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The Debate about "Orientalism"

The West's Encounter with the East since Antiquity—What do we mean by "Orientalism"?—Edward Said and the Critics of Orientalism—Alternative Perspectives—The Traditionalist Outlook

> *The value, efficacy, strength, apparent veracity of a written statement about the Orient therefore relies very little, and cannot instrumentally depend, on the Orient as such. On the contrary, the written statement is a presence to the reader by virtue of its having excluded, displaced, made supererogatory any such real thing as "the Orient" ... that Orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient, and this sense is directly indebted to various Western techniques of representation.* (Edward Said)[1]

> *Western culture will be in danger of a decline into a sterilizing provincialism if it despises or neglects the dialogue with other cultures ... the West is forced (one might also say: condemned) to this encounter and confrontation with the cultural value of "the others" ... One day the West will have to know and to understand the existential situations and the cultural universes of the non-Western peoples; moreover, the West will come to value them as integral with the history of the human spirit and will no longer regard them as immature episodes or as aberrations from an exemplary History of man—a History conceived, of course, only as that of Western man.* (Mircea Eliade)[2]

The West's Encounter with the East since Antiquity

In the early 19th century Hegel remarked that "Without being known too well, [India] has existed for millennia in the imagination of the Europeans as a wonderland. Its fame, which it has always had with regard to its treasures, both its natural ones, and, in particular, its wisdom, has lured men there."[3] Eusebius relates the time-honored anecdote that Socrates himself was visited in Athens by an Indian who asked him about the nature of his philosophizing. When Socrates responded that he was studying the problems of human life, his interlocutor laughed and explained that it was impossible to understand human matters without considering the divine.[4] India is mentioned a

1 E. Said, *Orientalism*, 22.
2 M. Eliade, *Myths, Dreams and Mysteries*, 8-9.
3 Hegel quoted in W. Halbfass, *India and Europe*, 2.
4 The anecdote apparently goes back to the Aristotelian Aristoxenes. W. Halbfass, *India and Europe*, 8.

good deal in the classical literature from Herodotus onwards and we know that ancient philosophers and theologians such as Pythagoras, Diogenes, Plotinus and Clement took a close interest in the learning of their Eastern counterparts. Alexander the Great's entourage in his Eastern campaigns included philosophers, historians and writers wishing to learn more about the intellectual and spiritual life of the Eastern barbarians, and we are told that Alexander himself conversed with the gymnosophists, as the Greeks called the naked sages of India.[5]

The Enlightenment *philosophes* had been much attracted to the Chinese civilization. Many aspects of Chinese thought and culture had become well known in Western Europe, largely through the Jesuit missionaries. Writers like Voltaire, Diderot, Helvetius, Leibnitz and David Hume extolled the virtues of many aspects of Chinese civilization, particularly Confucianism which they understood as a rationally-based and humanistic system of social ethics. So widespread was the interest in and enthusiasm for things Chinese that we might speak of a wave of Sinophilia, if not Sinomania, flowing over Western Europe, particularly France, in the first half of the 18th century. However, for reasons which cannot be canvassed here, late in the century the European gaze shifted from China to India.

The beginnings of a serious and informed intellectual interest in the philosophic and religious thought of India can be tied to several specific events in the late 18th century: the founding in the 1780s of the Asiatic Society of Bengal by the remarkable William "Oriental" Jones (1736-1794), lawyer, linguist, poet, scholar, pioneering translator of Hafiz, Rumi, Attar and Kalidasa, and tireless propagandist for Oriental literature; the "discovery" of Sanskrit and the beginnings of serious comparative studies in the over-lapping fields of religion, philosophy and mythology in the journal *Asiatic Researches*; the publication in 1785 of Charles Wilkins' first English translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, a book "which was to exercise enormous influence on the mind of Europe and America,"[6] followed in 1801 by Anquetil-Duperron's translation from the Persian into Latin of a number of *Upanishads* as *Oupnek'hat*;[7] and the rapid emergence of the first generation of Indologists. The leading lights included not only Jones and Wilkins but also Thomas Henry Colebrook, judge in Calcutta and eminent Sanskritist, and Brian Hodgson, a minor functionary attached to the court of Nepal who

5 W. Halbfass, *India and Europe*, 12. See also Elizabeth Isichei, "Passages to India," 66-67.

6 E. Sharpe, *The Universal Gita*, 10. Warren Hastings, in his Foreword to Wilkins' translation of the *Gita*, hoped that this text would convince his compatriots of the "real character" of the Indian people: "It is not very long since the inhabitants of India were considered by many, as creatures scarce elevated above the degree of savage life; nor, I fear, is that prejudice yet wholly eradicated, though surely abated. Every instance which brings their real character home to observation will impress us with a more generous sense of feeling for their natural rights and teach us to estimate them by the measure of their own"; quoted in R. King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 154.

