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Islam Through Western Eyes

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By *Edward W. Said*

JANUARY 2, 1998

The media have become obsessed with something called “Islam,” which in their voguish lexicon has acquired only two meanings, both of them unacceptable and impoverishing. On the one hand, “Islam” represents the threat of a resurgent atavism, which suggests not only the menace of a return to the Middle Ages but the destruction of what Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan calls the democratic order in the Western world. On the other hand, “Islam” is made to stand for a defensive counterresponse to this first image of Islam as threat, especially when, for geopolitical reasons, “good” Moslems like the Saudi Arabians or the Afghan Moslem “freedom fighters” against the Soviet Union are in question. Anything said in defense of Islam is more or less forced into the apologetic form of a plea for Islam’s humanism, its contributions to civilization, development and perhaps even to democratic niceness.

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Along with that kind of counterresponse there is the occasional foolishness of trying to equate

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Islam with the immediate situation of one or another Islamic country, which in the case of Iran during the Shah's actual removal was perhaps a reasonable tactic. But after that exuberant period and during the hostage crisis, the tactic has become a somewhat trickier business. What is the Islamic apologist to say when confronted with the daily count of people executed by the Islamic komitehs, or when–as was reported on September 19, 1979, by Reuters–Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini announces that enemies of the Islamic revolution would be destroyed? The point is that both media meanings of "Islam" depend on each other, and are equally to be rejected for perpetuating the double bind.

How fundamentally narrow and constricted is the semantic field of Islam was brought home to me after my book *Orientalism* appeared last year. Even though I took great pains in the book to show that current discussions of the Orient or of the Arabs and Islam are fundamentally premised upon a fiction, my book was often interpreted as a defense of the "real" Islam. Whereas what

I was trying to show was that any talk about Islam was radically flawed, not only because an unwarranted assumption was being made that a large ideologically freighted generalization could cover all the rich and diverse particularity of Islamic *life* (a very different thing) but also because it would simply be repeating the errors of Orientalism to claim that the correct view of Islam was X or Y or Z. And still I would receive invitations from various institutions to give a lecture on the true meaning of an Islamic Republic or on the Islamic view of peace. Either one found oneself defending Islam–as if the religion needed that kind of defense–or, by keeping silent, seeming to be tacitly accepting Islam's defamation.

But rejection alone does not take one very far, since if we are to claim, as we must, that as a religion and as a civilization Islam *does* have a meaning very much beyond either of the two currently given it, we must first be able to provide something in the way of a space in which to speak of Islam. Those who wish either to rebut the standard anti-Islamic and anti-Arab rhetoric that dominates the media and liberal intellectual discourse, or to avoid the idealization of Islam (to say nothing of its sentimentalization), find themselves with

scarcely a place to stand on, much less a place in which to move freely.

From at least the end of the eighteenth century until our own day, modern Occidental reactions to Islam have been dominated by a type of thinking that may still be called Orientalist. The general basis of Orientalist thought is an imaginative geography dividing the word into two unequal parts, the larger and "different" one called the Orient, the other, also known as *our* world, called the Occident or the West. Such divisions always take place when one society or culture thinks about another one, different from it, but it is interesting that even when the Orient has uniformly been considered an inferior part of the world, it has always been endowed both with far greater size and with a greater potential for power than the West. Insofar as Islam has always been seen as belonging to the Orient, its particular fate within the general structure of Orientalism has been to be looked at with a very special hostility and fear. There are, of course, many obvious religious, psychological and political reasons for this, but all of these reasons derive from a sense that so far as the West is concerned, Islam represents not only a

formidable competitor but also a late-coming challenge to Christianity.

I have not been able to discover any period in European or American history since the Middle Ages in which Islam was generally discussed or thought about *outside* a framework created by passion, prejudice and political interests. This may not seem like a surprising discovery, but included in the indictment is the entire gamut of scholarly and scientific disciplines which, since the early nineteenth century, have either called themselves Orientalism or tried systematically to deal with the Orient. No one would disagree with the statement that early commentators on Islam like Peter the Venerable and Barthelemy D'Herbelot were passionate Christian polemicists in what they they said. But it has been an unexamined assumption that since Europe advanced into the modern scientific age and freed itself of superstition and ignorance, the march must have included Orientalism. Wasn't it true that Silvestre de Sacy, Edward Lane, Ernest Renan, Hamilton Gibb and Louis Massignon were learned, objective scholars, and isn't it true that, following upon all sorts of advances in twentieth-century sociology, anthropology, linguistics and history, American scholars

who teach the Middle East and Islam in places like Princeton, Harvard and Chicago are therefore unbiased and free of special pleading in what they do? The answer is no. Not that Orientalism is more biased than other social and humanistic sciences; it is as ideological and as contaminated by the world as other disciplines. The main difference is that the Orientalists use the authority of their standing as experts to deny–no, to *cover*–their deep-seated feelings about Islam with a carpet of jargon whose purpose is to certify their "objectivity" and "scientific impartiality."

