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CONFRONTING THE POLITICS OF EVASION IN AN AGE OF FRIGHT: DEMOCRACY, RELIGIOUS ENTHUSIASM, AND THE STATE

Introduction

Since the tragic events of 9/11, and the political, economic, and military shifts throughout the world as a result, it is uncanny how frequently the word “democracy” or the phrase “defending democracy and freedom,” have been invoked to justify courses of action that less than five years ago would have been unthinkable. These include illegal military invasions throughout the Middle East, the flouting of Arab human rights abroad and the curtailment of civil rights at home, the justification of the use of torture against enemy combatants, the denunciation of the United Nations and other international bodies, and the description of oppressive social realities (Abu Ghraib, Jenin, Mosul, and Haditha) as merely transitory states along the way to some greater social order—a part of the Neoconservative dream to transform the Arab world as envisioned by the Project for a New American Century (PNAC), whose signatories included Richard Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Paul Wolfowitz, Richard Perle, and Jeb Bush.

Religion, democracy, and the politics of fear seem to be thoroughly intertwined with the aims of U.S. Empire, in fact, they cannot really be separated from it without revealing that the emperor has no clothes, i.e. the exportation of democracy is the newest phase in imperial plundering. With the rise of Christian fundamentalism in the United States, the evacuation of the concept of democracy as an all-encompassing mantra that can be used to promote U.S. corporate interests in various theatres throughout the world, along with the necessity of creating a new menace—the war on terror—as a stand-in for the Kremlin and “Communist threat” in the wake of the end of the Cold War, it has become clear that the reasons for war must be continually manufactured along ethnic, religious, and ideological lines.

With Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” thesis, which contends that religious differences between East and West will eventually contribute to an irreconcilable division between Islam, Christianity, and Zionism, leading to a cataclysmic battle between warring ethnic groups bent on inflicting a final defeat

on their enemies, there can only be perpetual peace through perpetual war. The Christian Right seems poised to enact a politics that is not guided by anything other than Biblical warrant and fundamentalist religious belief, for example. Current prophesies about the apocalypse support the contention that there will be a return of Christ by hastening the rebuilding of the biblical Jerusalem and the destruction of the Israelites.¹

Religious fervor has played a key role in creating the kind of panic so necessary for the expansion of the defense-industrial base, providing a continued subsidy to the high-tech industry, and guaranteeing perpetual war. Within democracies such as the United States, the politics of fear plays a key role in keeping the domestic population scared of enemies that do not really exist, ensuring that the real enemy of the people—the military-industrial complex—remains invisible.

Religion and the Seduction of the Intellectual

Religious discourse seeks to transcend the constraints of power, providing adherents of the faith with a way to imagine a time when wickedness will no longer be rewarded. Religious fervor, however, is a type of social hegemony, an expression of solidarity between believers, which often correlates with race and nation. Religion seems to always return in the most unexpected places; the return of repressed religiosity is everywhere.

The latest version of this return to religion has followed in the wake of the massive amnesia that has beset U.S. academia after 9/11, which has ushered in the age of the national security state. The Bush administration's assault on the indigenous populations of the Middle East under the guise of a "war on terrorism," all in an attempt to secure geo-strategic advantage in the Middle East, has tested the talents of U.S. intellectuals and various propagandists. These attempts to rewrite the history of U.S. military adventurism in the Middle East, in service to aims of state, have resulted in the religious seduction of the critic, who seeks to escape politics and political commitments and to revel in the play of language and indeterminacy. This is an attempt to flee from responsibility and accountability. Religious seduction leads to intellectual evasion.