7 The remarkable story of the translation is told by Stephen Cross in "*Ex Oriente Lux*: How the Upanishads came to Europe." See also W. Halbfass, *India and Europe*, 64-68.

amassed a collection of rare Sanskrit manuscripts.[8] The path-breaking work of such amateur scholars, most of whom pursued legal, administrative and political careers, paved the way for the great orientalist scholars of the 19th century—Eugène Burnouf, Max Müller, Paul Deussen—and for the explosion of interest in Eastern philosophy and metaphysics amongst the German Romantics and the American Transcendentalists. Jones and his collaborators thus inaugurated a tradition of scholarship which has been carried on into our own times.[9]

Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, the eminent Indian philosopher and first President of India, has written of the West's attraction to "the glamour of the exotic," and has remarked that "The East has ever been a romantic puzzle to the West, the home of adventures like those of the Arabian Nights, the abode of magic, the land of heart's desire ..."[10] Michel Le Bris has characterized the East as it exists in the European imagination as

> That Elsewhere, that yearned for realm where it was supposed that a man might get rid of the burden of self, that land outside time and space, thought of as being at once a place of wandering and a place of homecoming.[11]

But, of course, this is only one facet of a very complex phenomenon. Since the time of the classical historians and playwrights the East has also been depicted not only as exotic, mysterious and alluring but as malignant, dark, threatening. Stephen Batchelor has put the matter in psychological terms:

> In the European imagination Asia came to stand for something both distant and unknown yet also to be feared. As the colonizing powers came to identify themselves with order, reason and power, so the colonized East became perceived as chaotic, irrational and weak. In psychological terms, the East became a cipher for the Western unconscious, the repository of all that is dark, unacknowledged, feminine, sensual, repressed and liable to eruption.[12]

Then too, there is another persistent strain in European attitudes, one which we can mark in the famous and frankly contemptuous remarks by one of the most pompous windbags of the 19th century, the one-time colonial administrator and historian, Thomas Babbington Macaulay. His characterization of Indians as "lesser breeds without the law" has passed into idiomatic currency, even if many are unaware of the provenance of that deeply offensive

8 On Jones and the Royal Asiatic Society see R. Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, Ch 3; R. Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance*, 33-34; W. Halbfass, *India and Europe*, 62-64.

9 The story of the beginnings of this kind of scholarship with respect to Tibet, China and Japan will be touched on at various points in our narrative, and we will later meet many 20th century heirs of this tradition.

10 S. Radhakrishnan, *Eastern Religions and Western Thought*, 251.

11 Quoted in J.J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 19.

12 S. Batchelor, *The Awakening of the West*, 234.

phrase. Perhaps less well-known, but no less characteristic, was his dismissal of Hinduism[13] as a web of "monstrous superstitions" and of the ancient Sanskrit Scriptures as "less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgments used at preparatory schools in England." He scorned Indian

> medical doctrines which would disgrace an English farrier—astronomy which would move laughter in the girls at an English boarding-school—history, abounding with kings thirty feet long, and reigns thirty thousand years long—and geography made up of seas of treacle and seas of butter. [14]

The history of intellectual and cultural contact between West and East is convoluted, full of ambiguities, enigmas and contradictions. There has been no shortage of attempts to theorize the Western fascination with the East. Most influential of all such theorizations in recent years has been Edward Said's widely-celebrated *Orientalism* in which he argued that the Orient was a "system of ideological fictions" whose purpose was, and is, to legitimize Western cultural and political superiority; furthermore, the Western understanding of the East has grown out of "a relationship of power, of domination, of varying degrees of complex hegemony."[15] Said's argument, it must be said, is addressed primarily to the European encounter with Islam and with the Middle East, although Said himself extends the case to the Orient in general. I believe that a close study of Western engagements in Eastern religion and philosophy in particular exposes certain fundamental weaknesses in Said's analysis, which is not to deny the force and cogency of Said's argument within the Middle Eastern domain with which he is principally concerned. Since Said's landmark work there has been a proliferation of scholars bringing a Foucaldian conceptual apparatus and the intellectual protocols of "post-colonial studies" to an analysis of the loosely defined phenomenon of Orientalism.

What do we mean by "Orientalism"?

In recent times the term "orientalism" has become highly problematic, now carrying several meanings which do not sit together altogether comfortably. Five distinct senses of the word have crystallized over the last two centuries: the *scholarly study* of the languages and texts of the Orient (initially conceived as the Middle East but later encompassing all of Asia); a late 18th-century *policy* of the East India Company favoring the preservation of Indian languages,

13 Because of the peculiarities of the Indian tradition the term "Hinduism"—which, in its Western sense, is of 19th century provenance—is even more problematic than its apparent counterparts such as "Buddhism," "Christianity" and the like. See R. King, *Orientalism and Religion*, 100ff. and 143-144. Nonetheless, it is used throughout this work to signify the manifold and profuse doctrines, forms and practices which are encompassed by the tradition issuing from the *Vedas*. For a defense of the term see W. Halbfass, *India and Europe*, 332-3, and S. Radhakrishnan, *The Hindu View of Life*, 13.

