

Edward Said, Religion, and the Study of Islam: an Anglican view
Yazid Said, Lecturer in Islamic Studies, Mater Dei Institute of Education
Dublin City University

Abstract

The article examines the important, but controversial, analysis of Western readings of Islam by Edward Said in his *Orientalism* and other works. The thesis supports Said's claim that Western historical readings of Islam has a context and a framework of its own; but, it argues that Said falls into similar traps to those he critiques in the way he reasons away the significance of 'religion' in his investigation. This failure opens up for a different methodology of relating to Islamic religious texts and the study of Islam generally, using insights from Rowan Williams' *Why Study the Past*. Whilst Said as well as certain Orientalists share scepticism about 'religion', this article points to the significance of theological and moral considerations in approaching religious texts.

Introductory Remarks

The reflections shared below started life at the beginning of my research on my medieval Muslim friend, Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (d.1111).¹ When challenged as to what my methodological starting point was, I found it difficult to ignore Edward Said's famous critique of the Western tradition of textual analysis called 'Oriental studies'.² Said is considered by many as arguably the most influential American critic and Palestinian activist of the last quarter of the twentieth century, whose account of Orientalism became a fashionable orthodoxy for many concerned with Western intellectual treatment of the Arab/Islamic world, where Europe had political interests over a couple of centuries. For, the Orient that concerned Said was the Middle East, rather than Japan or India.³ Though he stresses his wish to see the implications of his theory expanding beyond the Middle East, he alludes to obvious differences between the Far East and the Middle East; the former did not pose a military threat to Europe nor did it proclaim religions that were tangled theologically with Christianity in the way that Islam and the Middle East are.

Essentially, the article is a comment on the problematic understanding and academic appropriation of 'religion' in Said's writings on Islam and Western coverage of Islam. It offers some insights based on the most influential Anglican theologian of our age, Rowan Williams, on the question of studying history. Said

¹ Some comments about the subject matter of this article appear in my book, Yazeed Said (2013: 26-29).

² Albert Hourani (1980: 9).

³ Edward Said (1979: 17).

was neither a good scholar of Islam nor a good scholar of religion. He was worried about the way Islam is covered in the West for good reasons; however, he was, in good Western fashion, also worried about 'religion' and equally unclear about what the word means, except from the standpoint of Western modernity as will be explained below. He remains a self-proclaimed secularist of Anglican connections.⁴

The scholarship on Said's expertise as a literary critic reflects a multifaceted philosophical, political and theoretical fabric of ideas;⁵ but, as already hinted, Said's interests intersect at the point where his concern for criticizing Orientalist reading of Islam, and for the political power structures that serve this reading, touch on the question of 'religion'. Said summarises his theory like this:

My thesis is that the essential aspects of modern Orientalist theory and praxis (from which present-day Orientalism derives) can be understood, not as a sudden access of objective knowledge about the Orient, but as a set of structures inherited from the past, secularized, redisposed, and reformed by such disciplines as philology, which in turn were naturalized and laicized substitutes for (or versions of) Christian supernaturalism.⁶

Said here is trying to explain how, as he sees it, the religious pattern of human history and destiny were reconstituted in the secular frameworks of Orientalist discourse, which becomes the dominant ideological methodology of reading Islamic texts.⁷ Therefore, it seems that there are grounds for making the plea or even the demand that religion needs to be properly discussed vis-à-vis Said's texts and its relationship to Western representation or misrepresentation of Islam, which runs throughout his *Orientalism*. This could be seen simply as a task, whether interesting or onerous, or simply a sharing of reflections of Said's interpretation or misinterpretation of religion and the implications of that on the

⁴ In his own keynote address to the conference of the Palestinian Liberation Theology centre, Sabeel, in Jerusalem in 1999, Said affirmed that he was baptized at St. George's Cathedral by the late Revd. Elias Marmoura, whose son, the late Michael Marmoura, was Said's teacher at St. George's school and later an important scholar of Islam at Toronto University. Naim Ateek & Michael Prior (1999: 17). But, in the same address, Said confesses that he was a lapsed child of Anglicanism. In his memoirs, he shows how he became flirtatious with secular atheism in his young age under the influence of a maiden aunt, a teacher who lived with the family in Cairo, answering his question 'is there a god?' with 'I very much doubt it', Edward Said (2000: 15).

⁵ See the collection of articles in Adel Iskander & Hakem Rustom (eds.) (2010).

⁶ Edward Said (1979: 122).

⁷ Ibid, 121.

study of Islam. It could be both a task and a reflection, with the exception perhaps of the onerous; for the burden of theology on reading texts and history is, pace Said, anything but onerous, perhaps even light.