¹ In *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives* (Columbia University Press: New York, 1998), Said writes: [T]he true Christians will be suspended over Israel, above the battle, in Raptures, and after the fighting is over Jesus will restore them to Jerusalem, from which they will rule the world" (152-3). In addition, we must make note of Said's reference to Tom Delay who "came by his ideas concerning Israel by virtue of what he described as his convictions as a 'Christian Zionist,' a phrase synonymous not only with support for everything Israel does, but also for the Jewish state's theological right to go on doing what it does regardless whether or not a few million 'terrorist' Palestinians get hurt in the process" (*Al-Ahram*, Aug. 21-27, 2003)

Despite the proliferation of nearly every variety of postmodern theory dealing with the instability of language and human subjectivity, one senses that academic intellectuals are no closer to bringing themselves to an open and honest confrontation with their interest in the advancement of and their complicity in the promotion of state power.

The abundance of seemingly trivial and unimportant academic preening about différends, différence, and difference has been at the expense of meaningful and helpful academic work about the usurpation of workers' rights and governmental infringement upon civil liberties. In brief, for every hundred thousand postmodern theorists, there might be one Noam Chomsky, who is willing to ask painful questions about how intellectuals are vital agents in providing ideological cover for indefensible foreign policy. The academic intellectual plays a vital role in this process, as her production of theories about the social scene are vital to centers of power, assuring the polity that the world does make sense despite the visible contradictions about social disharmony all around us. The relatively recent emergence on the academic scene of complexity and chaos theory suggest that obfuscation and avoidance of pressing social issues might in fact be one of the unstated goals of academic discourse.

To, what, then, may we attribute this fascination with and heavy professional investment in vacuous and alienating "critical" jargons that have seemingly taken over the life of the academic professional, producing a seeming inability to think about contemporary problems, producing a real absence of critical discussion about extremely important issues? The rise of professionalization and specialization within the academy, the move toward apolitical work, which is rewarded with lucrative grants and special honors, has produced an environment ripe for aiding the latest national passion, an intellectual priesthood devoted to serving aims of state. This latest version of Julian Benda's "the treason of the intellectual" brings with it a serious failure of outlook and vision: by avoiding taking a position on the pressing issues of the day, for example the Bush administration's assault on the Middle East, intellectuals inadvertently establish a position marked by silence and intellectual evasion.

Through Althusser's definition of ideology—the imaginary relationship that exists between a subject and his or her real conditions of existence—one can ask a seemingly inevitable question: To what degree do academics reproduce the modes of production through their work that legitimates the operations of the military-industrial complex and global corporations? The university is an extension of the social bureaucracy of which it is a part, so it is only to be expected that academic work will be channeled to uphold reigning social structures and ideologies. Is it possible to resist these structures and imposed ideologies? Yes, to the extent that academic intellectuals are willing to goad one another, as colleagues, to recognize the instrumental role their professional organizations can play in resisting the perverse tendencies of the national

culture, a culture most often at odds with the principles it holds sacrosanct (democracy, freedom, equality before the law, etc.). In 1968, Richard Ohman, in the pages of *PMLA*, wrote

By remaining silent, we say loudly that we do not see a connection between our professional interests and "the love of our neighbor, the impulses toward action, help, and beneficence, the desire for... diminishing human misery." I wonder if this consequence is what our members intend.²

Ohman's reflections from over thirty-five years ago force us to recognize the material and political constraints of our institutions and professional organizations. "How much," we might ask, "of a difference can we really make?" A number of us have struggled with whether or not it is appropriate to bring discussions, that focus on the current crisis in various theaters of the Middle East (Afghanistan, Iraq, Israel/Palestine), into our intellectual projects. What, after all, do these situations have to do with sociology, literary criticism, or intellectual history?

Resisting Intellectual Passivity: Chomsky's Example

For nearly fifty years Chomsky has repeatedly reminded U.S. intellectuals of their distinct responsibility to "speak truth to power and expose lies," a responsibility that the corporately dominated university and the near religious enthusiasm of American nationalism has made increasingly difficult. From *American Power and the New Mandarins* to *Towards a New Cold War* to *Hegemony and Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance* and most recently in his *Failed States: The Abuse of Power and the Assault on Democracy*, Chomsky has relentlessly exposed how U.S. intellectuals have succumbed to the trappings and seduction of power for the political and economic advancement of their professional class, while serving to justify and rationalize crimes of state. In case anyone has forgotten, North American intellectuals enjoy a historically unprecedented opportunity, by virtue of the resources they have access to and the time they are privileged enough to make use of, to incite a greater awareness of how nationalism has become a religion that dulls the critical sense against the deep complicity of the average U.S. citizen.

