

[The Legacy of Edward Said: a Twentieth-Century Dhimmi](#)

Author : Jacob Thomas on Nov 12, 2006 - 01:46 PM

Bat Ye'or lectured on the subject of **“Europe and the Ambiguities of Multiculturalism”** at the **Christian Solidarity International's 29th Annual Meeting**, which was held from 2-4 November, 2006, at Paul Gerhardt Church in Munich, Germany. Four days later, I read the text of her speech on [Dhimmiwatch](#) I noticed that she referred to the late Edward Said,* and his legacy.

For a long time, I have wanted to write about this person who used his prestigious position at Columbia University to vilify European and American Orientalists. Her words prompted me. I begin by quoting from the opening part of her address:

“It is for me a great honour to be invited by CSI, an organization that has been so active on so many humanitarian fronts in order to denounce slavery, war crimes and genocide, and to alleviate human suffering. And I am thinking particularly of its struggle on behalf of human rights and dignity in Sudan since 1992 and CSI’s freeing over 80,000 Christian and other Sudanese slaves under the leadership of John Eibner and Gunnar Wielback.”

Bat Ye'or described the new state of affairs in Europe by referring to *“the globalization of our world and the policies that have led to large-scale Muslim immigration, adopted by the European Community from 1973, has introduced into Europe conflictual situations and prejudices common in the Muslim world against non-Muslims that have been documented by Orientalists familiar with Islamic theology, law and history.”*

She then proceeded to deal with the legacy of Edward Said: *“But the politicization of history initiated by Edward Said has obfuscated the root causes of Islam’s traditional hostility toward Jews and Christians from the seventh century onward. Edward Said was a Christian raised in Egypt and educated in America; he taught English literature at Columbia University. A great admirer of Arafat and a member of the PLO’s top Committee, he endeavored to destroy the whole scientific accumulation of Orientalist knowledge of Islam and replace it with a culture of Western guilt and inferiority toward Muslims victims. **The obliteration of the historical truth that he constantly pursued from 1978 – starting with his book Orientalism – as well as his hostility to Israel, has prevented an understanding and the resolution of problems that today assail Europe and challenge its own survival.**”* [Emphasis is mine, JT]

What a tragedy! One would have expected Edward Said, a descendent of Levantine Christians, to have written objectively and honestly about Islam, and to deal with the oppressive regime of dhimmitude that was inflicted on Jews and Christians. Instead, as Bat Ye'or put it, **“he endeavored to destroy the whole scientific accumulation of Orientalist knowledge of Islam and replace it with a culture of Western guilt and inferiority toward Muslims victims.”** [Emphasis is mine, JT]

One wonders, why Edward Said embarked on such a course! How could he have been that ignorant of the history of Islam? Or was he rather moved by a powerful motive to ingratiate himself to Muslims, and specifically to the Palestinian leadership, when he leveled his severe criticisms against Western Orientalists? But no matter how loyal to the “Arab Cause” a descendent of dhimmis may be, he is never accepted as a full-fledged member of an Arab-Muslim society. For ultimately, what Muslims really want is the Islamization of all non-Muslims still living within *Daru'l Islam*. Said is admired and praised in Arab and Palestinian circles, but only because he used his position and his writings to insult the West, and mostly its Orientalists. I was reminded of this fact as I came across an article in the 11 November, 2006 issue of Elaph.com where the author criticized Western intellectuals for their misunderstanding and misrepresentation of Islam. In order to substantiate his claim, he had only to refer to Said’s “**Orientalism.**” But does he deserve all the acclaim and the praise he has been receiving?

In this connection, I would like to quote at length from a review of “**Orientalism,**” by the late Malcolm H. Kerr.* It appeared in the International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies, vol. 12 (December 1980), pp. 544-547. [Orientalism](#)

“This book reminds me of the television program ‘Athletes in Action,’ in which professional football players compete in swimming, and so forth. Edward Said, a literary critic loaded with talent, has certainly made a splash, but with this sort of effort he is not going to win any major races. This is a great pity, for it is a book that in principle needed to be written, and for which the author possessed rich material. In the end, however, the effort misfired. The book ... is spoiled by overzealous prosecutorial argument in which Professor Said, in his eagerness to spin too large a web, leaps at conclusions and tries to throw everything but the kitchen sink into a preconceived frame of analysis. In charging the entire tradition of European and American Oriental studies with the sins of reductionism and caricature, he commits precisely the same error.

“But can it really be so easily denied out of hand that the Islamic religion has always exerted a pervasive influence on the culture and society of its adherents? Does Said realize how insistently Islamic doctrine in its many variants has traditionally proclaimed the applicability of religious standards to all aspects of human life, and the inseparability of man's secular and spiritual destinies? What does he suppose the Ayatollah Khomeini and the Muslim Brotherhood are all about?