Said has valid points in his criticism of Western historical studies of the Orient. He reminds us that history is never just a matter of neutral observation of events. The writing of history provides inevitable judgments about what it deals with. This is an important insight. But, when it comes to remedy the deficiency through appropriating post-colonial theories applied to literature and politics,⁸ Said provides an incomplete answer. He does not go beyond the Western theoretical basis of Enlightenment views of religion that form the foundation of Orientalism, which he is trying to criticize. In other words, he criticizes the West's reading of Islamic societies, while he accepts the West's definition of religion, and therefore, perhaps even of Islam in a reverse sort of way. Therefore, if Orientalist readings of Islamic texts are indeed connected to European expansionism as Said rightly explains, our primary concern here is how both the Orientalists as well as Said deal with 'religion', than about Orientalism itself.

The Religious Effects of Culture

William Hart provided a comprehensive analysis of the intricacies of Said's theory vis-à-vis the Western philosophical tradition in his *Edward Said and the Religious Effects of Culture*. Hart explores the degree to which religion is as important to Said's critique of culture and imperialism in the same way that it is for Marx's critique of capital, Nietzsche's critique of decadence, and Heidegger's critique of metaphysics.

Hart starts, however, with exposing Said's affiliation with the English-speaking tradition of cultural thought that extends to Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy*. Said believed that the West's interpretation of the Orient was conceived of as a transmission of meaning and truth, reflecting how religious affiliations and Western culture merge into one.⁹ Therefore, Hart adds: 'Said is both fascinated and repelled by Arnold's notion of culture'.¹⁰ The reason for this distinction lies in the difference that both Arnold and Said appropriated the meaning of religion. Arnold still thought of himself like other liberals as a Christian; but for him, religion works along with art, science and philosophy to achieve what he calls 'perfection'; Arnold tells us: 'to reach this idea, culture is an indispensable aid'.¹¹ For Said, however, 'Western Culture' is not simply an expression of certain practices in the arts, independent from social and political

⁸ Jahan Ramazani (2010: 159-169); Sabry Hafez (2010: 181-183).

⁹ Edward Said, (1979: 4-9).

¹⁰ William Hart, (2000: 26).

¹¹ Cited in John Senior (1978: 3).

realms, but is that which is associated with the nation or the state, and which becomes a source of identity. Such a definition of culture, Said believes, has replaced earlier religious affiliations.¹² Said, therefore, 'offers a qualified approval of Arnoldian high culture, but rejects Arnoldian state-worship'.¹³ Therefore, Western culture for Said represents religious arguments in fancy dress.

Religion cannot carry the right answers for Said. For him, religious people are not opened enough to the critical reading of history, and this closes off the options for 'criticism' and 'intellectual discipline'.¹⁴ Anarchy, exile and exodus are Said's preferred metaphors for disturbing the sacred order of meaning, when secular criticism represents the only hope as 'on the other side of power'.¹⁵ There is a residual religiosity in Arnold's view of culture, which Said will not accept. In this exploration of Arnoldian culture and its affinities to Saidian culture, Hart lay the groundwork for what Said calls religious cultural effects that is the allures of nationalism, Orientalism and imperialism. Said opposes nationalism, Orientalism and imperialism only because his description of religious-cultural effects are little more than a metaphor for dogmatism and control.

However, this is where we begin to see Said's failings in his appropriation of the word 'religion'. Said may agree with the view that 'Matthew Arnold was the hinge upon which the English speaking world turned from Christianity to modernism',¹⁶ but he does not struggle with what this shift from earlier religious affiliation to modern national and cultural affiliations really entails vis-à-vis 'religion'.

Secularism versus Religion

What is the alternative for Said? On the most basic level, Said resorts to a radical yet flawed understanding of secularism too. If his interpretation of religion is limited so is his understanding of secularism. In his address to the 1999 International Sabeel conference in Jerusalem,¹⁷ Said speaks about how 'humans make their history'.¹⁸ The main sources of his theory are the eighteenth century philosopher of secularism Giambattista Vico together with the fourteenth century Muslim scholar Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406). Vico separates the domains of the divine

¹² Edward Said (1994: xii-xvi); (1979: 120-121).

¹³ William Hart (2000: 26).

¹⁴ Edward Said (1980: 60).

¹⁵ Edward Said (1983: 29).

¹⁶ John Senior (1978: 1).

¹⁷ See note 4 above.

