

Assessment Five

A Discussion of an Academic Theoretical Work/Perspective
Associated with the Study of Muslim Politics, and its Relevance
to Contemporary Debates: Orientalism

Muslim Politics

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Introduction

Edward Said's text, *Orientalism* provides an academic, theoretical perspective on what Said believed were prevailing issues towards the academic study of the Orient, or more broadly, the East by Western society. As a religion, historical civilization, and political system, Islam is consistently mentioned to illustrate Said's views of how the West views (in quite inferior terms) the Orient. One key aspect of *Orientalism* is how Western biases are inherently attached to the study of the Orient, as well as how the Orient is not able to represent itself on its terms and is only given credibility when an Orientalist scholar has engaged in its academic analysis.¹ This is a significant aspect when analyzing the theoretical framework and relevancy of Orientalism, specifically in the study of Muslim politics as well as perspectives on Islam.

Biases are an inherent part of any study- the individual experiences of an individual contribute a significant portion of perspective, and academia is not immune to these issues. Yet, a scholar or researcher can strive to be objective, or at least be willing to not use their, preferred or familiar system of values, in completing an academic assessment of a specific system. Unfortunately, the integrity of this approach in studying Muslim politics is rare and, quite often the exception. Political, religious, ethnic, and racial biases are often on full display when engaging in the research of Islam and Muslim politics, and Edward Said's theoretical perspective of Orientalism encompasses a common and significant issue in studying Islam and subsequently, Islamic history and politics.

This paper is going to analyze the relevancy of Edward Said's theoretical concept of Orientalism and its relevancy to the study of Islam and Muslim politics. Part I will address the theoretical issues associated with the academic study of Islam and Muslim politics within the West, highlighted by Said's concept of Orientalism. Part II will analyze the academic inaccuracies attached to the above approach, as well as its contemporary relevance in Muslim politics. Both parts will feature examples of Orientalist scholar, Bernard Lewis, to articulate the issues of the theoretical approach of Orientalism in the study of Islam and Muslim politics.

¹ Edward W. Said. 1979. *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books), p. 283

Part I.

Historically as an academic discipline, the study of Islam, Islamic history, and Muslim politics were rarely featured as an independent area of research. Even in the middle of the twentieth century, during which significant events concerning Muslim and global politics occurred such as the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, as well as the relevance of imperialism in Islamic societies, Islam did not have a significant presence within Western academia. For example, within the American Academy of Religion (AAR), a group of academic-based scholars devoted to the study of religion, the study of Islam was absent. Interestingly, when Islam was seldomly featured within the AAR, its discussions would be held within the subunit of the “History of Christianity,” as if Islam is not a separate monotheistic entity, but rather a heresy of Christianity.² Therefore, from a Western perspective, Islam has not been significantly studied as a stand-alone field of academic study.

One of the key targets of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* was scholar, Bernard Lewis. Lewis is a constant feature in *Orientalism*, mostly due to his approach to the academic study of Islam and contemporary Islamic politics. Therefore, it is imperative to dissect the immense significance Lewis had on the academic study of Islam and Muslim politics. Along with his admirers being powerful individuals in positions of political power, his influence on the academic periphery of Western academia was significant. As a monumental academic figure in Princeton University’s Middle East program during his tenure as a faculty member, Lewis continued to have a powerful influence and perspective within the department, even after his retirement.³

Yet, the lack of attention given to Islam, its civilization, and political systems, did not cease broad generalizations of Islam, as well as contemporary Muslim politics. For example, Lewis was adamant that the deteriorating political and (lack of) democratic status of Muslim societies is the responsibility of the respective populations of these areas, specifically in their

² Carl W. Ernst & Richard C. Martin. 2010. “Introduction: Toward a Post-Orientalist Approach to Islamic Religious Studies,” in *Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press), p. 1 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv6wgc97>