14 Macaulay quoted in J.J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 73, and in E. Sharpe, *Universal Gita*, 17.

15 E. Said, *Orientalism*, 321 & 5.

laws and customs; the adoption of an *artistic style and subject matter* associated with East; a *discourse* of power fashioned in the West and deeply implicated in European imperialism; a *corporate institution* harnessed to the maintenance of the ideological and political hegemony of Europe throughout Asia.[16] The second and third senses of the term are peripheral to our present concerns.

From the late 18th to the mid-20th century "orientalism" remained a more or less neutral descriptive term, though not without a cluster of both positive and negative connotations. It referred to the linguistic and philological studies which emerged in the wake of the great maritime voyages and discoveries, the growth of mercantilism and the spread of European colonial power between the 16th and 19th centuries. Although the Western study of Eastern texts and languages had been pursued since ancient times, orientalism is closely associated with the birth in the 1780s of the Indological studies of a group of English civil servants in Bengal, working under the patronage of Governor-General Warren Hastings.

Since the early 1960s "orientalism" has become a much more volatile term. The word has accumulated a new freight of meaning as well as a highly charged ideological nebula through the work of such figures as the Egyptian sociologist Anouar Abdel-Malek, the Syrian historian A.L. Tibawi, the Marxist sociologist Bryan Turner, and, pre-eminently, the Palestinian theorist and writer, Edward Said.[17] Although much of his work was foreshadowed by Tibawi and Abdel-Malek, Said's *Orientalism* marked a watershed in the history of orientalism—both as a term and as an intellectual tradition and scholarly institution. Henceforth in this study I will follow a simple expedient: against the current tide, "orientalism" will continue to be used in a non-pejorative sense to signify an ongoing Western tradition of intellectual inquiry into and existential engagement with the ideas, practices and values of the East, particularly in the religious field, while "Orientalism" will refer, in Said's terms, to an ideologically-motivated "epistemic construction" and a "corporate institution."

Edward Said and the Critics of Orientalism

Said's primary interest lay in the Western perception and subjugation of the Islamic world of the Middle East. Since 1978 his thesis has been extended and extrapolated to cover European interactions (both intellectual and political) with the entire Asian continent. Said's thesis, baldly stated, is that Orientalism was a legatee of a European tradition of "narcissistic" writing, stretching back to Homer and Aeschylus, in which Western intellectuals created an "Orient" that was a fabric of "ideological fictions" whose purpose was

16 See A. Macfie (ed), *Orientalism: A Reader*, 1-2.

17 See A. Macfie (ed), *Orientalism: A Reader*, 1-8; A. Abdel-Malek, "Orientalism in Crisis"; A.L. Tibawi, "English- Speaking Orientalists"; B. Turner, *Marx and the End of Orientalism*; E. Said, *Orientalism*.

to confirm the West's sense of identity and to legitimize Western cultural and political superiority. Orientalism is a "colonizing knowledge" which generates a series of stereotypical dichotomies between a rational, democratic, humanistic, creative, dynamic, progressive and "masculine" "West" and an irrational, despotic, oppressive, backward, passive, stagnant and "feminine" "East." In psychological terms this ideologically charged representation of the East can be seen as the repressed "Other" of the West, "a sort of surrogate or even underground self"[18] associated with the subconscious attraction-repulsion of sexual aberration and corruption, and with a sinister "occultism." In Raymond Schwab's terms, the Orient appears in the Western unconscious as "the unfathomable, the nocturnal figure of the mind."[19] Western intellectuals and writers developed an extensive repertoire of clichés, images and oppositions which derived not from historical realities but from both a troubled fantasy-life and from the imperatives of power. On the material plane Orientalism served the interests of European colonialism by providing an integrated discourse through which the Orient could be filtered into western consciousness. The Orientalist scholar was an accessory, an accomplice, a partner-in-crime, of the politician, merchant, soldier, missionary and colonial administrator.

Ziauddin Sardar has usefully anatomized Said's understanding of Orientalism in seven defining points (the quotations coming directly from Said):

> 1. The classical tradition of studying a region by means of its languages and writings: thus anyone who teaches, researches or writes about the Orient is an orientalist.
>
> 2. "A way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience."
>
> 3. An overarching style of thought, with a history going back to antiquity, based on an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and "the Occident."
>
> 4. A "western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient."
>
> 5. "A library or archive of information commonly and, in some of its aspects, unanimously held ... a family of ideas and a unifying set of values ... These ideas explained the behavior of Orientals; they supplied the Orientals with a mentality, a genealogy, an atmosphere; most important, they allowed Europeans to deal with and even to see Orientals as a phenomenon possessing regular characteristics."
>
> 6. "A system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western empire."