¹⁸ Naim Ateek & Michael Prior (1999: 25).

from the domains of the human and focuses on the history of what he calls the 'gentiles', that is a history made by people, not ordained by God.¹⁹ Said believes that for both Ibn Khaldun and Vico, the world of human beings is a secular world, where God has no place.²⁰ God's presence complicates things in terms of who is in and who is out, who is chosen and who is not chosen; therefore, we would be better off without resorting to God, Said argues.

What is the theoretical basis here of Said's highlighting of the centrality of human agency in making history? Said is revealing his Marxist tendencies – Vico being one of Marx's sources.²¹ Though Said never describes himself as a Marxist, Hart shows that Said is still heavily influenced by Marxist ideas.²² Invoking a Marxist critique of religion as 'man's self-consciousness',²³ Said is keen to submit Western interpretations of the Orient to criticism. He wanted to show that Western interpretations could not be considered to have an unchanging finality, in the same fashion that a Marxist critique of 'religion' aimed to achieve. Hart also explores other ways of getting at Said's Marxist view of cultural critique. Referring to Marx's description of fetishism in *Capital*, Hart argues how this notion of fetishism and regression found also in Adorno's music theory, has psychoanalytic overtones, marrying together Marx and Freud in their understanding of 'religion'. According to this understanding, religious people are infantile 'because they have yet to mature or have regressed, religion being the prototypical form of regression'.²⁴ Religion for Said is regressive and an infantile behaviour.

Hart, of course, is not wrong in describing Said as a post-Enlightenment critic of religion; for, this invidious distinction between religion and secularism found momentum in the Kantian structuring of the will and Hume's empirical critique.²⁵ As John Gray and others have argued, with Kant and Hume, the Self has been deified.²⁶ However, this does not only affect the West's reading of history, and all things, but also of religion also, which Said seems to take for granted, making him repeat similar flaws and poses uncomfortable questions in relationship to the way he relates to Islamic texts himself.

¹⁹ Edward Said (1979: 120).

²⁰ Naim Ateek & Michael Prior (1999: 26).

²¹ Ibid, 25.

²² See also, Bryan Palmer (1990) & Aijaz Ahmad (1994).

²³ William Hart (2000: 94).

²⁴ Ibid, 31.

²⁵ Emmanuel Kant, (1963: 23); David Hume (1999: 21-26, 108-118); Shirley Letwin (1965: 41-58).

²⁶ John Gray (2002: 44).

The extent to which his use of Ibn Khaldun is reductive remains arguable, but an example of clear reductive-ness appears with the way he makes use of the medieval Andalusian theologian, Ibn Hazm, to solve the problem of how a text is both historically limited as well as being timeless. For Ibn Hazm, 'timelessness' refers to the texts of the Koran as originating in God. For Said, it is in the sense of being available in different ages to be read.²⁷ In another article, Said finds similar affinities between Ibn Khaldun and Foucault. Here, Said does not simply argue against prejudices and preconceptions of Islam, but interprets Islamic thought in the light of Western modern thought to justify his theory of secularism! In other words, Said appears here as the child of Enlightenment par excellence: his conclusion is not that of Islam's understanding of God, but a call for secular, rational means to affect the development of human history.²⁸

The foundation of this secular activity is the refusal to be bound by national or religious ties.²⁹ Said is to be commended for his refusal to be limited by any kind of ideology. However, there are a couple of points here to argue with him. The first point arises from Aijaz Ahmad's observation regarding the ambiguity of the direction between Orientalism and colonialism. Ahmad points out how Said is inconsistent in suggesting, on the one hand, that Orientalism is the corollary of colonialism, and yet insists at the same time in identifying its origins in European antiquity.³⁰ This, in turn, should at least be a reminder for Said that religious affiliations, like tribal affiliations, are not the creation of modern imperialist policies either. This paradox in Said's inconsistency could be solved if one is aware of pre-modern understanding of religion and post-Enlightenment theories of the same.

Said could have benefited from the works of Talal Asad and Nicholas Lash on the development of the meaning of 'religion'. Asad, responding to Geertz, raises the importance of time as a significant category in understanding religion. If religion relates to human activity, it cannot be classified by timeless definitions.³¹ This is not a relativist reading of 'religion'. It is a genealogical approach; hence, his *Genealogies of Religion*. By contrast, Edward Said, like Geertz, appropriates a universal understanding of religion with a focus on belief rather than action, whilst *Culture* for Said, as mentioned earlier, is defined as historically transmitted pattern of meanings. When Asad says: 'The European Enlightenment constitutes the historical site from which Westerners typically approach non-Western

²⁷ Edward Said (1983: 268-289).

²⁸ Edward Said (1986: 149-155).

²⁹ Naim Ateek & Michael Prior (1999: 32).

