: 42) questions Said's one-sided emphasis upon the power of the colonizer. This, he argues, gives too much power to the Western Orientalist and ignores the role played by the colonized subject in the production and interpretation of Orientalist discourses (see also Hallisey 1995: 32–3). For Bhabha the encounter between the Western colonizer and the colonized Asian subject is complex, producing a hybrid representation that is always beyond the control of both the colonialist and the native. Influenced by the French poststructuralist Jacques Derrida, Bhabha's point is that the authors of texts cannot hope to control the meaning attributed to their writings once they enter the public domain. Once an author provides an account of the Orient it can be interpreted in a variety of ways and pressed into the service of a number of different agendas. Bhabha makes much of the example of the English educated Indian. For Anglicists such as Lord Macauley (see p. 281) this figure represented the ideal for the future of India – civilized according to British cultural

standards. However, in his mimicry of the English colonizer the Anglo-Indian represents a hybrid form of 'Englishness' that confronts the colonizer in unexpected ways. Frankenstein has created a monster that he can no longer control!

A good example to illustrate Bhabha's point is the 'discovery' of the *Ezourvedam*. This text, circulated in the form of a French 'translation', was said to be an ancient Hindu scripture and caught the attention of a number of eighteenth-century European intellectuals. The *Ezourvedam* proclaims the superiority of monotheism and rejects the polytheism and ritualism of the uneducated Hindu masses. Voltaire vigorously promoted the text as a testament to the superiority of ancient Hindu culture in comparison to the decadence of Christianity. However, the *Ezourvedam* was a 'fake', produced by French Jesuits in Pondicherry with the probable aim of discrediting Hindu beliefs and practices and convincing Hindus of the superiority of the Christian message. Thus, a text that was initially produced by missionary Christians to spread the 'good news' of the Gospel, was adopted by French intellectuals such as Voltaire and used to demonstrate the inferiority and decadence of Christianity. How ironic! Similarly, Western notions of India as 'backward' and undeveloped in comparison to the material and technological might of the modern West were adopted and transformed by Hindu intellectuals such as Swami Vivekananda in the anti-colonial struggle for Indian independence. The West may be materially prosperous, Vivekananda argued, but this only serves to highlight that it lacks the spirituality of India. In one simple move Vivekananda took a standard Western stereotype about India and used it to counteract Western claims to superiority. What examples like the *Ezourvedam* and Vivekananda illustrate rather well is the multiple meanings and directions that can be attributed to Orientalist discourses.

Problems with the notion of 'religion'

The colonial domination of the West over 'the rest' in recent centuries has caused many Western categories and ideas to appear more universal than they might otherwise have seemed. An important feature of recent scholarship, therefore, has been to cast doubt upon the universal application of Western ideas and theories. Even the appropriateness of the notion of 'religion' in a non-Western context has been questioned on the grounds that it is the product of the cultural and political history of the West. For Talal Asad (1993), the modern Western tendency to conceive of religion in terms of belief – that is as something located in the private state of mind of a believer, leads Westerners to think of religion as something that is essentially private and separate from the public realm of politics. When Islamic or Hindu leaders in Asia express political views this is often seen in the West as a dangerous mixture of two separate realms of human life. Next time you watch a television news report about politics in the Middle East or India notice the style, presentation and reporting of events. How does the media portray foreign religious leaders in positions of political authority? Often news reports contain implicit assumptions about the 'normality' of the separation of religion from politics. However, as ex-BBC journalist Mark Tully suggests in his discussion of religion and politics in modern India:

If we are really serious about coping with India's poverty we too have to show far greater respect for India's past and perhaps even learn from it ourselves ...

Many will say I am trying to drag India backwards – to deny it the fruits of modern science and technology and to rob it of the freedom of democracy. Such critics are, I believe, in effect accepting the claim that there is now only one way: that Western liberal democracy has really triumphed.

(Tully 1991: 12)

We should bear in mind then that the separation of religion from politics is a feature of modern Western societies, reflecting eighteenth-century northern European disputes and the eventual separation of Church and State in modern Western nations. It is problematic therefore to impose this model of religion onto Asian cultures. Indeed for Asad all attempts to find a universal definition or 'essence' of religion are to be avoided because they imply that religion is somehow able to operate in isolation from other spheres of human cultural activity such as politics, law and science (1993: 28). Moreover, the sheer diversity of human cultures mean that the search for universal definitions of terms like 'religion' is fruitless. In its place, Asad advocates an approach to the study of cultures that focus upon embodied practices and the specific power-relations in which they operate.