18 E. Said, *Orientalism*, 3.
19 R. Schwab, *Oriental Renaissance*, 484.

> 7. The western "corporate institution" responsible for dealing with the Orient: describing it, containing it, controlling it, teaching and learning about it, making statements about it, authorizing views of it and ruling over it by these and other means.[20]

Said's thesis, shaped by both Gramscian Marxism and post-modernist French "high theory" (particularly that of Foucault), has provided the magnetic pole around which much of the recent debate about Orientalism has gravitated. Said's argument was not altogether new but the originality and force of *Orientalism* derived, at least in part, from his insistent application of the Foucauldian principle that knowledge can never be "innocent" and is always deeply implicated in the operations of power. Through a wide-ranging analysis of literary texts, travel writing and a mass of European documents, Said uncovered a system of cultural description which was "deeply inscribed with the politics, the considerations, the positions, and the strategies of power."[21]

To understand the general significance of this debate and the sea-change which it signifies we need to understand something of the historical background and of the intellectual changes signaled by the emergence of post-colonial studies. As Maxime Rodinson and others have pointed out, the conditions for a major critique of Orientalism were created by radical changes in the political landscapes of both Europe and Asia in the first half of the century. Amongst the most salient of these changes were the Iranian Revolution of 1906; the Young Turk and Kemalist movements in the years before and after the Great War; the defeat and dismemberment of the German, Austrian, Russian and Ottoman Empires; the rise of Bolshevism; the spread of anti-colonial nationalism in many parts of Asia; and, eventually, decolonization.[22] Such changes made possible a challenge not only to the military and political structures of European imperialism but to the intellectual and theoretical formations which had motivated, rationalized, camouflaged and validated them. Enter Tibawi, Said et al., soon to be joined by various other groups marching behind the banners of anti-Europeanism, anti-colonialism, and anti-elitism.

Since the meteoric appearance of the Saidian critique many other scholars have joined the fray to defend, extend, qualify or repudiate it. It lies outside our present purpose to negotiate this labyrinthine field but we may take note of the work of such scholars as Stuart Schaar, Ronald Inden, Richard King (generally supportive of Said), Bernard Lewis, David Kopf, John Mackenzie and Keith Windshuttle (generally critical), and Aijiz Ahmad, Fred

20 Z. Sardar, *Orientalism*, 68.
21 E. Said, "Orientalism Reconsidered," 347.
22 See M. Rodinson, "The Western Image," 55-62.

Halliday and Albert Hourani (somewhere in between).[23] A number of feminist theorists and historians entered the field in the 1990s, either inflecting Said's thesis in new ways or challenging its neglect of a significant body of orientalist writings by women.[24]

Said's work has been criticized along many different lines. To cite only a few: *Orientalism* offers us little more than the rehashing of the work of Said's unacknowledged predecessors in the field (Ziauddin Sardar);[25] it succumbs to the same homogenizing, essentializing and totalizing tendencies which it stigmatizes in *Orientalism* (B.J. Moore-Gilbert, Sadik Jalal al 'Azm, Rosane Rocher);[26] Foucaldian discursive theory (on which Said draws so heavily) is a remarkably blunt instrument with which to dissect historical particularities and the "micropractices, irregularities, historical discontinuities and discursive heterogeneity" of Orientalism itself (Ali Behdad);[27] Said's work is motivated by an ideological animus to Zionism and Judaism, and is guilty of "arbitrary rearrangement" and "capricious choice" in its treatment of the historical evidence (Bernard Lewis); his work is "ahistorical," lacking in precision and subtlety (David Kopf, John Mackenzie); and his analysis is vitiated by the contradictory epistemological assumptions and methodological procedures which he variously derives from Gramscian Marxism, Foucaldian theory, Arnoldian "high culture" and a tradition of secular humanism (James Clifford, Richard King); *Orientalism* ignores the considerable body of writing on the East by women (Billie Melman, Lisa Lowe), by such minorities as Anglo-Indians (B.J. Moore-Gilbert), and the self-representations of the colonized which are passed over in favor of an analysis of canonical Western literary texts (Ania Loomba);[28] Said's depiction, it is also argued, fails to recognize and account for the significant variations in different national Orientalist discourses and is unable to account for the fact that German and Russian orientalism developed independently of Empire (Sheldon Pollock, C.F. Beckingham, James Clifford).[29]

Whatever assessment one makes of the work of Said and other anti-Orientalists, it is certainly no longer possible to consider the interactions of

23 In addition to the works cited above, some of the principal works in this debate are: A. Ahmad, "Between Orientalism and Historicism"; A. Behdad, *Belated Travelers*; C.A. Breckenridge & P. van der Veer (eds), *Orientalism and the Post-Colonial Predicament*; J. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*; F. Dallmayr, *Beyond Orientalism*; F. Halliday, "Orientalism and Its Critics"; A. Hourani, "The Road to Morocco"; R. King, *Orientalism and Religion*; D. Kopf, "Hermeneutics versus History"; B. Lewis, *Islam and the West*; J. Mackenzie, *Orientalism: History, Theory and the Arts*; B.J. Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics*; K. Windshuttle, *The Killing of History*. Excerpts from many of these works can be found in A. Macfie (ed), *Orientalism: A Reader*.