³⁰ Aijaz Ahmad (1994: 181).

³¹ Talal Asad (1993: 29-39).

traditions',³² Said might agree, but he does not see the extent of irreligiousness involved in this misconception of the Orient because of a shift of understanding of what 'religion' really means.

Nicholas Lash skilfully mapped this shift in his *The Beginning and the End of Religion*,³³ and other writings. Lash speaks of a shift from the medieval '*religio*' as a virtue of action, doing justice to God, to sixteenth and seventeenth century sense of beliefs,³⁴ a set of ideas and propositions to which believers assent and connect with another world – which supports Asad's argument that the understanding of religion is historically limited. Among these varied definitions, the modern conception of religion seems to be the *default* position for Said. Indeed, Hart's main criticism of Said's Western affiliations is when he talks about religion as 'Jeffersonian with a strong dose of French anticlericalism';³⁵ for, Said's idea of religion seems to refer mainly to 'sixteenth-century European religious warfare, seventeenth-century Puritan America, and seventeenth- and eighteenth-century critique of religious enthusiasm'.³⁶ Therefore, religion, for Said, seems to function in a *political* mode, something that calls for submitting to a particular authority that frames the identity of a system of ideas. Understood in this way, the appeal to 'religion' has invited a good deal of scepticism in the modern world with the response: why should I? If religion is understood in this way, it seems to be an appeal to power. Said's protest seems to be posing the same question: why should I? Said is right if this is what religion truly means; his fault is to see religion in this mode as a universalisable definition that applies across history, when it is a little more than an expression of the circumstances of seventeenth century Europe.

Two points arise from the discussion so far. First, if Nicholas Lash and Talal Asad are right in their observations above, then we ought to emphasize that pre-Enlightenment understanding of religion suggests that it is wrong to understand religious activity as submitting to a system of obscure ideas as explained above. As Lash put it:

the relation of human beings to the Holy One, once understood as creaturely dependence relearned as friendship, is now reduced to knowledge of an object known as 'God'. All objects of enquiry are shaped by methods used for their investigation. The invention of 'religion' carried

³² Ibid: 200.

³³ Nicholas Lash 1996: 9-22.

³⁴ Nicholas Lash 2008: 14

³⁵ William Hart (2000: 13).

³⁶ Ibid: 89, 114-115.

with it the reduction of faith's attentive wonder to the entertaining of particular beliefs.³⁷

Second, if we do accept Said's definition of 'religion', then what is the alternative to 'bad' religion? As John Gray observed before 'humans think of themselves as having choices and consciousness: the creed of those who have given up an irrational belief in God for an irrational faith in mankind'.³⁸ Similarly, Said wishes to produce his own over optimistic view of the human ability for unaided interpretation of texts. But, this means inevitably falling into the trap of what Rowan Williams called 'the Marxist error of modern rationalistic reading, which identifies interpretation with genealogy',³⁹ focusing only on the conditions that made the text what it is. Therefore, whilst Said is able to recognize possibilities of connectedness beyond the tribal sense, he is unable to ask questions about what reveals the sacred order of things; for the important question remains how do we make decisions and know that they are morally discerned for the good of all. Who decides what is good and what is not? Do we have to resort to human whims and preferences in making decisions? Does Said have to resort to Vico's secular criticism to warn against ideology?

In fact, the assumption that one can speak of secularism as a neutral alternative to religious affiliation has been punctured not only by theological arguments, but also by some able sociological studies.⁴⁰ Secularism is not a neutral space; rather, it is a point of view. Or, as Hart put it, Said's 'secular criticism suffers from his failure to explicate the varieties of secularism'.⁴¹ Therefore, 'his critique of religion as a cultural effect – a temptation for the secular critic and a piece of repressed infantilism that threatens to 'return' – misfires when it takes religion as something that can be completed or terminated'.⁴²

Both Islam and Christianity have provided similar warnings against tribalism, which are the result of Revelation. In the case of Christianity, one has only to remember Jesus' attack on the traders in the Temple in Jerusalem, when he

³⁷ Nicholas Lash (1996: 13).

³⁸ John Gray (2002: 38).

³⁹ Rowan Williams in David Ford & Graham Stanton (2003: 220).

⁴⁰ David Martin identified a historical trajectory behind what he calls 'the loosening of monopoly', from historic churches and nation states and the relationship of this to developed economies that allow individuals to find other kinds of affiliations through their own choice. Martin shows that though this meant a decline in traditional religious belongings, it is a different thing from secularization, David Martin (2005: 112-119).

⁴¹ William Hart (2000: 161-162).

