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POSTMODERNISM AND ORIENTALISM: FRENCH PHILOSOPHY AS THE LATEST MIRROR OF OUR (OCCIDENTAL) SELVES

A Review of Ian Almond, *The New Orientalists: Postmodern Representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2007. Paperback. 229 pages.

Ever since Edward Said published his landmark *Orientalism* in 1978, the phrase has served as a hot button for pressing forward unfavorable opinions about certain Western writings, intellectual authorities, and styles of scholarship. Though originally a term of commendation prior to Said's sophisticated critique of the humanities and its attitude toward the cultures of Asia and the Middle East, the expression "Orientalism" has more recently functioned as a blunt instrument for denigrating without further argument what any Western academic might have to say about non-Western ideas, values, and cultures, particularly Islamic ones. "Orientalism" in general implies an ineradicable Eurocentric bias toward anything that happens to be non-European. Like most ethno-methodological stances that have become unshakable and commonplace across the disciplines, it denies any serious capacity for involvement by *outsiders* in a particular field dominated by cultural, or subcultural, insiders. "You can't understand us because you're not *x*" and "if you try, we will have to dismiss what you say because you're not *x*" are the most familiar conversation-stopping disclaimers that routinely segment and segregate the myriad trajectories of what are these days known as "cultural studies."

Said himself, of course, was never an ethno-methodological dogmatist, and while he consistently leveraged his own (non-Muslim) Palestinian identity to strip bare the more subtle "colonial" presuppositions of scholars who pretended to be anti-colonial, or even "post-colonial," he did not trivialize his not-so-latent political agenda for the sake of scoring crass political points, or launching rants. Said was one of the first high-profile thinkers in America outside the Yale group to do something really serious with post-structuralism. Unlike the early "deconstructionists" that quickly found their calling in merely explaining and commenting on Derrida, Said deployed his implicit theory of the text into a powerful tool for reframing discussions in history, Middle Eastern and international studies, and political thought as well as literary analysis, all the time rarely straying from a careful attention to the materials which he put under the knife. The problem with Said was never his major premise, or his approach. It was his tendency to overgeneralize and to capture too many quarries in too wide a net. It was some of the specific "applications" of his general charge of Orientalism that proved off the mark, and his epigones carried that regrettable failing forward. Thus the locution "Orientalist" has become more an epithet than a driving wedge for theory.

In *The New Orientalists* literature professor Ian Almond, who teaches in Germany but writes in English, takes us back to where Said left off. At the same time he discretely refrains from taking the shotgun polemical tack that got Said in so much trouble. Almond is far more focused. You might call his attack a kind of “precision bombing.” And, ironically, Almond sets in his gunsights many of those very same figures from Said himself drew a certain amount of inspiration, mainly Foucault and Derrida.

Almond also has undertaken a relatively modest project. He is interested almost exclusively in how the leading representatives of the postmodernist regime have all fallen been somewhat unfaithful to their own professed aims of revealing to us the true riches of difference and alterity when it comes to Islam. In fact, as progenitors of the Orientalist critique of Western letters and learning they have succumbed just as readily to the timeless shortcomings of Orientalism as a whole. The cardinal sin of Orientalism is its misuse, or overuse, of the *abstract non-Western Other* in staking out its own evolving positions. As Almond and a few others have trenchantly called to our attention, Orientalism often distorts and devalues its subject matter by a nuanced and perverse romanticism that is intended, paradoxically, to compel us to recognize our limitations and relative cognitive myopia as Westerners. Orientalism and “multiculturalism” frequently go hand in glove, although Western exponents of the latter would be loathe to admit that they quickly can be found guilty of the accusations Said has laid out against the academy in general.

Almond makes the astute observation that the postmodern preoccupation with *difference* usually leaves the genuine and raddled differences that “other” peoples and societies actually exhibit. Since Orientalists often have their own axe to grind against their parochial, paternalistic, or privileged opponents in what is essentially an ongoing, internecine, decidedly Western culture war, their positive valuation of the “Oriental” becomes a tool for exploiting for their own purposes at a much more sophisticated level, and with even more shameless arrogance than that of their putative adversaries, demeaning caricatures of whom they seem to be extolling. The Other amounts to the Orientalist’s closeted *alter ego*.