24 See Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains*, and B. Melman, *Women's Orients*.

25 Z. Sardar, *Orientalism*, 67.

26 B.J. Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory*, 53; Sadik Jalal al 'Azm, "Orientalism and Orientalism in Reverse."

27 A. Macfie, following Ali Behdad, *Orientalism: A Reader*, 7.

28 See A. Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, 49.

29 See S. Pollock, "Indology, Power, and the Case of Germany"; C.F. Beckingham, review of *Orientalism*; J. Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*.

East and West without taking some account of their critiques.[30] There is no gainsaying the brilliance of Edward Said's work; it would be foolish to turn away from his many insights or to ignore the challenges he has posed. Nonetheless, the Saidian thesis has given birth to many lop-sided and reductionistic works in which the hermeneutics of suspicion and malice aforethought have blinded their authors to the many positive aspects of orientalism. Whilst Said and his epigones have dominated the debate within such disciplinary arenas as sociology, political science and post-colonial/subaltern studies their work has exercised a less totalitarian influence in the field of comparative religion and the history of ideas. Here I do not wish to construct any detailed or systematic counter-argument either to Said or to his many successors. I hope that much of the material in this study will enable readers to at least consider some alternative perspectives. However, it is impossible to leave this subject without a few general remarks, the pertinence of which will become clearer as the reader proceeds.

The conceptual apparatus deployed in the contemporary critique of Orientalism has been drawn from a number of sources. Abdel-Malek and Turner drew on Marxist analyses of capitalism and colonialism, Tibawi on post-Enlightenment ideals of scientific detachment and the liberal ideal of inter-cultural respect, and Said on the deconstructionist theories of those monks of negation, the Parisian oracles of post-modernism. All have been influenced by the legacy of the German philosophical tradition, especially the thought of Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche. An obvious irony, which seems to have escaped the attention of some of the more fervent and over-heated critics of Orientalism, is that their assault on the Western fabrication of the Orient is itself a product of the Western intellectual heritage of which they are such strident critics. In Said's case the irony is sharpened by the fact that the "defense" of the Islamic civilization is conducted by a rootless intellectual of Protestant upbringing who is quite unable to conceal his own distaste for the religion that provides the very *raison d'être* of the civilization in question. Moreover, his argument is rooted in ideas and values (secular humanism, high culture) which are irredeemably Western and modernistic, and thus quite out of tune with those values that Muslims themselves hold most dear.

Not only is the theoretical arsenal of the anti-Orientalists drawn almost exclusively from Western sources but, with few exceptions, it is also relentlessly secular, materialist and humanistic in its assumptions, attitudes and values. These critics assert *ad nauseam* that no knowledge can be "apolitical" and "disinterested" but, in terms of their *own* argument, they often seem quite obtuse in understanding the limitations and prejudices which must govern their own outlook. This is especially problematic in the domain of religion.

30 A thoughtful, generally sympathetic but balanced consideration of arguments for and against Said's thesis can be found in Richard King's *Orientalism and Religion*, 82-95.

Scholars committed to an essentially modern, Western, areligious world view (which, with respect to religion itself, might be hostile, indifferent or vaguely "tolerant" but which, from a religious viewpoint, will *necessarily* be reductionistic) are thereby disqualified from the deepest understanding of the spiritual impulses which motivate men and women who immerse themselves in the doctrines and practices of alien religious traditions. These critics, for the most part, are locked into Salman Rushdie's facile dichotomy of the "light of secularism" and "darkness of religion."[31] It is all too easy to see the attraction to the East, on the level of the individual, in non-religious terms—the lure of the exotic, the promise of escape, the rebellion against convention and the like. But what of the religious impulse *per se*? For such scholars there is *no* such impulse but only a bogus religiosity which serves as cover for the "real" motivations at work (psychological, political, economic or whatever).

A recent work on Orientalism opens with the following passage:

> The problem of Orientalism, what makes the dissection and display of its skeletal being a tricky matter, is the very fact of its existence. Because Orientalism exists we have a world where reality is differently perceived, expressed and experienced across a great divide of mutual misunderstanding. To discuss Orientalism one has to urge people to go beyond this misunderstanding and see what has been made invisible: to distinguish a different outline in a picture that has been distorted by centuries of myopic vision. There is nothing about Orientalism that is neutral or objective. By definition it is a partial and partisan subject. No one comes to the subject without a background and baggage. The baggage for many consists of the assumption that, given its long history, somewhere within or about this subject there is real knowledge about the Orient; and that this knowledge can be used to develop an understanding of the cultures East of the West. The task of this book is to undermine this assumption ... While Orientalism is real, it is still, nevertheless, an artificial construction. It is entirely distinct and unattached to the East as understood within and by the East. There is no route map, no itinerary locked within the subject to bridge that divide.[32]

Oscar Wilde quipped of *fin-de-siècle* Japanophilia that "In fact the whole of Japan is a pure invention."[33] The witticism has now lost its zest. The kind of passage just cited, asseverating that the Western understanding of the Orient is nothing more than a tissue of mendacious fabrications, is now quite unexceptional—indeed it is standard fare in those fields of study now tyrannized by a peculiar mix of French "high theory," deterministic materialism and psychoanalytic theory. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said cautions that,

> Trouble sets in when the guild tradition of Orientalism takes over the schol-

31 See Z. Sardar, *Orientalism*, 75.
32 See Z. Sardar, *Orientalism*, vii.
33 O. Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," 988.