That is one point. The other distinguishes a historical pattern in what would otherwise be an undifferentiated characterization of Orientalism. Whenever in modern times there has been an acutely political tension felt between the Occident and its Orient (or between the West and its Islam), there has been a tendency to resort in the West not to direct violence but first to the cool, relatively detached instruments of scientific, quasi-objective representation. In this way Islam is made more clear, the true nature of its threat appears, an implicit course of action against it is proposed. In such a context both science and direct

violence end up by being forms of aggression against Islam.

Two strikingly similar examples illustrate my thesis. We can now see retrospectively that during the nineteenth century both France and England preceded their occupations of portions of the Islamic East with a period in which the various scholarly means of characterizing and understanding the Orient underwent remarkable technical modernization and development. The French occupation of Algeria in 1830 followed a period of about two decades during which French scholars literally transformed the study of the Orient from an antiquarian into a rational discipline. Of course there had been Napoleon Bonaparte's occupation of Egypt in 1798, and of course one should remark the fact that he had prepared for his expedition by marshaling a sophisticated group of scientists to make his enterprise more efficient. My point, however, is that Napoleon's short-lived occupation of Egypt closed a chapter. A new one began with the long period during which, under de Sacy's stewardship at French institutions of Oriental study, France became the world leader in Orientalism; this chapter climaxed a little later when French armies occupied

Algiers in 1830.

I do not at all want to suggest that there is a causal relationship between one thing and the other, nor to adopt the anti-intellectual view that all scientific learning necessarily leads to violence and suffering. All I want to say is that empires are not spontaneously born, nor during the modern period have they been run by improvisation. If the development of learning involves the redefinition and the reconstitution of fields of human experience by scientists who stand above the material they study, it is not impertinent to see the same development occurring among politicians whose realm of authority is redefined to include inferior regions of the world where new "national" interests can be discovered, and later seen to be in need of close supervision. I very much doubt that England would have occupied Egypt in so long and massively institutionalized a way were it not for the durable investment in Oriental learning first cultivated by scholars like Lane and William James. Familiarly, accessibility, representability: these were what Orientalists demonstrated about the Orient. The Orient could be seen, it could be studied, it could be managed. It need not

remain a distant, marvelous, incomprehensible and yet very rich place. It could be brought home–or, more simply, Europe could make itself at home there, as it subsequently did.

My second example is a contemporary one. The Islamic Orient today is important for its resources or for its geopolitical location. Neither of these, however, is interchangeable with the interests, needs or aspirations of the native Orientals. Ever since the end of World War II, the United States has been taking positions of dominance and hegemony once held in the Islamic world by Britain and France. With this replacement of one imperial system by another have gone two things: first, a remarkable burgeoning of academic and expert interest in Islam, and, second, an extraordinary revolution in the techniques available to the largely private-sector press and electronic journalism industries. Together these two phenomena, by which a huge apparatus of university, government and business experts study Islam and the Middle East and by which Islam has become a subject familiar to every consumer of news in the West, have almost entirely domesticated the Islamic world. Not only has that world become the subject

of the most profound cultural and economic Western saturation in history–for no non-Western realm has been so dominated by the United States as the Arab-Islamic world is dominated today–by the exchange between Islam and the West, in this case the United States, is profoundly one-sided.

So far as the United States seems to be concerned, it is only a slight overstatement to say that Moslems and Arabs are essentially seen as either oil suppliers or potential terrorists. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Moslem life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Arab world. What we have instead is a series of crude, essentialized caricatures of the Islamic world presented in such a way as to make that world vulnerable to military aggression. I do not think it is an accident, therefore, that recent talk of U.S. military intervention in the Arabian Gulf (which began at least five years ago, well before the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan) has been preceded by a long period of Islam's rational presentation through the cool medium of television and through "objective" Orientalist study: in many ways our actual situation today bears

a chilling resemblance to the nineteenth-century British and French examples previously cited.