On the surface *The New Orientalists* seems but an articulate screed about why our postmodernist luminaries fail to understand Islam. Each chapter examines a particular figure. The specific figures Almond dissects are Friedrich Nietzsche, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Julia Kristeva, Slavoy Žižek, Jorge Luis Borges, Salman Rushdie, and Orhan Pamuk. If these authorities have been singled out relentlessly to propel a critique of modernism (which Almond at times seems to conflate with Orientalism) and its Enlightenment fantasy of a universalism of distinct moral truths, epistemological axioms, and ideas, they themselves are presumably susceptible to the exact same critique. “S/he who deconstructs, will be deconstructed,” Almond declares. (p. 200)

However, not all of Almond’s efforts to unmask each of these individual’s supposed modernist/Orientalist proclivities are equally on the mark, let alone significant. His quarrel with Nietzsche, for example, is that the latter glorified

the manly “Muslim” as a foil for his savage attacks on the bourgeois European, particularly the German of Bismarck’s day. Given that little was genuinely known about the Islamic world in Nietzsche’s era, and what was known was filtered through the representational grid of a crepuscular Ottoman empire that yearned in itself to become European, there is little of serious consequence in Almond’s introductory essay that profiles the great prophet of Western demise. If Almond wants to establish that the dawn herald of the postmodern was in fact an Orientalist, that is about as insightful as noting that the British Raj was an imperialist. Nietzsche’s prejudices about Islam have had no more currency for the thought of his successor than his notorious misogyny. Furthermore, Nietzsche was far more bent on idealizing the Homeric Greeks than the followers of Muhammed, and given his disdain for monotheism, even his apparent stupidities cannot be taken at face value.

The same “what’s the point?” objection can be said about Almond’s treatment of Salman Rushdie. Rushdie is a complex and searching kind of writer who has explored the utmost, “progressive” possibilities inherent in both the European and the Islamic traditions. In that respect he is not unlike Said. It is odd that Almond would appear to lump him among other postmodern “Orientalists,” since an Orientalist, almost tautologically, is a Westerner who lacks the genuine “insider” perspective on his subject matter. Almond does not complain that Rushdie has insufficient insider credentials. What he faults is Rushdie’s alleged project of discovering an “unthought” kind of Islam that is somehow originalist in nature, of reviving “a pure and sincerer Islam.” (p. 109). Why that is a problem comes across as a little confusion, unless it is a sop to orthodox Muslims, to whom he seems to want to pander slightly.

Almond’s lament is that in questing after an originalist Islam that was truly faithful to the Prophet’s aims, Rushdie is dismissing the sincerity of current orthodox (perhaps a more fitting term would be “Shariaist”), or even reactionary exponents, and thereby giving short shrift to other forms of living Islam that is just as “real” as his own vision. But that is not what Orientalists do. It is what every radical thinker does. It is also in a coarse sense what the jihadists do. Almond needs to confront a thesis well-advanced by such a famous contemporary “Orientalist” as Bernard Lewis, Said’s whipping boy and nemesis. Lewis has rightly pointed out that it has been the instinct of Muslims ever since the Shia-Sunni split in the first century after Mohammed to invent some kind of original Islam. Rushdie, in fact, is doing nothing different than the Ayatollah Khomeini – just one among many latter day “real” Muslims – did when he issued his infamous *fatwa* against the author of *The Satanic Verses*.

With his notion of *velayat e faqih* (“rule by the guardians,” or “jurists”) Khomeini was just as open to charges, at least by Sunnis, of taking too many liberties in characterizing original Islam. The greatest transgression against God’s Qur’anic order, according to all Islamic schools, is *bida* (that is, “innovation”, which has the same implication, but is stronger than, the ancient Christian term “heresy”). In his attempt to recover his own version of an “originalist” version of Muhammed’s message. Khomeini reportedly thought he found an echo of

Muhammed's Medina in Plato's *Republic*. Hence since the Islamic Revolution in Iran the Supreme Leader has served as Plato's philosopher-king, who is also the ultimate authority in matters both temporal and spiritual authority, and the *faqih* of course as the mediators of that authority, as "guardians" (a word used to this day in that country).

