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Edward Said and Islam

FERIAL J. GHAZOU

Edward Said was thoroughly secular; his secularism was not anti-religious as much as a-religious. His interest in Vico is indicative of his own position. Giambattista Vico, in his *New Science* (1725), separated the domain of the divine from the domain of the human, concentrating on the latter in his analysis and using the terminology and concepts of his time. He was interested in the history of the gentiles, a history made by people and not the history ordained by God. Likewise Said was interested in human endeavor and history, in all that was made by human beings, not by supernatural forces, and thus in what can be changed by human beings. For Said, it is futile to discuss God's ways partly because he had no taste for it, and partly because what can anyone say to someone who tells you God is on his side? How can one have dialogue and exchange with such 'holiness' and 'fundamentalism'? Once you are one of the elect, or once you are convinced that your people are the 'chosen people'—and chosen by no less than God Himself—then there is no room for human intervention, no place for human agency or endeavor.

Colonial hegemony, as Said shows in his *Orientalism* (1978), was not simply military and political, but also cultural. The debasement of the Other—the colonized—was a necessary task to justify domination. Wittingly or unwittingly, European culture caved in under pressures of racism in whose frontlines stood colonial administrators and Orientalists. Whatever humanistic vision Europe had during the Enlightenment was subordinated to the colonial discourse. It was easy to call on the medieval hostility between Christendom and Islam (not withstanding areas of coexistence between them) and raise the specter of wicked and dangerous Muslims. Islam and Muslims were then classified as both false and evil. Even though such a worldview is essentially motivated by political considerations, the religious zeal of missionaries and other Christian and Jewish fundamentalists made use of it and disseminated a lop-sided view of Islam and Muslims. Fair-minded as Said was, he could not tolerate this smearing of the Muslim's image, this wholesale condemnation of a religious faith and its adherents, thus he wrote *Covering Islam* (1981). The title itself has a double meaning, for 'to cover' indicates 'to know fully' and 'to conceal'. The book uncovered how Islam and Muslim countries are misrepresented in American media. Frances Fitzgerald noted that 'every foreign correspondent and every editor of foreign news' should read it.

Said went further than revealing prejudices against Islam and Muslims. He strove to learn from Islamic thought, and to use the insights of Islamic culture in his view of, and concern for, the relation between humanism and knowledge. In 'Foucault and the Imagination of Power' (1986), Said throws light on Foucault through reference to the Muslim philosopher of history Ibn Khaldun, sometimes known as the 'father of sociology'. Without reductionism, Said shows affinities while at the same time points to differences between the two. This analogical and contrastive approach not only puts those two minds on the same horizon, but also uses each to elucidate the other.

One of the main paradoxes that Said as a critic tried to solve was how the literary text is both timeless and time-bound. It is timeless in the sense that we can read it, enjoy it, and learn from it even though it was produced in a different age whose worldview is no more relevant to us. It is time-bound as the text itself is very much a product of its context and has strong bonds with the cultural environment that shaped it, including the socio-aesthetic cross-currents of the time. Said is not the first person to try to solve this seeming contradiction. Marx before him in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1904) wondered how man in an industrial world can enjoy Greek myths. His explanation was that such a pleasure is a sort of nostalgia for mankind's childhood, a recollection of an earlier mode of production. Said's interpretation, on the other hand, makes use of Islamic hermeneutics and exegesis to

explain this Janus-faced textual phenomenon—the text being both historically anchored and trans-historical. In *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (1983), Said refers to the medieval Andalusian theologian, Ibn Hazm, who solved the problem of actuality versus textuality. He and other Zahirites saw the interplay between the holy text and its circumstantiality (embodied in *asbab al-nuzul*, the study of the causes and contexts of the revelations). Their view of language as both immutable and an instrument of contingency provided them with a view of the Qur'an as both divine and worldly.

Said's distinction between filiation and affiliation made elegantly and powerfully in the introductory chapter of this book, entitled 'Secular Criticism', reproduces for those familiar

with Islamic values the distinction made in the Qur'an between tribal '*asabiyya*, where solidarity is based on kinship, and the spiritual solidarity Islam preaches among fellow believers (Repentance IX: 24; The Disputer LVII: 22; Apartments XLIX: 10). Though the context in which Said is using these terms is unquestionably secular, his binary opposition parallels the distinction between blood solidarity of *Jahiliyya* (pre-Islamic period) and solidarity which goes beyond blood to the bonding of conviction and belief in post-Islamic society.

What Said was interested in when writing about criticism was to put critical thought before solidarity. He was against secular cliques and partisan loyalty, against sectarian politics and confessional identity. He fought against blind adherence and mystification—be it for a secular creed or a religious dogma. Like a *mujtahid* par excellence, Said always strove for critical thinking and innovative interpretation.

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