⁴² Ibid: 162.

decisively seems to challenge the whole religious establishment and cult. As Rowan Williams put it: 'Jesus, in his acts and parables, is a strikingly secular figure, unconcerned to ask questions about the status or purity of those who come to him'.⁴³ Jesus, therefore, becomes the sign of *God's* openness to the whole world, not a leader of a religious sect. Islam, too, has always prided itself of being a summons to the whole world, warning against tribal affiliations with kin solidarity, *ʿaṣabiyya*, associated with the *jāhiliyya* (pre-Islamic period of 'ignorance') in Surah IX: 24 and Surah LVII: 22. In other words, one can stand against the limitations of any ideology because of theological sensitivities. Undoubtedly, religious history has not been that innocent when it comes to relating to 'others' – no history is! But, the significance of these theological warnings is in pointing to the fact that if God truly matters, then *all* matter, whilst this is not claimed to be just the result of human guess, and God remains beyond human control or imagination. Said is right to stand against those who claim the opposite: if God matters then no one else matters! But, he does not provide the full necessary tools for engagement with Islamic religious texts; for as Hart concludes:

Said is on the verge of an insight that eludes him nevertheless...The geographical imagination of the West (the East-West distinction) was not central to this conflict. The fundamental distinction was between the true God and idols, true and false religion.⁴⁴

Covering Islam

The lack of attention to the intricacies of religious discourse is amply clear when Said talks about *Covering Islam*. Here, as in *Orientalism*, Said shows how abstract canonical representations of Islam are the fruit of academic political and media cooperation that deny the complexities and intricacies of Islamic Jurisprudence, Mysticism, theology and context. He demands a morally informed criticism on Islam,⁴⁵ all of which is well and good; but, at the same time, he does not seem to bother about a morally informed criticism of 'religion'. Therefore, when Said rightly criticizes the media in *Covering Islam* as being the privileged source that defines our perceptions of Islam in the world,⁴⁶ he does not consider even slightly the possibility that this might be the fruit of the condition of public discourse that is devoid of God. For now, as Hume suggested, we human beings are 'nothing but a collection of perceptions, which succeed each other in

⁴³ Rowan Williams (2005: 54).

⁴⁴ William Hart (2000: 83).

⁴⁵ Edward Said (1997: 38, 79, 161, 164).

⁴⁶ *Ibid*: 48.

perpetual rapidity'.⁴⁷ In other words, while Said exposed a particular configuration of power and knowledge, as the West expands its monopoly of the world through textual analysis, he does not question the analytical and epistemological usefulness of the term 'religion', missing the real question of his criticism. Said accuses Western scholarship of fulfilling the will of government policies, when he himself seems to be fulfilling the will of Western Enlightenment thinking on religion.

Interestingly, Said's concern for morally informed criticism is the same concern that Rowan Williams's book, *Why study the past?* poses before historians. Why study the past? This is a good question, as they say. Said's critique points to a similar foundational question: why is it important to embark on Orientalist studies at all?⁴⁸ The answer is two-fold. We have elaborated above on the first: the power struggle involved in constructing knowledge of the 'other' by which Europe defines its own self-identity and establishes its superiority. Despite a good deal of attacks on Said's theory here, which included at times attempts to restrict circulation of Said's writings within the academy,⁴⁹ I do not contest Said's claim here. But, my concern, coming out of Hart's important study, is that this claim is not wholly connected with the history and tradition of religious discourse between Muslims and Christians past and present.

Whilst Said speaks of misconceptions, ignorance and hostility in Orientalist literature, the question is: Which came first, hostile scholarship or its subject matter? For this sort of language did not start in Europe. It goes further back, being hard-wired into the logic boards of – where else – Middle Eastern Christianity. That is where it all began. The images of Muslims, Islam, and the Prophet very much reflect the first reactions that Christians had to the challenge of Islam in the Middle East. Sidney Griffith in his monograph *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque* referred to documents from the seventh century, which called the Prophet of Islam as false, as one armed with the sword, and as the antichrist.⁵⁰ It is true that in the Middle Eastern context of the seventh century, there were still mixed reviews and at times positive commendations of the conquest and the spread of Islam, which in itself reflects the disastrous divisions among Christians. But, the point is that this intra-Christian rivalry and inter-communal polemic was part of the background of the discourse of the Christian response to Islam, and therefore, much of what Said attributes to Orientalism is really about religious discourse, which he is not wholly qualified to tackle. In addition, Said does not expand on the contemporary scene of how

⁴⁷ Cited in John Gray (2002: 75).

⁴⁸ Edward Said (1980: 54).

⁴⁹ Matthieu Courville (2006); Matthew Abraham & Andrew Rubin (2007).