> ar who is not vigilant, whose individual consciousness as a scholar is not on guard against *idées reçues* all too easily handed down in the profession.[34]

This passage is not without its unintended ironies, given that for a period of some years almost every nickel-and-dime scholar dealing with the West's encounter with the East took up the Saidian line—*idées reçues* indeed!

Let us return for a moment to the characteristic passage from Ziauddin Sardar cited above. These kinds of claims have become so familiar that we need to take a step back to see what staggering and preposterous claims are being made! Centuries of tireless Western scholarship, of assiduous intellectual explorations, of meticulous translations and painstaking commentaries, not to mention the direct personal testimonies of Europeans living in Asia, all count for nothing more than an "artificial construction" which can only generate "mutual misunderstanding." A melancholy and somewhat ludicrous spectacle! But, wait! After centuries, even millennia of mutual incomprehension, it is now possible, we are told, to erase this monstrous edifice of misunderstanding, to start from zero and to find "*new* bases for *genuine* encounters with the people, places, history, ideas and current existence that is to the East of the West"[35]—as if quite suddenly there is an entirely new dispensation which will allow us to avoid the follies and misdemeanors of the past. The question of quite *how* this is to be done is not specified in anything but the vaguest and most platitudinous terms.

Rather than the fashionable disparaging of the achievements of many orientalists of the past, I incline towards Mircea Eliade's view that

> We have indeed pillaged other cultures. Fortunately, however, there have been other Westerners who have deciphered the languages, preserved the myths, salvaged certain artistic masterpieces. There have always been a few orientalists, a few philosophers, a few poets striving to safeguard the meaning of certain exotic, extra-European spiritual traditions.[36]

Whilst their work was no doubt often contaminated by mixed motives and their work sometimes turned to dubious ends, the scholarly enterprise in itself was a noble one and their heroic labors ought to elicit our admiration and gratitude rather than opprobrium. This is especially the case amongst those writers and researchers who, far from aiding and abetting colonial regimes or reinforcing racist and progressivist ideologies, were inspired by a sense that the East had philosophical, artistic and spiritual riches which could be shared by a Western world which had lost its religious bearings. Prominent amongst such writers were two figures to whom we shall often refer in this study, the Anglo-Ceylonese art historian, Ananda

34 E. Said, *Orientalism*, 326.
35 Z. Sardar, *Orientalism*, viii (italics mine).
36 M. Eliade, *Ordeal by Labyrinth*, 68.

Coomaraswamy, and the French metaphysician, René Guénon, each of whom played a decisive role in awakening the West to the profound messages of the Eastern traditions.

Alternative Perspectives

In raising these objections to some aspects of the anti-Orientalist critiques I certainly do not want to retreat into the naïve view of orientalism as an unproblematic domain of "pure" and "disinterested" scholarship. In point of fact the connections between Orientalism and imperialism were exposed long before the current rash of critiques. In 1924, for instance, René Guénon himself was excoriating those European orientalists whose researches had become an instrument in the service of national ambition.[37] It is by no means the case that the recognition of the political and ideological dimensions of Orientalism must derive from the kind of critiques elaborated by Said: Guénon's own outlook could hardly have been further removed from that of Said for whom "traditional," it is all too apparent, is more or less synonymous with backwardness, superstition and ignorance.

Nor should this study be construed in any way as a defense of Western imperialism or a justification of the cultural vandalism which was its inevitable consequence. Nor do I deny the acuity of much of Said's work. My argument is with the blanket condemnation of orientalism as a more or less entirely reprehensible auxiliary of European political and cultural hegemony. The role of orientalism in Western colonialism can hardly be denied but, in Francesco Gabrieli's words, it has been "unjustly exaggerated, generalized and embittered."[38] Furthermore, Said's thesis is found to be quite precarious when we consider Western encounters with the civilizations of India, Tibet, China and Japan (the arenas with which we are primarily concerned). We will see that Western engagements with Eastern thought and spirituality often impelled the most profound and passionate repudiation of the imperial ethos and provided a platform for Western self-criticism of the most searching kind. As J.J. Clarke remarks early in his fine book, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter Between Asian and Western Thought* (1997),

> Orientalism ... cannot simply be identified with the ruling imperialist ideology, for in the Western context it represents a counter-movement, a subversive entelechy, albeit not a unified or consciously organized one, which in various ways has often tended to subvert rather than to confirm the discursive structures of imperial power.[39]

Clarke's study provides us with a model of a much more finely nuanced and judicious account of orientalism, acknowledging those political aspects to