King (1999) has also questioned the usefulness of the category of religion in the study of non-Western cultures. Modern notions of religion reflect Christian theological assumptions, in particular the preoccupation with orthodoxy and truth (rather than practice and forms of life) and with a canon of authorized scriptures as the location of the true essence of religion (King 1999: Chapters 2 and 3). As a consequence of colonial influence, world religions such as 'Hinduism' and 'Buddhism' have come to the fore in the colonial and modern periods, reflecting Western (Protestant and secular) assumptions about the nature of religion (see also Almond 1988; Fitzgerald 1990). It is not that these religions were simply 'imagined' by Westerners without the input of indigenous elite groups, but rather that their representation and subsequent developments within South Asian culture continue to reflect Western Orientalist concerns and assumptions. King argues that academic disciplines such as religious studies and Indology (the study of India) should work to extricate themselves from the Christian categories and secular assumptions, which continue to influence representations of the Orient, particularly the emphasis that is placed upon the so-called 'world religions'.

Orientalism and the study of Islam

Given that Said's work in this area focused almost exclusively upon the Middle Eastern and Islamic dimensions of Western Orientalist writings it is not surprising to find that his work has had a great deal of influence upon modern debates about the role and impact of Western Orientalism upon modern representations of Islam and Muslims. The debate has generally focused upon the legacy of Western colonialism in the Middle East and the continued existence of a number of negative stereotypes of Islam in the West. What is the relationship between modernity and Western culture? In Western culture modernity and traditionalism are usually seen as opposed to one another. Can one be modern and still align oneself with Islamic traditions? How is Islam to respond to the economic and political dominance of the West and the legacy of Western colonial rule in the Middle East?

Broadly speaking, there have been two main responses to these issues and the challenge laid down by the work of Edward Said. Some Arabic intellectuals and scholars of Islam have argued that Western scholarship should be abandoned in favor of an Islamicization of knowledge. Why, such proponents argue, should Muslims feel obliged to conform to the intellectual conventions and secular presuppositions of Western scholarship? This strand of Islamic scholarship has increasingly described itself as 'Islamism' as an indigenous alternative to the negative connotations of the Western term 'fundamentalism'. The Islamists tend to reject Western scholarship as a cultural attack upon Islam. In its place they advocate continuity with older traditions of Islamic scholarship, the use of Arabic as the primary linguistic mode of expression and an ongoing exploration of the truth expressed in the holy words of the Qur'an. Critics of this approach argue that Islamism represents the development of Occidentalism – a reversal of the Orientalist approach and a denigration of the West as inferior. Edward Said made it clear, however, that this was not the intention of his own analysis, concerned as he was to overturn and reject the dichotomy between Occident and Orient rather than reverse it. Nevertheless, for writers such as Akbar Ahmed this has been the result of Said's analysis:

One inevitable consequence is the rejection of Western scholarship by Muslims. Muslim scholars in the West, whether Arab or Pakistani, are deeply suspicious of Western Orientalism. They are thus pushed into the hole, Said has unwittingly dug for them. For Muslims in Africa and Asia, imperfectly grasped bits of Marxist dogma, nationalism, and religious chauvinism create incorrect images of the West ... Said has left us with what he sets out to denounce: stereotypes and large blocks – Orientalist, Oriental, Orient.

(Ahmed and Donnan 1994: 5)

Islamism represents a contemporary response to what has been called 'westoxification' (the pollution of Islamic culture by Western influences) and a reassertion of Islamic values and beliefs in a context of Western economic, political and cultural dominance. Scholars such as Mahmûd Hamdî Zaqzûq (1983) for instance, have called for a scientific response to Western Orientalism founded upon the truth of Islam. Others, such as Hasan Hanafi (1991), call for the creation of Occidentalism, that is the academic study of the West, as a post-colonial response to the cultural and intellectual dominance of Western scholarship.

In contrast to the Islamists, there are also a number of Arabic intellectuals engaging with the concerns and issues of Western scholarship. In most cases such scholars are migrants, often educated by and now working in Western universities. The main concern for such writers remains the mutual proliferation of stereotypes about Arabs and Westerners and the question of the impact of globalization, cultural interaction and politics upon representations of Islam. Clearly these two strands of contemporary Arabic scholarship do not sit easily with each other. The Islamists direct much of their criticism towards those Arab intellectuals who have adopted or utilized Western methodologies in their analysis. This is seen as a rejection of Islam and complicity with the secularism of the Western colonial aggressor. Similarly, Western influenced Arabic scholars tend to reject Islamist approaches as 'Orientalism in reverse', questioning the privileged insulation of Arabic culture from wider international debates concerning modernism, postmodernism and globalization.