⁵⁰ Sidney Griffith (2008: 25).

the media in Muslim lands does not seem to be speaking any more clearly than their Western counterparts about Christianity or the West for that matter. One can often read the press in Muslim lands and believe that Christianity equals primitivist Evangelical Christians and Christian Zionism in America, who have a corrective military mission against Islam.

But, there is a second answer to the foundational question why study the orient, not wholly disconnected from the first answer, but, which has to do more with the basic question of how we read history and Islamic texts; for part of Said's criticism here is that the West's classical approach sought the study of the 'Orient' as an encounter with an un-interpreted world.⁵¹ In other words, apart from the power struggles, there is another element involved, which has to do with claiming better knowledge of Islam's history and sources than the original sources portray. Being aware of the religious 'manipulation' of the original Islamic sources, historians tend to examine the history of Islam by dismissing religious perspectives, hence the need to establish a list of events that 'happened'. They sought 'to treat history with the same exactness as was given to the natural sciences'.⁵²

As I noted elsewhere,⁵³ this 'historical quest' for the early phases of Islamic history remained the source of much complex debate, and many scholars have been generally sceptical of the original Islamic sources. Though some research on al-Ṭabarī's (d.310/923) *History* and on the work of Sayf Ibn ʿUmar (d. 180/796) give examples that point to the necessity to dispense with the prejudice that either is wholly wrong, they do not consider them 'impeccably trustworthy historians', proving that the interest remains in historical certainties.⁵⁴ Said's critique I think was to reflect the inconclusive nature of such methodologies as they presuppose two ideas: First that these societies and their texts are always obvious and easy to understand; second, that they reflect the study of a separate 'other', which is platonically disconnected from the researcher's point of view.⁵⁵ For Said, such concerns remain connected with the issues of power struggle, because they are rooted in the sense of moral superiority of Western culture towards the other.

However, this has to do with how 'religion' is understood; again, Said remains inconsistent. While he raises important questions about Western scholarship of Islam, he shares its scepticism of the 'religious manipulation' of the texts;

⁵¹ Albert Hourani (1980: 9).

⁵² Jan Romein (1958: 449).

⁵³ Yazeed Said (2013: 26).

⁵⁴ Ella Landau-Tasseron (1990: 22-23).

⁵⁵ Edward Said (1979: 278).

excluding religious questions out of the discussion in the way he makes use of Ibn Hazm and Ibn Khaldun. This carries numerous amounts of difficulties to say the least. He is concerned for showing that Islam is a complex object of discourse that differs according to place, context and time, refusing to allow the possibility of speaking of Islam simply as a single ideology. But, he seems to be speaking from the point of a limited understanding of secularism.

This is also apparent in the way Said relates to some notable Orientalists. It is interesting that the Frenchman Orientalist Louis Massignon receives glowing respect from Said in the way he draws on the entire corpus of Islamic literature, and contextualizing Islamic texts. But, Massignon remains for Said an Orientalist for maintaining a clear distinction between Islam and Western religious traditions as part of the East-West divide.⁵⁶ H.A.R. Gibb seems to be the English equivalent of Massignon for Said. The same inconsistency applies to Said's criticism of Gibb; Said points to Gibb's abstract use of the words 'religion' and 'Islam' from 'mundane circumstances of everyday life', when he himself seems to be doing the same thing.⁵⁷ There is no apparent mention of the important work of Kenneth Cragg either, who arguably is more akin to Massignon than Gibb in his grateful acknowledgment of Islam's witness to God and celebration of common Christian and Muslim ground, whilst maintaining a sensitive Christian critique of Islam. Said also refers positively to Marshall Hodgson's Classic *The Venture of Islam*.⁵⁸ But, again Hodgson acknowledges that our reading of history involves, like any other critical discipline, our critical intelligence, which is, nonetheless, an aspect of nature, and not an intrusion from some other world.⁵⁹ This means that, contrary to some Orientalist conclusions, (and Said stands with them here), the reason why the religious historical tradition of Islam takes a central place is incapable of being predicated only empirically of 'neutral' materials, or even of our supposed 'neutral' observation of the text. We do need to relate to the religious aspect of the text seriously, and not only when it comes to Islam obviously.

The Hermeneutics of Engagement

Where do we go from here? We go back to some observations from Rowan Williams. Said's misgivings about religion have to do a little with how religious ideas can engage what Rowan Williams calls 'honest discourse'. Williams defined this kind of discourse as that, which 'invites collaboration by showing that it does not claim to be in and of itself final'. 'Religious talk', adds Williams,

⁵⁶ Ibid: 268-271.