37 R. Guénon, *East and West*, 156.
38 F. Gabrieli, "Apology for Orientalism," 81.
39 J.J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment*, 9.

which Said and the post-colonial critics have brought attention but also affirming the creative, liberating and subversive effects of European engagements with the East. I share Clarke's view that Said's treatment of orientalism, particularly the assertion of the necessary nexus with imperialism, is over-stated and unbalanced. It either ignores or marginalizes the positive motivations and impulses behind many Western encounters with and representations of the Orient and foregrounds those politico-economic and psychological factors which present European engagements in a sinister light. Nor can I accept the notion that orientalists were inevitably chasing mirages, constructing mirror-images and projecting their own fantasies onto an artificial screen called "the East" or "the Orient." Doubtless, this was *part* of the story of Western encounters but there was also *real* understanding of an *actual* Orient.

We are largely concerned in this study with *religious* phenomena which must be treated *sui generis* and not rammed into the theoretical strait-jackets of reductionistic models of religion. As Mircea Eliade has insisted,

> ... a religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied as something religious. To try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false; it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it—the element of the sacred. Obviously there are no purely religious phenomena ... But it would be hopeless to try and explain religion in terms of any one of these basic functions ... It would be as futile as thinking you could explain *Madame Bovary* by a list of social, economic and political facts; however true, they do not effect it as a work of literature.[40]

The present study takes up the task of considering Western encounters with the Eastern traditions as *religious* phenomena which, in the end, are not amenable to non-religious explanations. As Eliade concedes, "there are no purely religious phenomena," which is to say that any "religious" phenomenon has a history, a social and political context, a location in time and space. This work will not succumb to facile stereotypes about "the mystic East" as a realm outside history and beyond politics; on the other hand, nor will it surrender to the jejune slogan popularized in May 1968, "nothing outside politics." The Western engagement with Asia can be only partially (and quite inadequately) explained by the analytical techniques and conceptual categories of Marxist/Foucauldian/psychoanalytic thought, no matter how sophisticated and refined their application nor how erudite the scholars deploying them.

Mircea Eliade has also argued that

> ... the scholar has not finished his work when he has reconstructed the history of a religious form or brought out its sociological, economic or politi-

40 M. Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, xiii.

> cal contexts. In addition he [or she] must *understand its meaning* ...[41]

It is one of the governing purposes of the present study to disclose, insofar as possible, the *meaning* of Western encounters with Eastern spiritualities *as understood by the European participants themselves*. We shall not restrict our inquiries to such understandings but they will certainly occupy a central place. One of the more insidious effects of much post-modernist theorizing, especially that of Foucault, is to erase the very notion of human agency and to relegate the self-understandings and experiences of human individuals to the sidelines as epiphenomena of little interest; indeed, individuals themselves are reduced to "functions" of the systems within which they operate. Foucault's *The Study of Things*, one of his admirers tells us, "proclaims the eclipse of man as a ground of thought."[42] This is a particularly corrosive form of reductionism, which ultimately leads to the kind of nihilism deplored by the psychologist Victor Frankl:

> The true nihilism of today is reductionism ... Contemporary nihilism no longer brandishes the word nothingness; today nihilism is camouflaged as nothing-but-ness. Human phenomena are thus turned into mere epiphenomena.[43]

The present work is *not* a systematic study of orientalism in any of its senses although it does encompass the scholarly study of Eastern languages and texts. Rather, it is an attempt to survey the *existential and spiritual engagement* of a wide variety of Westerners in Eastern religions, and to do so from a viewpoint sympathetic to all religious traditions but not identified with any particular faith.

The Traditionalist Outlook

In his essay "The Pertinence of Philosophy" Ananda Coomaraswamy suggested that

> ... if we are to consider what may be the most urgent practical task to be resolved by the philosopher, we can only answer that this is ... a control and revision of the principles of comparative religion, the true end of which science ... should be to demonstrate the common metaphysical basis of all religions and that diverse cultures are fundamentally related to one another as being the dialects of a common spiritual and intellectual language ...[44]

This enterprise is high on the agenda of the "traditionalists." The traditionalist perspective was first publicly articulated by René Guénon. Since the time of Guénon's earliest writings, soon after the turn of the last century, a signif-

41 M. Eliade, *The Quest*, 2 (italics mine).
42 J. Merquior, *Foucault*, 55.
43 Victor Frankl, quoted in E.F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, 15.
44 A.K. Coomaraswamy, *What is Civilization?*, p.18.

icant traditionalist "school" has emerged with Guénon, Ananda Coomaraswamy and Frithjof Schuon acknowledged within the group as its pre-eminent exponents. Later representatives of this school include Titus Burckhardt, Marco Pallis, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr, all of whom have written on Eastern subjects. The present work takes it bearings not from the contemporary debate about Orientalism but from these traditionalist thinkers who have overcome the barriers of Eurocentricism and intellectual provincialism in a much more radical fashion than these latter-day critics. They have done so not by resorting to the currently fashionable theories of deracinated European intellectuals but by their immersion in both the Occidental and Oriental worlds of Tradition, using this term as it is understood in the work of René Guénon. An allegiance to the traditionalist position entails, as a necessary corollary, a rejection of modernism (i.e., the ideas, assumptions and attitudes which inform the prevailing worldview amongst the Western intelligentsia—and increasingly, alas, the Western-educated elites of the East). Chapter 8 of this study is devoted to the role of the traditionalists in the story of East-West encounters but a few introductory remarks here will not be out of place.[45]

