

Islam Today 7 Orientalism and the Representation of Islam

The understanding of Islam and Muslims in many ‘western’ contexts has its roots in so-called ‘orientalism’, in particular in relation to the types of stereotyping and assumptions that may be made about Muslims at individual and community levels with the UK, as well as in wider global contexts. To an extent, this has been exacerbated because of the various conflicts that have occurred in ‘Muslim contexts’, such as the Gulf War and the invasion of Iraq, which has led to direct manifestations of Islamophobia and other forms of prejudice against Muslims. Clearly, this is a significant issue to explore in its own rights, although that is not the purpose of this particular section. Instead, aspects of the historical patterns of anti-Muslim prejudice in relation to ‘orientalism’ are introduced, in conjunction with related reading from the module pack.

Edward W. Said’s ‘Orientalism’

Academic discourse about ‘orientalism’ has taken place in the light of Edward W. Said’s seminal work on the subject, Orientalism, published in 1978. It was not the first book to tackle these themes, and there have been subsequent and sustained critiques of Said. However, some of the salient points have relevance in terms of how a worldview is constructed – and whilst there are a number of general ‘orientalism’ themes that relate to Islam, the book also contains specific references to Islam and Muslims. The book itself is well worth reading, but somewhat lengthy for the purposes of this module. So a selection of (some) relevant quotes is presented below, together with an explanatory discussion, and students are encouraged to seek out the book and read it outside of this module.

Said discusses how various academic, literary, educational and colonial frameworks were created in the west around paradigms of ‘the other’ – meaning those outside of ‘western’ contexts - in order to fulfil specific political and economic objectives, often resulting in various forms of subjugation:

"... despite their differences, the British and the French saw the Orient as a geographical - and cultural, political, demographical, 'sociological, and historical - entity over whose destiny they believed themselves to have traditional entitlement. The Orient to them was no sudden discovery, no mere historical accident, but an area of the east of Europe whose principal worth was uniformly defined in terms of Europe, more particularly in terms specifically claiming for Europe -European science, scholarship, understanding, and administration - the credit for having made the Orient what is as now. And this had been the achievement - inadvertent or not is beside the point - of modern Orientalism." p 221¹

These patterns of thought continue, according to Said, to have a currency in the contemporary world – in particular in relation to Muslims:

“... Islam has been fundamentally misrepresented in the West - the real issue is whether indeed there can be a true representation of anything, or whether any and all representations, because they are representations, are embedded first in the language and therein the culture, institutions, and political ambience of the representer. If the latter alternative is the correct one. then we must be prepared to accept the fact that a representation is eo ipso implicated, intertwined, embedded, interwoven with a great many other things besides 'the truth', which is itself a representation. What this must lead us to methodologically is to view representations (or misrepresentations - the distinction is at best a matter of degree) as inhabiting a common field of play defined for them, not be some inherent common subject matter alone, but by some common history, tradition, universe of discourse. p 272-3

It is felt important, when discussing Islam Today, to provide an overview of how bodies of knowledge about Muslims and Islam were created, maintained and channelled. The following summary of some of Edward W. Said's thoughts in this regard provides a useful basis for discussion.

Said provides several definitions associated with the term 'orientalism', associated with its historical and intellectual influence. Particularly significant is the suggestion that:

“Orientalism is a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'. Thus a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs 'mind', destiny, and so on. This orientalism can accommodate Aeschylus, say, and Victor Hugo, Dante and Karl Marx...” p2-3

Said's analysis accommodates a discussion on the interchange between academic and imaginative meanings of orientalism:

"... 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." p.3

"Orientalism... is not an airy European fantasy about the Orient, but a created body of theory and practice in which, for many generations, there has been a considerable material investment. Continued investment made Orientalism, as a system of knowledge about the Orient, an accepted grid for filtering through the Orient into Western consciousness, just as that same investment multiplied - indeed, made

truly productive -the statements proliferating out from Orientalism into general culture." p.6

Said stresses the ways in which distinctions were constructed between the 'west' and the 'east', and how information about the 'east' (including Muslim contexts) was constructed and manipulated – in order to generate stereotypes that are familiar in many contemporary approaches to Muslims and Islam today. Particularly important was the way in which written works gave strength and authority to stereotypes, which were further enabled through the distribution of information through schools, libraries and other dissemination methods. By presenting a demeaning and dominating set of assumptions about 'the Oriental', consciences might be absolved during exploitation and subjugation processes.