⁵⁷ William Hart (2000: 82); Edward Said (1979: 279-280).

⁵⁸ Edward Said (1997: 17, 67).

⁵⁹ Marshall Hodgson (1993: 72).

is in an odd position here. On the one hand, it is making claims about the context of the whole moral universe, claims of crucial concern for the right leading of human life; it is thus not likely, *prima facie*, to be content with provisional statements. On the other hand, if it really purports to be about the context of the moral universe, it declares itself to be uniquely 'under judgment', and to be dealing with what supremely resists the urge to finish and close what is being said.⁶⁰

Though Williams presents a critical reading of Christian history writing, there is no reason why this should not apply to the reading of religious Islamic texts as well, especially if one comes to the text with Rowan Williams' Christological concern for emptying one's preconceived assumptions in relating to the 'other', willing to be challenged and enlarged through learning more about Christ in the reading of another religious text. The main implication of all of this is that the reading of Islamic history as that of crisis and a primitive immutable legal system, whilst the history of the West is simply seen as a history of freedom and rationality, needs to give way, not simply to Said's secular critique, but to Rowan Williams' moral dimension of reading history, reminding us that 'good history writing is writing that constructs that sense of who we are by a real engagement with the strangeness of the past'.⁶¹

This concern for moral history reading might rectify the inconsistencies of Said's critique. If one agrees with Julie Meisami that: 'The medieval historian's primary interest lay less in recording the 'fact' of history than in the construction of meaningful narratives',⁶² one should note that meaningful narratives can be had, as Rowan Williams points in his *Why Study the Past*, only when one acknowledges that there are different layers of reading texts and history; and uncovering the various layers of meaning in the context of the time requires of us to strive for a bigger vision to give a clearer and bigger meaning. This means relating seriously to the religious aspect of the investigation, not shunning it so easily as Said wishes to do.

What Rowan Williams seems to be proposing, therefore, reflects something of the methodology of the two great twentieth century giants of Islamic studies, Louis Massignon and Kenneth Cragg, and points to what the American philosopher Walter Davis phrased as a 'study of culture to become...a fully dialectical process, [where] critics and their objects of study must be brought into a

⁶⁰ Rowan Williams (2000: 5).

⁶¹ Rowan Williams (2005: 23-24).

⁶² Julie Meisami (1999: 3).

mutually destabilizing relationship'.⁶³ Hodgson's classical work can be seen as a historical account that anticipates to some extent Walter Davis' 'hermeneutics of engagement'.⁶⁴

Conclusion

The question that arises from this critique of Said is: if the Orientalists had their common sense based on the invidious divide between East and West, and if Said's common sense was built on the other invidious divide between religion and secularism, then what is the answer really to reading Islamic texts? How are scholars able to maintain Rowan Williams' moral vision of reading texts practically? One of the answers may have been provided earlier last century, before Said produced his critique. This possible answer appear when Dr. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Dūrī in 1960's urged historians to identify social, political and religious questions concurrently, pointing to certain *makhāṭir*, risks, when Western scholarship fails to do so, stating that it would lack coherence, even though it might provide a wealth of scattered information.⁶⁵ Said would agree to a certain point with this observation, arguing that certain Western studies of Islam reflected an abstract monochrome depiction of what Islam is. He does not provide the full cure, however, as Duri before anticipated, in emphasizing the significance of raising interdisciplinary questions together without neglecting the significance of theological and moral foundation of religious texts.

In light of Duri's warning and Williams' concern for moral reading of history, one could suggest that had Said been 'a good Anglican' (and not a lapsed Anglican as he confesses, but one who takes and is aware of the importance and complexity of religious and theological discourse) he would have offered his critique to the world of Orientalism as a gift that clarifies better how to support an intellectual history of Islamic texts as an answer to the conventional Orientalist reading. As I mentioned in another context,⁶⁶ it would be perhaps more useful and enlightening to avail the field of Islamic studies of the considerable resources in the academy, which goes beyond the walls of 'Oriental studies' faculties; such resources include theology, ethics, law and political philosophy. For this would reflect better the intricacies of medieval Muslim thought, a matter that requires taking seriously the theoretical basis of Islam's theological understanding of history as based on the Koranic Revelation as well and allows for the greater engagement between different disciplines and traditions for the sake of mutual growth and learning.

⁶³ Walter Davis (1989: 228).

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Dūrī (1949: 6).

⁶⁶ Yazeed Said (2013: 1).