Almond nonetheless is right on target – and therefore establishes himself as an critic of the postmodernist canon for unconventional reasons – when he discusses the French thinkers. Almond makes us aware that so much of French intellectual culture – radical as well as reactionary – has been shaped by the painful Algerian experience. As an Algerian Jew, we would expect Derrida for all his inclusive political sympathies, to be high on Almond's list, even though his general treatment of the "new Orientalists" makes us wonder if he as a Westerner doesn't perch himself on the threshold of the same slippery slope as classical Orientalists. All too often the charge of Orientalism comes from Islamists themselves, which makes it less credible. Yet it can also be found among Islamophiles in the West, who are well-nigh "Orientalists", once more by definition, if the cruder meaning of the locution is deployed. Islamophiles do not "get" the historical faith-claims of Jews any more than Islamophobes are willing to entertain the legitimate grievances of present day Islamic revivalists against the West.

Almond is most concerned with Derrida's treatment of Islam, particularly in his later writings, in what seem Protean and often contradictory fashions. He singles out two key Derridean texts – *Faith and Knowledge* and *The Gift of Death*. In these writings, and by allusion in others, "Derrida's understanding of Islam shifts shape and changes colour according to the demands placed on it. As a partner religion [in the Abrahamic context], as an oddity, as unjustly marginalized, as a medieval phenomenon, as a canny manipulator of technoscience, as just one religion among many, as a pool of archaic violence, as a metaphysical system...what we have in Derrida's treatment of Islam is a proliferation of different identities, each one the response to a certain textual need." (p. 59). Just prior to this observation Almond diagnoses this "strategy" of Derrida as prototypically Orientalist. "First of all, Islam is a kind of barometer [for Derrida], one which helps reveal the internal pressures and imperfections of democracy by forcing it to confront its *tout autre* – Islam, in other words, as that which forces democracy to become undemocratic, which forces the modern to employ the medieval to protect itself." (p. 58)

That Derrida makes such a move should be no surprise to us. Derrida's heurism of a "democracy to come" not only crystallizes the true political dimensions of deconstruction, it also discloses the operational control throughout his work of his Jewish messianism, which he apparently drew from Benjamin. Jewish messianism and Islamic "supercessionism" – the fundamental belief that the Qur'an is the final and complete revelation for all of history – are as contradictory as their incompatible Scriptural genealogies naming Abraham's heir, something which proponents of "interfaith dialogue" rarely can bring themselves to acknowledge. *Difference* is both baseline and concrete here, not

abstract. Unfortunately, Derrida did not possess – one would not have expected him to do so – the kind of intimacy and facility with religious texts that he has displayed with philosophical ones. And because Derrida as “deconstructionist” has for the most part deconstructed the Western *philosophical* tradition, beginning in Greece, and in lesser measure Western political theory which derives extensively from that tradition, one would have to assume he could indeed be branded an Orientalist. The central value of Almond’s intricate argument about the new Orientalists is not that we should be shocked in principle by such an insinuation. It is the recognition that, as he says, the most eminent deconstructors are eminently deconstructible, even if one has to wheel out the category of Islamic otherness in its true singularity to accomplish the task. Ironically, for all its assaults on the universalism of the *Aufklärung*, postmodernism more tied to the Enlightenment than postmodernists would care to admit, if we follow Almond’s drift.

Where the rubber meets the road in Almond’s exegesis of the new Orientalists comes down, as it does in world affairs today, about the primacy of what the West means by “democracy.” Almond is not exactly adhering to the purely relativist rants of the new Islamist dictators that language of “human rights” and “democratic” government is merely the will to Western (and one may add “imperialist”) power. But he aptly notes that in authors as diverse as Derrida, Baudrillard, Foucault, and Žižek some kind of neo-communitarian “people’s” democracy, designed to foster personal “liberation”, is the bottom floor for all implied cultural and political critique. That of course is the heritage of the French Revolution, the Paris Commune, and the events of May 1968.