"...Orientalism was a library or archive of information commonly and, in some of its aspects, unanimously held... These ideas explained the behaviour of Orientals; they supplied Orientals with a mentality, a genealogy, an atmosphere; most important, they allowed Europeans to deal with and even to see Orientals as a phenomenon possessing regular characteristics. But like any set of durable ideas, Orientalist notions influenced the people who were called Orientals as well as those called Occidental, European, or Western; in short, Orientalism is better grasped as a set of constraints upon limitations of thought than it is simply as a positive doctrine. If the essence of Orientalism is the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority, then we must be prepared to note how in its development and subsequent history Orientalism deepened and even hardened the distinction." p.41-2

Said raises significant issues as to how the world is perceived and interpreted, that can be pertinent in the field of religious studies and the study of Islam, even if they were not written specifically with that focus in mind. Said refers to the work of other scholars, whom, in his view, have successfully interpreted aspects of Islam and Muslim society. Critics have questioned whether Said – a Christian of Palestinian origin who became an academic in the United States – is an appropriate arbiter of such values. His critical approach has merit as a launch pad to discourse about the perception and interpretation of Islam and Muslim societies. Some of the questions and issues that Said raised in his initial publication are extremely pertinent contemporary contents, and relate directly to how Islam is perceived (by people who are not Muslim and by Muslims). Said writes in particular about the work of Norman Daniel, an prominent historian who studied Islam in the west:

"The reception of Islam in the West... has been admirably studied by Norman Daniel. One constraint acting upon Christian thinkers who tried to understand Islam was an analogical one; since Christ is the basis of Christian faith, it was assumed quite incorrectly - that Mohammed was to Islam as Christ was to Christianity. Hence the polemic name "Mohammedism" given to Islam, and the automatic epithet 'impostor' applied to Mohammed. Out of such and many other misconceptions, 'there formed' a circle which was never broken by

imaginative exteriorisation... The Christian concept of Islam was integral and self-sufficient.' Islam became an image - the word is Daniel's but it seems to me to have remarkable implications for Orientalism in general – whose function was not so much to represent Islam in itself as to represent it for the medieval Christian."p.60

A consideration of orientalism is critical in order to evaluate sources about Islam and Muslims within your studies. This can extend to interpreting how the 'western' media depicts Muslim societies and issues, as well as individuals – and whether the orientalist paradigm is considered 'a thing of the past' or something that has relevance when discussing Islam Today:

"....the principal dogmas of Orientalism exist in their purest form today in studies of the Arabs and Islam. Let us recapitulate them here: one is the absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior. Another dogma is that abstractions about the Orient, particularly those based on texts representing a 'classical Oriental civilization, are always preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern Oriental realities. A third dogma is that the Orient is eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself; therefore it is assumed that a highly generalized and systematic vocabulary for describing the orient from a Western standpoint is inevitable and even scientifically 'objective.' A fourth dogma is that the Orient is at bottom something either to be feared (the Yellow Peril, the Mongol hordes, the brown dominions) or to be controlled (by pacification, research and development, outright occupation wherever possible)." p.301

Such assertions should not dissuade anyone from writing or studying the subject of Islam, although it is helpful to be aware of the potential pitfalls and dangers that are omnipresent for students (both Muslim and other).

Edward W. Said has attempted to raise a whole set of questions that are relevant in discussing the problems of human experience, not just in relation to Islam and Muslims. He also draws upon these themes in his work *Covering Islam*.

Suggested Reading

Burke, Edmund. "Orientalism." In *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Modern Islamic World*. , edited by John L. Esposito. *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, <http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t236MIW/e0610>

MEI Bulletin, Orientalism's Wake: The Ongoing Politics of a Polemic, Middle East Institute, *Viewpoints*, No. 12, September 2009, <http://chenry.webhost.utexas.edu/pmena/coursemats/2009/Orientalism.pdf>

Said, Edward W. *Orientalism* (London: Random House, 1979)

_____. *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, (London: Vintage Books; Revised edition, 1981, 1997)

Tate Britain, *The Lure of the East: British Orientalist Painting*, 2008, <http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/britishorientalistpainting/default.shtm> This exhibition website contains a number of examples of orientalist paintings, together with a commentary.

Exercise

Discuss your thoughts regarding the coverage of Islam and Muslims in the British media, and whether you feel they have a basis in 'orientalism'. Choose some newspaper stories or a television programme with 'Islamic' themes, and provide a summary of how Muslims have been depicted. Key themes to consider are: the representation of Islam and Muslims; stereotyping; theories of knowledge about Islam.



'Ghawazee', image taken from Edward W. Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (London: John Murray, 1860, 5th ed.)

¹ Page numbers denote extract from Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Random House, 1979)