³ Richard W. Bulliet, 2013. “Reviewed Work: Notes on a Century: Reflections of a Middle East Historian by Bernard Lewis, Buntzie Ellis Churchill,” *Review of Middle East Studies*, 47.1: p. 63 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41970039>

adherence to Islam, ignoring aspects of colonialism and imperialist factors in the political landscape of the Middle East.⁴

This presents numerous issues, not least of all in the inherent biases of the belief of Western political superiority in comparison to the non-Western political system. Orientalists commonly highlight the Orient's "backwardness" as the antithesis of European superiority in this case, political and economic backwardness.⁵ Yet, to ignore recent political events, such as the World Wars and the colonial impact on Islamic societies, and to put the nexus of the issue to adherence to a religion, is emblematic of the issues of Orientalism within Muslim political contexts and a common feature of Lewis and Orientalists. Using the Holocaust as an example of how it (rightly) altered a collective consciousness, Said questions why imperialist factors are ignored when studying (in this case political factors of) Islamic societies.⁶

Perhaps most importantly, the issue of Orientalism is its application of Western cultural values and traditions, when analyzing Muslim politics. Western traditional values, such as modernity and secularism, are commonly used as a reference point to judge the political standing of Muslim societies. The issue this approach presents is that the Muslim political situation is not judged on its terms, but Western terms and perspectives. In a countering sentiment, Anthropologist Talal Asad, sharing the sentiment of Islamic Studies scholar, Marshall Hodgson states, that to accurately assess and study Muslim societies, "Muslim societies must be understood on their terms and not a superimposed Western model."⁷ If this approach isn't applied to the study of Islam and Muslim politics, it often leads to incorrect conclusions, which is a practical issue of Orientalism.

⁴ M.A. Muqtedar Khan. 2020. "Post-Orientalism and Geopolitics," *Insight Turkey*, 22.2: p. 132
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26918127>

⁵ Said, p.7

⁶ Said, p.xxii

⁷ Ernst, p. 9

Part II.

Having an incorrect foundation of academic assessment, as well as the belief of cultural and political superiority is not only an issue from a moral perspective but also a practical one. This can be witnessed by the Orientalist approach of Bernard Lewis' assessment of Islam's history and politics.

For example, when assessing the foundations of the Islamic Republic of Pakistan, Lewis opens his essay "The Concept of an Islamic Republic" on the paradoxical nature of the term "Islamic Republic." His consistent tone of political superiority is in full display when he states that the political traditions of Islam are "almost exclusively monarchial and authoritarian."⁸ Yet, if one delves deep into Islamic history and Islamic political theory, there are clear indications that early Islamic political traditions did not view a monarchic authoritarian regime favorably- if anything, it was viewed with contempt. *Mulk*, or kingship, was commonly referred to in a negative light by early Islamic chroniclers and political philosophers. A common theme of anti-Umayyad sentiment in early Islamic tradition was the introduction of *mulk* into the Islamic political system, which was often the basis of constant political rebellions.⁹ Therefore, Lewis' assessment of the political system of Islam as being sympathetic to monarchic authoritarianism is not only problematic but academically and practically flawed.

Additionally, the Orientalist approach to studying Muslim politics, is often within a broad narrative, even when attempting to analyze a positive component. In the same essay, Lewis synchronizes all of Islam's political systems when he mentions the attractiveness of a unifying and equitable nature of an Islamic political system, such as the proponents of brotherhood and community. However, he additionally states that unlike the Hindus of the East, Muslim societies "have never developed a caste system."¹⁰ The question then leads to, which Muslim society is he referring to? When analyzing the political system of Pakistan, which is overwhelmingly Muslim and seceded from India due to fears of living in a Hindu majority, there are naturally strong cultural similarities between India and Pakistan. As in India, the application of the caste system

⁸ Bernard Lewis. 1955. "The Concept of an Islamic Republic," *Die Welt Des Islams*, 4.1: p. 1
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/1569481>