It is not that there has ever been a large counter-intellectual movement from within academia, which has questioned how national culture works co-extensively with aims of state, but that such a countermovement has now been seemingly reduced to helplessness, an indication of how resistance and dissent

² Ohman, Richard, "The MLA and the Politics of Inadvertence," *PMLA* (*Publications of the Modern Language Association*) Vol. 83, 1968, p. 989-90

against the state can be appropriated and transformed into a concept connected to a supposed war on terror: a clear attempt to destroy indigenous nationalism and intellectual empathy with such movements, in essence an extension of the overwhelming power of the national security state beyond the raw demonstration of military might; a transformation of one's very cognitive mapping of the world itself.

It is high time to analyze the parameters of our professional practice and the easygoing collegiality that often accompanies it and to challenge the detriments of both. Hannah Arendt called *deformation professionale* the insidious ways in which professional commitment distorts one's moral and ethical senses. Intellectual evasion is often justified along the lines of Realpolitik: one sides with the strong to protect oneself; rebuking and criticizing the policies of the strong is suicidal and unwise.

A belief in the rightness and inevitability of market forces, neo-liberal capitalism, free-market exchange, military occupation and the benevolence of corporations in ensuring the public good become a type of religious faith, a prerequisite for comprehending, participating in, and extracting capital from the world system—they are articles of faith. To question the necessity and goodness of these processes and political philosophies is to engage in a form of apostasy, a denial of the rightness of the ruling order, which suggests that one has succumbed to a naivety, lack of sophistication, and an unhealthy idealism.

Orientalism, American Politics, and the War for Civilization

The quest for dominance in the Middle East has been accompanied by a rhetoric of demonization, which castes Arabs as civilizational-deficient creatures, incapable of either ruling over or controlling themselves, an example of how these swarthy hordes require the rule and guidance of the stern white man. Without this rule, according to this perverse orientalist logic, complete chaos will attend anything and everything the Arab does and attempts, which is why the seizure and occupation of Arab land, whether it be in Palestine or Iraq, really makes no difference since the ruling logic is the same: there can be no Arab democracy, self-determination, or leadership which is not in some way chosen and controlled by the United States and its allies.

All of the contradictions inherent in the logic of orientalism, which can define the freedom and greatness of Western institutions against the supposed tyranny and despotism of the East and its irrational practices, can be maintained because of its inherent racial science, which posits that there exists a significant difference between the “races” in terms of intelligence, hygiene, the maintenance of social order, etc. “They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented” is

Marx's famous dictum, an epigram appearing in Said's *Orientalism* that captures how England's civilizing mission had become a national religion in the late nineteenth century. That such an imperial will-to-power could consume Britain's national psyche, enabling such an *esprit de corps* to enflame the sort of passions that would allow honorable men and women to lay down their lives to conquer both the people and the geography of vast swaths of territory.

Return of Repressed Religiosity

The return of repressed religiosity is a reference to Freud's psychosexual theory and to the notion of repression, and its effects, in particular.³ The return of the repressed is the emergence of the past into our present. Religion is symptomatic of our immaturity, evidence of our failure to deal effectively with the effects of the past in the present.

President Bush, for example claimed that the Hand of God guided him into Iraq to "fight evil."⁴ This is a clear instance of a direct and unabashed return of repressed religiosity. Similarly, we can see the use of such grand ideas as Orientalism and its related religious discourses serving as an agent of closure, shutting off human investigation, criticism, and effort in deference to the authority of the more-than-human, the supernatural, the other-worldly. Like culture, religion furnishes us with systems of authority and with canons of order whose regular effect is either to compel subservience or to gain adherents, which, in turn, gives rise to organized collective passions whose social and intellectual results are often disastrous.