References

Books

- Ahmad, Aijaz
1994 *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. Verso, New York.
- Asad, Talal
1993 *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam*. Johns Hopkins, Baltimore and London.
- Crone, Patricia
2003 *Slaves on Horses: The evolution of the Islamic Polity*. Second edition, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Davis, Walter
1989 *Inwardness and Existence: Subjectivity in/and Hegel, Heidegger, Marx, and Freud*. The University of Wisconsin Press, London & Madison, Wisconsin.
- Dūrī, °Abd al-°Azīz, al,
1949 *Muqaddima fī tārīkh Ṣadr al-Islām*. Maṭba°at al-Ma°ārif, Baghdad.
- Gray, John
2002 *Straw Dogs: Thoughts on Human and Other Animals*. Granta Books, London.
- Griffith, Sidney
2008 *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Hart, William
2000 *Edward Said and the Religious Effects of Culture*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Hodgson, Marshall
1974 *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*. The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Hodgson, Marshall
1993 *Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam, and World History*. Edmund Burke III (ed.) Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Hume, David
1999 *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Tom L. Beauchamp (ed.), Oxford University Press, Oxford.

- Kant, Emmanuel
1963 *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Smith. N.K. (tr.), MacMillan & Co LTD, London.
- Lash, Nicholas
1996 *The Beginning and the End of Religion*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
2008 *Theology for Pilgrims*. Darton, Longman and Todd, London.
- Letwin, Shirley
1965 *The Pursuit of Certainty: David Hume, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill, Beatrice Webb*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Martin, David
2005 *On Secularization: towards a revised general theory*. Ashgate, Alderhot, Hants.
- Meisami, Julie
1999 *Persian Historiography to the end of the Twelfth Century*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh.
- Palmer, Bryan
1990 *Descent into Discourse*. Temple University Press, Philadelphia.
- Said, Edward
1997 *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. Vintage, New York.
1994 *Culture and Imperialism*. Vintage, London.
1978 *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. Penguin Books, London.
2000 *Out of Place: A Memoir*. Vintage, New York.
1983 *The World, the Text, and the Critic*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass.
- Said, Yazeed
2013 *Ghazālī's Politics in Context*. Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon.
- Senior, John
1978 *The Death of Christian Culture*. Arlington House Publishers, New York.
- Williams, Rowan
2000 *On Christian Theology*. Blackwell Publishers, Oxford.
1994 *Open to Judgment: Sermons and Addresses*. Darton, Longman & Todd, London.
2005 *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*. Darton Longman and Todd, London.

Edited Books

Ateek, Naim & Prior, Michael (eds.)

1999 *Holy Land Hollow Jubilee: God, Justice and the Palestinians*. Melisende, London.

Iskandar, Adel & Rustom, Hakem (eds.)

2010 *Edward Said: A Legacy of Emancipation and Representation*. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Chapter in edited books

Hafez, Sabry

2010 'Edward Said in Contemporary Arabic Culture', in *Edward Said: A Legacy of Emancipation and Representation*, edited by Adel Iskandar and Hakem Rustom, 170-190. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Hourani, Albert

1980 'Islamic History, Middle Eastern history, modern history', in *Islamic Studies: A Tradition and its Problems*, edited by Malcolm Kerr, 5-26. Undena Publications, Malibu, California.

Ramazani, Jahan

2010 'Edward Said and the Poetry of Decolonization', in *Edward Said: A Legacy of Emancipation and Representation*, edited by Adel Iskandar and Hakem Rustom, 159-169. University of California Press, Berkeley.

Said, Edward,

1986 'Foucault and the Imagination of Power', in *Foucault: A Critical Reader*, edited by David Couzens Hoy (ed.), 149-155. Basil Blackwell, Oxford.

1980 'Islam, the philological vocation, and French culture', in *Islamic Studies: A Tradition and its Problems*, edited by Malcolm Kerr, 53-72. Undena Publications, Malibu, California, 1980.

Williams, Rowan

2003 'Historical Criticism', in *Reading Texts, Seeking Wisdom: Scripture and Theology*, edited by David Ford and Graham Stanton, 217-228. SCM, London.

Journal articles

Abraham, Matthew & Andrew Rubin

2007

'Introduction: Edward Said and After: Towards a New Humanism. Special issue of *Cultural Critique*, 67: 3,4.

Courville, Matthieu

2006

'Ivory Towers' or Tower of Babel? A Critical Reading of Martin Kramer'. *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, 15 (2): 187-199.

Landau-Tasserou, Ella,

1990

'Sayf Ibn Umar in Medieval and Modern Scholarship'. *Der Islam*, 67 (1): 1-26

Romein, Jan,

1958

'The Common Human Pattern'. *Journal of World History*, 4 (2): 449-463.