Even if military aggression does not occur, the implications of all this are far-reaching. As mentioned earlier, Islam has uniformly appeared to Europe and the West in general as a threat. Today, the phenomenon is more in evidence than ever before because on the one hand there has been an enormous media convergence upon what has been called the emergence, return or resurgence of Islam, and on the other hand, because parts of the Islamic world–Palestine, Iran, Afghanistan, among other places–which have been undergoing various unequal processes of historical development, have also seemed to be encroaching upon traditional Western (more particularly *American*) hegemony. The views of the experts and of the media are nearly identical on this. Far from attempting to refine, or even dissent from, the gross image of Islam as a threat, the intellectual and policy community in the United States has considerably enforced and concentrated the image. From Zbigniew Brzezinski's vision of the "crescent of crisis" to Bernard Lewis's "return of Islam," the picture drawn is a unanimous one. "Islam" means

the end of civilization as “we” know it. Islam is anti-human, antidemocratic, anti-Semitic, antirational. University scholars whose professional lives are tied to the study of Islam have either been willing collaborators with this state of things, or if they have been silent, their marginality in the culture at large further confirms the fact that in the United States at least, there is no major segment of the polity, no significant sector of the culture, no part of the whole community capable of identifying sympathetically with the Islamic world.

On the other hand, most of the Third World is now fully bathed in U.S.-produced TV shows, and is wholly dependent upon a tiny group of news agencies that transmit news back to the Third World, even in the large numbers of cases where the news is *about* the Third World. From being the source of news, the Third World generally, and Islamic countries in particular, have become consumers of news. For the first time in history (for the first time, that is, on such a scale) the Islamic world may be said to be learning *about itself* in part by means of images, histories and information manufactured in the West. If one adds to this fact that students and scholars in the

Islamic world are still dependent upon U.S. and European libraries and institutions of learning for what now passes as Middle Eastern studies (consider, for example, that there isn't a single first-rate, usable library of Arabic material in the entire Islamic world), plus the fact that English is a world language in a way that Arabic isn't, plus the fact that for its elite the Islamic world is now producing a managerial class of basically subordinate natives who are indebted for their economies, their defense establishments and for their political ideas to the worldwide consumer-market system controlled in the West–one gets an accurate, although extremely depressing, picture of what the media revolution (serving a small segment of the societies that produced it) has done to Islam.

To the extent that Islam is known about today, it is known principally in the form given it by the mass media: not only radio, films and Tv but also textbooks, magazines and best-selling, high-quality novels. This corporate picture of Islam on the whole is a depressing and misleading one. What emerges is that Ayatollah Khomeini, Col. Muammar e-Qaddafi, Sheik Ahmad Zaki Yamani and Palestinian terrorists are the best-known figures in the foreground, while

the background is populated by shadowy (though extremely frightening) notions about *jihad*, slavery, subordination of women and irrational violence combined with extreme licentiousness. If you were to ask an average literate Westerner to name an Arab or Islamic writer, or a musician, or an intellectual, you might get a name like Kahlil Gibran in response, but nothing else. In other words, whole swatches of Islamic history, culture and society simply do not exist except in the truncated, tightly packaged forms made current by the media. As Herbert Schiller has said, TV's images tend to present reality in too immediate and fragmentary a form for either historical or human continuity to appear. Islam therefore is equivalent to an undifferentiated mob of scimitar-waving oil suppliers, or it is reduced to the utterances of one or another Islamic leader who at the moment happens to be a convenient foreign scapegoat.

We are well past the point of being able to say whether the media or the experts or the governments or the mass audiences are to blame for this state of affairs. With very few exceptions, one is struck by the blinding uniformity of the picture. Perhaps it is true that the state of information that

now exists on any subject is as standardized, and as low, as this one; and perhaps also it is true that whatever the experts, the special-interest groups, the manipulators touch they turn into flatness, ignorance and stereotypes. But we must be especially alarmed that whether Islam is depicted on television, or whether it turns up in school textbooks, or whether it appears in best-selling novels by high-class novelists, or whether it's learnedly discussed by an academic expert on Islam (who is still respected in parts of the Arab world), the picture is almost exactly the same. That does not mean that the picture is an inaccurate one; rather, it is a picture; it has the consistency of something made up, not of life; it portrays certain aspects of what Marshall Hodges has called the Islamicate world, but deforms them into a pattern that expresses certain things about a mass-media society, very little about what is referred to as Islam. What is crucially important about this presentation of Islam is the media's ascendancy, their intellectual and perceptual hegemony, over the whole thing, and since the media sell their product to consumers who prefer simplicity to complexity, the uniform image of Islam that emerges is constructed out of much the

same material from which history, society and humanity have been eliminated.