The traditionalists, by definition, are committed to the explication of the *philosophia perennis* which lies at the heart of the diverse religions and behind the manifold forms of the world's different traditions. The *philosophia perennis* discloses an axiology, a set of first principles, a "universally intelligible language" and a "common universe of discourse," which provides the basis on which the most meaningful meeting of religious traditions may take place.[46] At the same time—the point is crucial—the traditionalists are dedicated to the preservation and illumination of the traditional forms which give each religious heritage its *raison d'être* and guarantee its formal integrity and, by the same token, ensure its spiritual efficacy. This outlook, based on the wisdom of the ages, is radically at odds with the ethos of modern Western scholarship. The fact that the work of the traditionalists has been largely ignored in Western academia is a sad commentary on a contemporary outlook which prides itself on "open-ness" and "respect for plurality" but which, in fact, is remarkably insular. In the field of study with which we are concerned, how else are we to account for the neglect of works as compelling as Guénon's *East and West* (1924) and *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedanta* (1925) or Frithjof Schuon's *Language of the Self* (1958) and *In the Tracks of Buddhism* (1968)? As Seyyed Hossein Nasr has observed, "One of the remarkable aspects of the intellectual life of this century ... is precisely the neglect of [the

45 Readers interested in a much fuller exposition of the traditionalist outlook might consult my *Traditionalism: Religion in the light of the Perennial Philosophy*.

46 A.K. Coomaraswamy, *The Bugbear of Literacy*, 80.

traditional] point of view in circles whose official function is to be concerned with questions of an intellectual order."[47]

Under the view championed by Guénon, Schuon and Nasr (and others), the traditional worlds of East and West have much more in common than either has with the modern West. Traditional civilizations are essentially religious: culture is the outward expression of religion and its application in all aspects of life, is in T.S. Eliot's phrase, the "incarnation of religion."[48] By contrast, modernity defines itself by its irreligious temper and by its attachment to a rationalistic and materialistic science. At the heart of all religious traditions is a metaphysical wisdom which is always the same despite the variegations in its outward vestments whilst the modern worldview is essentially little more than a *negation* of the traditional outlook, fueled by an ignorance of metaphysical principles and by the disavowal of religious forms. The most profound of divisions, therefore, is not between geographically differentiated areas but between traditional societies on one side (all previous cultures, everywhere) and those of modernity on the other (post-medieval Western Europe and its extensions elsewhere in the world). As Coomaraswamy so acutely remarked,

> "East and West" imports a cultural rather than a geographical antithesis: an opposition of the traditional or ordinary way of life that survives in the East to the modern and irregular way of life that now prevails in the West. It is because such an opposition could not have been felt before the Renaissance that we say that the problem is one that presents itself only accidentally in terms of geography; it is one of times much more than places.[49]

In this work we will touch on many issues arising out of the confrontations of tradition and modernity, and consider them in a number of contexts and from a variety of viewpoints. Nonetheless, it would be fraudulent, and no doubt quite futile, to pretend that this work aspires to the chimerical "objectivity" so prized in some academic quarters. Our colors have already been nailed to the mast. In navigating our way through a long and complicated story we shall keep our sights firmly fixed on Guénon's affirmation that

> ... the outstanding difference between the East and West (which really means in this case the modern West), the only difference that is really essential (for all others are derivative), is on the one side the preservation of tradition, with all that this implies, and on the other side the forgetting and loss of this same tradition; on the one side the maintaining of metaphysical

47 S.H. Nasr, *Knowledge and the Sacred*, 67.

48 T.S. Eliot, *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*, 28.

49 A.K. Coomaraswamy, *The Bugbear of Literacy*, 80. See also, A.K. Coomaraswamy, *Selected Letters*, 69.

> knowledge, on the other, complete ignorance of all connected with this realm.[50]

Many of the figures with whom we will be concerned in this study were attracted to the East for reasons which they themselves often barely understood. As often as not, though, we will find some fugitive intuition that the East was capable of imparting to the West, by way of those individuals with eyes to see and ears to hear, an incomparably precious gift—a re-awakened sense of that Ultimate Reality and those perennial verities towards which the genuine religious quest is always directed. In so doing the East enabled those receptive to its message to return to the sources of wisdom within the Western tradition and to uncover those fundamental truths which are ever-present but which "cannot impose themselves on those unwilling to listen."[51]

The Debate about "Orientalism"

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50 R. Guénon, "Oriental Metaphysics," 55.
51 F. Schuon, "No Activity without Truth," 28.