⁹ Sean W. Anthony 2021. "Chapter Three: Prophetic Dominion, Umayyad Kingship: Varieties of Mulk in the Early Islamic Period," in *The Umayyad World*, ed. by Andrew Marsham (New York, NY: Routledge Member of the Taylor and Francis Group), p. 41

¹⁰ Lewis, p. 5

in Pakistan's political system is significant, even as recent as the national elections of 2013. A study within Pakistan analyzed the voting patterns of the rural province of Punjab and determined that caste loyalty was a decisive aspect of political culture and behavior.¹¹ Lewis falls into the academic error of reaching an incorrect conclusion, generalizing various Islamic societies, even though his assessment may initially be taken in a favorable light to highlight communal loyalty.

Interestingly, Lewis has a different approach to understanding the basis of secularism and its relationship with Christianity. As compared to evaluating Islamic political theory, Lewis has a significantly sympathetic tone toward Christianity's supposed relationship with secularism. Lewis believes that not only is secularism, the separation of church and state, inherently Christian but was "imposed by the subsequent history of Christendom," due to various persecutions of conflicting perspectives on Christianity.¹² Never mind the oxymoronic nature of how an organized religiopolitical system (Christendom) is responsible for the separation of its breakup but he makes an indirect assessment of why the Judeo-Christian religiopolitical traditions are superior to the Islamic ones, specifically, the wisdom of Christians to move towards secularism. This point by Lewis is not just an indirect critique of various Muslim political societies, but an ode to his contemporaneous Western political systems.

Conclusion

Orientalism, as an academic theoretical approach, is relevant in understanding the approaches to studying Islam, specifically Muslim politics. Aspects such as the inherent biases associated with the Orientalist approach to studying Muslim politics, and the issues of its potential for inaccurate conclusions illustrate, not just the foundational issues of Orientalism, but its prevalence in the analysis of Muslim politics.

However, Orientalist observation is not just limited to academic research. This aspect of academic research percolates in various mediums, including policy, as well as in media coverage

¹¹ Nazir Hussain Shah, Naudir Bakht. 2019. "Impact of Caste and Biradari System on Voting Behavior: Comparative Study of Rural and Urban Southern Punjab (District Bahawalpur)," *Journal of Pakistan Vision*, 20.2: p. 192 http://pu.edu.pk/home/journal/12/V_20_2_2019.html

¹² Lewis, Bernard. 1995. "Secularism in the Middle East," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 100.2: p. 151 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40903409>

and general conception. For instance, the recent invasion of Ukraine by the Russian regime under Vladimir Putin highlights the relevancy of Orientalism in various formats. For instance, when covering the humanitarian and political crisis of Ukraine, CBS News correspondent, Charlie D'Agata stated his shock that this sort of political instability could occur in Europe. D'Agata's shock comes from how unlike Iraq and Afghanistan a "relatively civilized, relatively European" society could experience such political instability and uncertainty.¹³ Some coverage of the Ukrainian crisis is even more blatant when examined from a racial perspective, such as when former deputy general prosecutor of Ukraine, David Sakvarelidze stated in a BBC interview of his distraught emotions when witnessing the suffering of "European people with blue eyes and blond hair being killed."¹⁴

From both a moral and academic perspective, Orientalism is not only relevant in its application in the study of Muslim politics, but its widespread influence is problematic. To counter its relevance and common application, it is imperative to understand not just what Orientalism is, as a theoretical approach to studying Muslim politics, but its history and attitude towards non-European and non-Western societies. This recognition prompts an awareness of past academic misdeeds so that there can be a more interdisciplinary and accurate approach when analyzing various areas of research, such as Islam and Muslim politics.

¹³ Rashawn Ray. 2022. "The Russian Invasion of Ukraine Shows Racism Has No Boundaries," *Brookings Institute* <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/how-we-rise/2022/03/03/the-russian-invasion-of-ukraine-shows-racism-has-no-boundaries/>

¹⁴ Ray

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