What can be done? To begin with, what should be avoided is an attempt to alter, improve, beautify, make more appealing the image of Islam. Such an effort falls into the trap of believing that reductive images can be made substitutes for a very complex reality, and it ends up perpetuating the entire system of ideological fictions by which Islam is made to do service for Western designs upon riches, peoples and territories that happen to call themselves Moslem. A hard and fast distinction has to be made between serious consideration of the Islamicate world and nearly everything that passes for Islam in the media and in all but a few places in the culture. One cannot look for help in promoting serious investigative discussion of Islam–even as a subject of academic inquiry–among traditional Orientalists or within the normally constructed programs of Middle Eastern studies in today's Western universities. On the other hand, younger scholars and students can be extremely useful in carrying work beyond prejudices and constrictions of their elders. And, just as important, a serious interest in the problems of Islamic society and Islamic

peoples is very likely to develop not among the Middle East experts, or media people who have a purported specialty in modern Islam, but inside segments of the population who have a wider and more serious view of human problems in general: men and women who are committed not to Orient and Occident but to the cause of human rights, rather than lobbyists who act on behalf of human rights when they are paid to do so; students of comparative literature rather than Semitic philologists who know nothing about other literatures and who care little for the contemporary world; genuinely enterprising sociologists who know something about theory and care a great deal about issues confronting concrete societies, rather than specialists in the Islamic mind or in a monolithic thing called Islamic society. Whatever the person, whatever the field of endeavor, I doubt that there can be any substitute for a genuinely engaged and sympathetic–as opposed to a narrowly political or hostile–attitude to the Islamic world. Indeed, I suspect that only if we get beyond politicized labels like “East” and “West” will we be able to reach the real world at all.

As for what the Islamic, and more especially the Arab-Islamic, world might do, this can be put very simply. There is no longer any excuse for bewailing the hostility of the "West" toward the Arabs and Islam and then sitting back in outraged righteousness. When the reasons for this hostility and those aspects of the "West" that encourage it are analyzed, an important step has been taken toward fighting it, but that is by no means the whole way. Certainly there are great dangers today in actually *following*, actually *fulfilling* this hostile image of Islam–and that has only been the doing, it is true, of *some* Moslems and *some* Arabs and some black Africans. But such fulfillments underline the importance of what still has to be done. In the great rush to industrialize, modernize and develop itself, the Islamicate world has been compliant about turning itself into a great consumers' market. To dispel the myths and stereotypes of Orientalism, the world as a whole has to be given an opportunity to see Moslems and Orientals producing a different form of history, a new kind of sociology, a new cultural awareness: in short, the relatively modest goal of *writing* a new form of history, investigating the Islamicate world and its

many different societies with a genuine seriousness of purpose and a love of truth. But, alas, we must recognize that even with vast sums of money easily available, the Islamic world as a whole does not seem interested in promoting learning, building libraries, establishing research institutes whose main purpose would be modern scientific attention to Islamic realities and to seeing whether in fact there is something specifically Islamic about the Islamic world.

Why is there a rush to produce row upon row of functionally illiterate technicians–with each new generation more likely than its predecessors to be vulnerable to the media revolution in its worst excesses? This is the great question of the hour. If it is a fact that this is the general direction taken by the Third World countries that have recently gained their independence, it isn't much of a consolation to say confidently that the problem is not an *Islamic* one but a social and cultural one. Nor is the rhetorical attack upon neo-imperialism very convincing at a time when national governments and rulers openly espouse values that further the new style of imperialism without colonies. To say that this reflects a preoccupation with rhetoric

and style at the expense of concrete substance is, however, not to have learned anything from what we have been calling the distortion of the Arab-Islamic image in the Western media. That this distortion has occurred at all is a function of power, and in this instance style and image are direct political indices of power. Thus, we must concede that any drastic attempt to correct distortions of Islam and the Arabs is a political question involving the use and deployment of power.