The key difference between all these French “new Orientalists”, according to Almond, is ultimately the degree to which they are disenchanted, or cynical, about the historical arc of Western civilization. Whether it is Baudrillard’s neo-McLuhanism or Žižek’s retro-Marxism the underlying aim is to push in our face our failings as the democratic West. For the latter it is our preoccupation with the substantialism of the Symbolic order, the fetishism of ordinary language that closes out the exception to the rule. “The way in which the Muslim world performs the functions of the Real in Žižek’s text on 9/11 – as a geopolitical provider of trauma, as a source of transcendental and iconoclastic resistance to the Symbolic, as a forever present subversive threat to a futile desire for order – subtly affirms the Huntington thesis Žižek rejects. And as with Foucault’s theoretically uninhibited Tunisians, one of the consequences of Islam’s proximity to the writing, unnameable, destructive vortex of the Real is a diminishing of its rational/intellectual substance.” (p. 187) .

For Baudrillard, the same holds but in terms of his revisionary reading of contemporary Western civilization as pure media culture where the “real” is reduced to simulacra, where it evanesces into the “hyperreal”. Baudrillard compresses the whole of Islam into this hermeneutic of signs and simulations, Almond protests. He carefully explains what Baudrillard is actually up to in his now celebrated essay *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*. Baudrillard wants to invoke Islam to make his point that the West is no longer capable of “resisting”

anything because there is nothing remaining of its meaning-structure from which it can lodge a resistance. In its "virulent and ungraspable instability," says Baudrillard, the Islamic world is the pure and ethereal *Doppelgänger* of the self-evaporating Western consciousness. As an opaque and unappeasable threat it catalyzes the momentum of Occidental decadence toward its own apocalypse. Citing Philipe Muray's description of the jihadists as "prisoners of our resemblance," Baudrillard portrays "the mood of Islam as a pseudo-divine judgment upon the morally/intellectually bankrupt West." Furthermore, Baudrillard suggests that Islamism is not merely "a symptom of the decline of the West, but also that its manifestation has become a tool of Occidental suicide." (p. 173)

There is a profound temptation to take Almond mainly as a kind of eloquent and well-informed nitpicker about the *unselfconscious ignorance* of both historical and contemporary Islam on the part of the latest generation of academic superstars. If that is simply the case, the book can be read rapidly, absorbed, nodded at, and conveniently put aside, since the fault does not lie with our postmodern culture heroes alone. Islam today in all its mutability and complexity is real in a much more real sense than Žižek's, or Lacan's, Real. It is a reality that cannot be assimilated cavalierly to some kind of shock of recognition, to a form of widespread cognitive dissonance. It is a reality that challenges to the very degree that it threatens, that bids engagement even while upping the ante for earnest dialogue, that penetrates not only to the level of our inherent moral and political hypocrisies but also into our own superficiality and self-delusion about the importance and power of the "religious" in our lives. It is not about the "West and the rest," to employ Huntington's slogan, or about Western reflexive self-understanding and its "remainder."

Islam is not a supplement to our "Jew-Greek" habits of discourse. Nor is it a weekend excursion for intellectual tourists. It bids us to inspect the "utter holiness" that lurks within the postmodern construct of "wholly otherness." It is not Alice through the looking glass. It is the shattering of the glass that not only forces us to look at ourselves, but ourselves in relation to what demands a radical reappraisal of what we mean by own "selves" to begin with. In addition, we are called to engage the "Other", not as other, but as living persons with real faces.

The *New Orientalists*, which at first glance seems simply like an obscure foray into some neglected facets of critical scholarship on the postmodern moment in our history, turns out in fact to be a head-turning gesture in the direction of where the humanities really need to go. Instead of arguing about the priority of European versus non-European, the humanities in general, including religious and cultural theory in particular, must muster the courage to face what is at really at stake in the dizzying process we have come to call "globalization." After one reads Almond's book, it is hard to hedge any longer.

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