The persistence of these and other religious-cultural effects testifies amply to what seems to be necessary features of human life, the need for certainty, group solidarity, and a sense of communal belonging. Sometimes of course these things are beneficial. Still it is true that what a secular attitude enables—a sense of history and of human production, along with a healthy skepticism about the various official idols venerated by culture and by system—is diminished, if not eliminated, by appeals to what cannot be thought through and explained, except by consensus and appeals to authority. The one modern critic who has perhaps done the most to help us understand these destructive tendencies is the late Edward Said, who sought to transform the practice of literary criticism—and to move beyond its disciplinary limits—by injecting it with his restlessness and insurrectionary energy.

³ Hart, William D. *Edward Said and the Religious Effect of Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2000, p.158

⁴ See Paul Harris's "Bush Says God Chose Him to Lead Our Nation":
<http://observer.guardian.co.uk/international/story/0,6903,1075950,00.html>

This restlessness and insurrection were born out of frustration. Said viewed the state of contemporary literary criticism, for example, as deplorable and found the infinite calls to textuality within theory circles as more than disconcerting as they exemplified a betrayal of the intellectual mission. Said ascribed this “textual turn” to the rise of Reaganism, with its commitment to reducing spending on social programs, within the context of the then ongoing Cold War and the rise in military spending. Said seemed to sense the contemporary intellectual’s impotence in combating these “worldly” realities: “What one discerns today is religion as the result of exhaustion, consolation, disappointment: its form in both the theory and practice of criticism are varieties of unthinkability, undecidability, and paradox together with a remarkable consistency of appeals to magic, divine ordinance, or sacred texts.”⁵ Said defined intellectual responsibility against this professional scene where irrelevance and inanity had become central features of the contemporary intellectual’s existence.

The intellectual, faced with what appears to be an impossible situation in terms of her or his ability to influence change, turns to the text as an object of religious worship, unwilling to move outside of it *into* the world for an examination of the political forces that shape historical events. Said viewed this unwillingness to move out into the world as a triumph of not only professionalism but also of the status quo, which support an expansive militarism at home and often suicidally-ignorant adventurism in the Third World. According to Said, this return of repressed religiosity could be found in Harold Bloom’s *Kabbalah* and Northup Frye’s *The Great Code*:

Most distressing of all is the growing resemblance between professed political neoconservatives and the religiously inclined critics, for both of whom the privatized condition of social life and cultural discourse are made possible by a belief in the benign quasi-divine marketplace. Folding back upon itself, criticism has therefore refused to see its affiliations with the political world it serves, perhaps not. Once an intellectual, the modern critic has become a cleric in the worst sense of the word. How their discourse can once again collectively become a truly secular enterprise is, it seems to me, the most serious question critics can be asking one another.⁶

The excessive focus upon textuality, without a larger sense of how this activity connects to and opposes the larger forces in society, infuriated Said; providing an example of the very worst of *trahison des clercs* or the treason of the intellectual. What happens in texts, Said seemed to claim, should not outweigh the critic’s commitment to interrogating the forces of culture that shape what that text proclaims. It is precisely this sense of “worldliness” with respect to textual construction that seemed most pressing to Said. To overlook the concerns of a common humanity in times of crisis and to instead tend to the “mumbo jumbo”

⁵ Said, Edward. *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Cambridge: Harvard U P, 1983, p. 291.

⁶ Ibid., p. 292.

of textual theories struck Said as inexcusable, signaling the intellectual's defeat.

In his *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Said claimed that social change can only be advanced through a form of intellectual commitment—unhampered by religious or metaphysical absolutes—situated within local and global struggle. Said's own example in this regard is undisputed, particularly in his persistent advocacy on behalf of Palestinian self-determination whereby he rejected any and all types of “religiosity” that obscured the category of the “political” and its role in shaping human perception and understanding. Said viewed the embrace of “secular criticism”—a form of intellectual intervention that views detachment from the irrationality and passionate frenzies that often attend religious worship—as a prerequisite to becoming a responsible public intellectual “in the world” who can contribute to social change.