Orientalism, gender and religion

In the concern to highlight politics and the marginalization of the Other, the post-colonial agenda in scholarship has much in common with the development of feminist approaches to the study of religion (King 1999: 111–16). It is not surprising then to find that recent works have shown an increasing awareness of gender as a factor relevant to the Orientalist debate (Miller 1990). Lata Mani (1987) argues that nineteenth-century debates about the legality of *sati* (the ritual burning of a Hindu widow on her deceased husband's funeral pyre) – a practice abolished by the British in 1829, did not allow the women concerned to emerge as either 'subjects' or 'objects'. Instead the Hindu widow became the 'site of contestation' in a debate which centered instead upon the question of whether or not the burning of widows was sanctioned by ancient Hindu sacred texts. All participants in this debate, whether abolitionists or preservationists, accepted without question the authority of Hindu brahmanical scriptures as the definitive source for 'the Hindu position'. The location of the 'essence' of Hinduism in ancient texts clearly reflects the Protestant presuppositions of the early Orientalists and gained further support from their reliance upon the scholarly community of brahmanical pandits as the authorized spokesmen for Hinduism (King 1999: Chapters 5 and 6).

Similarly, recent work has also paid attention to the images of the 'sexualized Orient' found in Western fantasies about the Oriental 'harem' and 'the veil' (Lewis 1996; Mabro 1996; Yegenoglu 1998). Notions of the seductive and sensual nature of the Orient and of the Oriental woman in particular also continue to this day in media advertising and popular culture. Whether this involves popularized accounts of the 'secrets of the *Kama Sutra*' (which is thereby transformed from an ancient Hindu text on the etiquette of courtship and lovemaking into an exotic manual of sexual positions), or the commodification and sexualization of Thai therapeutic massage, modern Western consumer culture continues to build upon much older colonial legacies and Orientalist stereotypes.

Attention has also turned to the role played by women in the Orientalist and imperial enterprises. Reina Lewis (1996), taking her lead from the work of Lisa Lowe (1991), argues that an examination of the location of female Orientalists in a complicated and sometimes contradictory network of power-relations demonstrates the diversity of the Orientalist project. Female Orientalists took up a variety of stances with regard to Western imperial superiority over the East at the same time as being involved in a complex series of domestic debates about the status and role of women in Western society. Her analysis suggests that an adequate critique of Orientalism should avoid the tendency to focus upon the expressed intentions and motivations of individual Orientalists and consider instead the broader structural relations of power that Orientalist discourses maintain: 'When we look at European women's representation of and participation in processes of othering, we are looking at representations made by agents who are themselves partially othered (as the symbolic feminized other of men in Europe)' (Lewis 1996: 238).

The most recent work within the field of post-colonial studies has focused upon the mutual involvement of a variety of factors (including race, class, gender and sexuality), in the study of the cultures, histories and religions of Asia. Anne McClintock (1995: 6–7) argues for instance that 'imperialism cannot be understood

without a theory of gender power'. Similarly, Mrinalini Sinha (1995) has examined the ways in which nineteenth-century British notions of 'masculinity' developed in opposition to the perceived 'effeminacy' of the Bengali male. Sinha's work demonstrates rather well the complex interaction of Hindu and British notions of gender, race and sexuality in the colonial period. Attention has also turned in recent works to the existence of manipulative strategies and representations in pre-colonial Asian societies (Pollock 1993: 96–111; Killingley 1997; King 1999). These works suggest that the Orientalist tendency to stereotype and diminish the 'Other' is by no means an exclusively Western practice.

Concluding remarks

One of the most important insights to be drawn from the Orientalist debate is an awareness of the political nature of knowledge itself. Fundamentally, what post-colonial approaches teach us is to be more aware of the ongoing influence of colonialism upon the representation of others, and also of ourselves. Like feminist scholarship, post-colonialism is diverse but remains grounded in an awareness of the politics of knowledge, that is the involvement of scholarship in issues of power, authority and justice. This is especially relevant when dealing with the cultures and traditions of others, but 'indigenous' accounts by cultural 'insiders' are no less implicated by issues of authority and representation. Moreover, such has been the impact of Western domination over the last few centuries that indigenous traditions have themselves been transformed by the material and cultural violence of Western colonialism. Rejecting the separation of religion and its study from political concerns, post-colonial analysis opens up the possibility, indeed for such theorists the necessity, of exploring alternative ways of understanding and representing human diversity. How are we to make sense of differences between people in a *pluralistic* rather than an *oppositional* way? How might we try to understand the diverse ways of living that represent our common global heritage? This is perhaps the central issue confronting humanity today and no doubt will continue to influence debates within the study of religion. In this regard the comparative study of religion has a key role to play in the quest for greater understanding of the various cultures, peoples and forms of life that make up the world in which we live.

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