Let me return to the power of the media in the current situation involving Islam. As the press comes to perceive an increasing number of Moslems as American enemies, rulers like Egypt's President Anwar el-Sadat (whose remark that Khomeini was a lunatic and a disgrace to Islam was repeated ad nauseam) have been made to seem like a more desirable Islamic norm. The same is true of the Saudi royal family, although what generally goes unreported as a result is a considerable amount of disturbing information and, in the case of Iran, this deepens the hostage crisis.

Since the Camp David agreements of 1978 there has been a consensus that Sadat is our friend in the region; along with Prime

Minister Menachem Begin of Israel he has been openly proclaiming his willingness to become a regional policeman and to give the United States bases on his territory. As a consequence, nearly everything reported out of Egypt effectively makes his point of view seem like the correct one on matters Egyptian, Arab and regional. Egypt and the Arab world, in fact, now often reported with a view to confirming Sadat's pre-eminence; little appears about the widespread opposition to him. Exactly the same thing happened during the Pahlevi regime, of course, when, with the exception of Berkeley scholar Hamid Algar, no one paid the slightest attention to the potential of the Shah's religious and political opposition. Many of our political, military, strategic and economic investments today are made through Sadat, and by virtue of Sadat's perspective on things.

There are other reasons too. One is the Middle East's sensitive *domestic* aspects for this country. It is no accident, for example, that even after Watergate and the revelations about the Central Intelligence Agency (and even with the Freedom of Information Act), there have been no major discoveries concerning U.S. activities in the Middle East. This is surprising in the case

of Iran, not simply because so many Americans were on the take from the Shah but also because of Israel's extremely close involvement with the United States there under the ex-Shah's regime. Savak was set up with the direct help of the Mossad, the Israeli intelligence agency, and, as in so many other cases, the C.I.A. and the Federal Bureau of Investigation cooperated willingly with the Israeli secret services.

In addition, there is an increasingly influential new lobby in this country whose main function is to assure the U.S. public that the present Arab regimes in the Gulf are stable. Among all the reporters for the major networks and newspapers, in fact, only CBS's Ed Bradley noted on November 24, 1979, that all information about the November occupation of the Great Mosque in Mecca came from the Government and that no other news was permitted. Subsequently, *The Christian Science Monitor*'s Helena Cobban reported from Beirut on November 30 that the mosque's seizure had a very definite *political* meaning, that far from being Islamic fanatics, the attackers were part of a political network having a secular as well as an Islamic program, pointedly directed at

the political and financial monopoly held by the Saudi royal family. One month after her article appeared, the Saudi spokesman for the group, who had given Cobban the story, was picked up off a Beirut street and has disappeared; Saudi intelligence is reportedly behind the man's abduction.

With the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, we are probably going to have an even more dramatic cleavage separating good Moslems from bad. We will undoubtedly be seeing ever more news hailing the achievements of good Moslems like Sadat, Pakistan's Zia ul-Haq and the Afghan Moslem insurgents–more equating of good Islam with anti-Communism and, if possible, with modernization. As for Moslems who do not serve our purpose, they will, as always, be portrayed as backward fanatics.

Edward W. Said *We mourn the loss of Edward Said, who passed away on the morning of Thursday, September 25, 2003.* Edward W. Said, the late University Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, was for many years the magazine's classical music critic as well as a contributing writer. Known both for his groundbreaking research in the field of comparative literature and his incisive

political commentary, Said was one of the most prominent intellectuals in the United States. His writing regularly appeared in the *Guardian* of London, *Le Monde Diplomatique* and the Arab-language daily *al-Hayat*, printed in every Arab capital in the world. In 1948, Said and his family were dispossessed from Palestine and settled in Cairo. He came to the United States to attend college and lived in New York for many years. Because of his advocacy for Palestinian self-determination and his membership in the Palestine National Council, Said was not allowed to visit Palestine until several years ago. Educated at Princeton and Harvard, Said lectured at more than 150 universities and colleges in the United States, Canada and Europe. His writing, translated into fourteen languages, includes ten books, among them *Orientalism* (Pantheon, 1978), a runner-up in criticism for the National Book Critics Circle Award; *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Harvard, 1983); *Blaming the Victims* (Verso, 1988); *Culture and Imperialism* (Knopf, 1993); *Peace and Its Discontents: Essays on Palestine in the Middle East Peace Process* (Vintage, 1995); *End of the Peace Process: Oslo and After* (Pantheon, 2000); and, most recently, *Power, Politics, and Culture* (Pantheon).

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