Edward Said's secular criticism, a form of intellectual resistance against the identity-dependent categories of modernity, which have reduced human experience to one or another type of expression of group solidarity, provides an attractive model through which measure the inherent difficulties of residing between culture and system, i.e., between the forces of culture and the professionalized norms of literary criticism. Occupying a site between the two, for the exiled intellectual, provides a privileged viewpoint from which to analyze the pernicious aspects of both. The secular critic does not allow the professional guild structure to exclusively determine her subject matter, instead she lets her critical sense guide her despite the various pressures that surround her demanding that she conform to some real or imagined dictate. Matthew Arnold, for instance, envisioned a particular social role for these extraordinary individuals:

Plenty of people will try to indoctrinate the masses with the set of ideas and judgments constituting the creed of their own profession or party. Our religious and political organisations give an example of this way of working on the masses. I condemn neither way; but culture works differently. It does not teach down to the level of inferior classes; it does not try to win them for this or that sect of its own, with ready-made judgments and watchwords.⁷

These “men of culture” are individuals who upset the comfort level of those regulating the types of criticism that has been tamed by institutions and orthodoxies. In *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Said discusses the prominence of Jonathan Swift and the importance of his brand of agitation for the intellectual tradition, claiming that those who resist the *idée rescues*

and strike out on their own to find out the truth about the structures of domination that soften the critical sense in lesser critics are labeled as “agitators.” He goes on to contend that “[a]gitators are a set of interfering, meddling people,

⁷ Arnold, Matthew. Stefan Collini, Ed. *Culture and Anarchy*, Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1993, p. 79.

who come down to some perfectly contented class of community and sow the seeds of discontent among them. That is the reason why agitators are so completely necessary.”⁸

The Exile outside Religious Discourse

As a Palestinian exile, Said was forced to reconcile his loss of a home in Palestine due to the creation of Israel in 1948, as well as his experience of the West as a young adult, in an attempt to understand the extremely complicated dynamic between Western and non-Western cultures, which clearly became such a central theme in his work . The experience of exile, the feeling that accompanies someone who is unmoored from a specific cultural or physical home, brings with it a heightened sense of how and why cultural difference often produces strong clashes that sometimes results in state violence, forced migration, and the dispossession of indigenous populations.

For Said, the forced expulsion of nearly 800,000 Palestinians from what is now present-day Israel in 1947 and 1948 created the Palestinian Question just as the Jewish Question seemingly reached its conclusion. That the tragedy of the Palestinian people would begin through the creation of Jewish state at the hands of people, the Jews, who themselves had suffered so much stands as one of the most profound ironies of the twentieth century. Erich Auerbach, the renowned author of *Mimesis*, stands as Said’s prototypical exile because he came to write most brilliantly about European culture while separated from it during World War II in the isolation of an occupied Istanbul.

Said sought to understand, throughout all of his work, how human societies in their attempts to make the strange familiar, reduce cultural Others through the very knowledge prisms that will refract the experiences of these Others through a set of categories enabling the removal of cultural difference; in turn, this leaves human societies, which are technologically or militarily inferior to the Western powers, in a subject position that automatically puts them in a position of cultural or civilizational inferiority. Conrad’s famous quote from *Heart of Darkness* captures this sentiment perfectly: “The conquest of the earth, which mostly means the taking it away from those who have a different complexion or slightly flatter noses than ourselves, is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much.”

The relationship between culture and the religious worship of one’s culture, nationalism and ethnocentrism, create the conditions of possibility for a return of repressed religiosity, which has been described by William Hart in his *Edward*

⁸ Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, p. 78.

Said and the Religious Effect of Culture as “the abdication of responsibility by intellectuals within the domain of high theory” and “refers to a special case of religious seduction, where ostensibly the most radical forms of cultural critique exemplify the secular return of religious ideas such as Original Sin and messianism.”⁹

Hart claims that Arnold “sought to satisfy the evidentiary demands of science without reducing religion to a set of meaningless propositions.”¹⁰ The return of repressed religiosity, while seemingly having no obvious connection to religious worship, represents an eruption of immaturity within our mature present. Arnold was a proponent of viewing culture as the transfiguration of religious thought—the negation, preservation, and transformation of religion. As the transfiguration of religious thought, culture banishes the extra-moral truth claims of religion to a purely private realm. Nonetheless, this form of culture as transfigured religion brought with it the belief that the state is the guardian of culture.

Said feared the exclusionary power of culture, especially when as it was wedded to the repressive mechanisms of the state, believing that—if the state is viewed as the guardian of culture, and hence the highest manifestation of “the best self”—the groundwork for authoritarianism will eventually be laid, enabling the perpetuation of historical moments such as the Holocaust. According to Hart, “Culture becomes a trope for atavistic religious ideas and commitments such as nationalism, Orientalism, and imperialism”; [s]ecular criticism breaks with the gods of nationalism, state worship, by severing the link between critical consciousness and the politics of identity.”¹¹

In his *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Said notes: “It is in culture that we can seek out the range of meanings and ideas conveyed by the phrases *belonging to* or *in a place, being at home in a place*.”¹² Indeed, culture—as a force of separation—sanctioned who could indeed call a particular nation “home” and who would be deemed, by definition, an “alien.” Are Arnold’s aliens Said’s responsible intellectuals? In *Culture and Anarchy*, Arnold had said of the critic that if he is not to fall prey either to narrow class interests (Barbarians, Philistines, or Populace) and if he is truly to be a disinterested critic, he must belong to a small intrepid band formed by men of culture.¹³ Arnold describes them thus:

Therefore, when we speak of ourselves as divided into Barbarians, Philistines, and Populace, we must be understood always to imply that within each of these classes there are a certain number of *aliens*, if we may so call them,—persons who are mainly led, not by their class spirit, but by a general humane spirit, by the

⁹ Hart, p. 15.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 26.

¹² Said, *The World, the Text ,and the Critic*, p. 8.

¹³ Ibid., p. 280.

love of human perfection; and that this number is capable of being diminished or augmented.¹⁴

These aliens are able to resist the usual class loyalties deforming and compromising deeply felt personal commitments, which are oriented toward social justice and the love of human perfection, the very commitments that stand in resistance to an industrialized society that places the demands of production ahead of the primacy of human experience.

As Said states in his "Nationalism, Human Rights, and Interpretation," "Arnold's ideas about culture share with nationalists and patriots of the time a sort of reinforced sense of essentialized and distilled identity, which in a much later context of twentieth-century genocidal wars and wholesale persecutions, Adorno saw as leading to 'identitarian thought'."¹⁵ Said notes that Arnold separated European culture from all others: "For behind Arnold's disquisitions between Europeans and Negroes, Europeans and Orientals, Europeans and Semites is a history that is pretty constant and pretty unchanging from the 1830s and 40s till World War II."¹⁶ This racial chain of being obviously held grave consequences for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

In his *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Said uses the word culture "to suggest an environment, process, and hegemony in which individuals (in their private circumstances) and their works are embedded as well as overseen at the top by a superstructure and at the base by a whole series of methodological attitudes."¹⁷ This Marxian view of culture in Said's thought as outlined in such texts as *Beginnings*, foregrounds the important role an examination of the ideological conditions behind the practices of colonialism would play in latter Saidian works such as *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism*—texts investigating the modes of cultural transmission influencing the construction of cultural canons and the worship of pop culture icons, as well as the separation of cultural insiders from outsiders.

[I]n the transmission and persistence of a culture there is a continual process of reinforcement, by which the hegemonic culture will add to itself the prerogatives given it by its sense of national identity, its power as an implement, ally, or branch of the state, its rightness, its exterior forms and assertions of itself; and most important, by its vindicated power as a victor over everything not itself.¹⁸

Arnold's "The best that has been though and known" arises as a contingent cultural value, enforced by societal inclusions and exclusions, and cannot in a serious sense be considered a transcendental good. This notion that the best that

¹⁴ Arnold, *Culture and Anarchy*, p. 110.

¹⁵ Said, "Nationalism, Human Rights, and Interpretation," *Raritan*, Vol. 12:3 (Winter 1993), p. 32.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 32.

¹⁷ Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, p. 8.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 14.

has been thought and known is acknowledged, because that which is not the best that has been thought and known is excluded, highlights Arnold's conception of culture as a dialectical engagement between competing forces within society. Culture, then, results as a social-political "effect," emanating from the class able to impress its concerns on the polity, ultimately receiving the imprimatur of the state for its ability to define reality. In this sense, Arnold's conception was thoroughly concerned with European peoples, with the longevity and promotion of English culture. The degree to which Arnoldian culture supported a racialized science which divides the world into superior and inferior races was something that troubled Said throughout his work. Specifically, we might ask, does Arnoldian culture legislate the enactment of orientalist and racialized discourses? In his *Race: The History of an Idea in the West*, Ivan Hannaford writes:

Arnold's notion of state, still a powerful force in English though a century later, was not political; it rested upon the assumption that politics is an unwanted and idle activity, that parliaments are little more than chat shops, capable of achieving nothing to alleviate poverty and the deep-seated malaise of society.¹⁹

The structures of human societies, particularly the categories that are employed to capture and freeze human experience, reduce the capacity individuals possess as critical thinkers and intellectuals to understand one another through the untutored mediations that can be fashioned to resist the totalizing systems that so often reduce and flatten the richness and complexity of humanity to easily consumable forms and placeholders. This tendency, then, to deploy knowledge in the service of the state and political agendas has been one of the most destructive and dehumanizing efforts of projects such as Orientalism, and the attendant discourses of imperialism and racialized science. These efforts erase the individual differences between people while also severely limiting the spaces for explorations of personal identity outside frozen group categories that revolve around race and ethnicity. Orientalism was as much a human failure as an intellectual one, according to Said. As the current conflict in the Middle East suggest, Said was quite prophetic in his critical writings.

Conclusion: Culture as Transfigured Religion

The committed intellectual seeks to expose culture as a sort of transfigured religion, the transformation of religious worship into an acceptable form of cultural practice. On the other hand, the very traditions that enable the intellectual to do her work are the very traditions the oppositional intellectual is seeking to expose and up-end. While Said recognizes culture's necessity in maintaining the "best that has been thought and said," while also controlling

¹⁹ Hanaford, Ivan. *Race: A History of an Idea in the West*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U P, 1996, p. 283.

mass culture, he is wary of the various phenomena Arnoldian culture creates: nationalism, imperialism, historical amnesia, Orientalism. How then does one strive to obtain the type of culture, which will advance secular criticism, while recognizing and guarding against the pitfalls cultural divides bring with them? Robert Young, in his *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* recognizes the importance of Arnold's conception of culture for the alienated intellectual:

Arnold [thus] performs a maneuver that decisively transforms the marginal position of the alienated intellectual into the very centre of society. In a curious anticipation of today's cultural dynamics, the nation's peripheral Other, its minority culture, becomes its centre.²⁰

Culture, as that force that enables the domination of the state, forms a necessary aspect of the expression of state authority. As it excludes undesirable social components, culture simultaneously elevates the "best that has been thought and known" by affirming the values of the individuals and institutions that produce cultural products affirming the state's authority as a necessary and life-preserving function which must be defended at all costs. This interaction is a continual component of religious discourse within a democracy during the reign of a politics of fear.

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PURL: <http://www.jcrt.org/archives/08.2/abraham.pdf>

²⁰ Young, J.C. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race*. New York: Routledge, 1995, p. 78.