“In his introductory chapter he explains that he has chosen to concentrate on the British and French (and, in the contemporary phase, the American) Orientalists because of his conviction that Orientalist scholarship has acted as a servant of imperialism; and these being the imperial powers, there is little point in studying the writings of scholars from other countries (pp. 4, 15, 17, 19). Thus he deprives himself of the chance to test his proposition by comparing his sample with a raft of Orientalists from other countries, notably Germany but also Holland, Italy, Austria, and Hungary.

“Thus conceived, Said’s selection of European authors leaves out a veritable army of

luminaries familiar to every graduate student in Islamics: Goldziher, Snouck Hurgronje, Becker, Nöldeke, Wellhausen, Gabrieli, Levi Della Vida, Schacht, Rosenthal, and Goitein, all of whom failed to be native citizens of the most successful imperial powers. Yet also omitted are the most distinguished contemporary Oriental scholars even in Britain and France: Arberry, Hourani, Watt, Coulson, Gellner, Evans-Pritchard, Cahen, Brunschwig, Le Tourneau, Laoust, Gardet, Rodinson, Miquel, and Berque, which is rather a lot. In the United States, where he assails the Middle East studies establishment for propping up American neocolonial interests in the Muslim world, he confines his citations to a handful of figures, such as Bernard Lewis and Gustave von Grunebaum (both of them European emigrants), along with Morroe Berger, Manfred Halpern, and Leonard Binder as well as an irrelevant sprinkling of Israelis—Patai, AlRoy, Harkabi—to establish the presence of an anti-Muslim or anti-Arab animus.

“But whether it is the Western tradition of Orientalist scholarship that is primarily to blame—in fact, whether that tradition has, in the net, really contributed to the problem—is another question. Said seems to be stuck with the residual argument that whatever the individual goodwill of the scholars, they are all prisoners of the establishment—the old-boy network of government, business, the foundations—which, in turn, depends on propagating the old racist myths of European Orientalism in order to further the cause of Western imperial domination of the East (pp. 301-302). At best this is a preconceived argument, and a highly debatable one.

“The list of victims of Said’s passion is a long one, too long to examine in detail. Some of them deserve it: he has justly taken the measure of Ernest Renan. Some others are probably not worth it. One wonders why he is so ready to lump nineteenth-century travelers with professional philologists; why he found it necessary to twist the empathy of Sylvain Levi for colonized peoples into an alleged racism (pp. 248-250), or to dismiss the brilliance of Richard Burton as being overshadowed by a mentality of Western domination of the east (p. 197); why he condemns Massignon for his heterodoxy and Gibb for his orthodoxy; or why he did not distinguish between Bernard Lewis’s recent polemics on modern politics and his much more important corpus of scholarship on the history of Islamic society and culture. For those who knew Gustave von Grunebaum and were aware of his scholarly genius and his deep attraction to Islamic culture in all its ramifications, Said’s summary exercise in character assassination (pp. 296-298) can only cause deep dismay. Suffice it to say that von Grunebaum’s view of Islamic culture as “antihumanist” was a serious proposition, and in fact not an unsympathetic one, denounced but not rebutted by Said, who seems not to recognize the difference between an antihumanist culture and an inhumane one. He might have done well to note that Abdallah Laroui, whose penetrating criticism of von Grunebaum’s work he invokes, earned thereby an invitation from von Grunebaum to teach at UCLA; and von Grunebaum being the man he was, with his respect for talent and debate, were he still living would more than likely have responded to Said’s book in a similar fashion”

Another Western scholar who commented briefly on Said’s **“Orientalism,”** is Kenneth Cragg, who once held the position of the Anglican Bishop of Jerusalem. He is known for his genuine scholarship, his irenic spirit, and his excellent grasp of the Arabic language.

In his book, *The Arab Christian: A History in the Middle East*, published in 1991 by Westminster/John Knox Press, in Louisville, Kentucky, he made this cogent observation about Said's view of Western Orientalists:

*“There is, it would seem, a degree of Palestinian nationalism in Edward Said's approach. He insists that all knowledge turns on power and there is no western orientalism not funded by political, commercial, or imperialist interests. It would seem, on this count that only insiders to it can know a culture, seeing that all outsiders bring unsurmountable prejudice. **The dishonesty lies in propounding this view from within an eastern insidership, which has so eminently demonstrated a capacity to know the West and its ethos and literature on the part of one, by origin an outsider.** It would have been generous to acknowledge similar capacities in reverse on the part of those orientalists, e.g., Hamilton Gibb, whom he mostly castigates.”* P. 302 [Emphasis is mine, JT]

As a Levantine Christian who is personally acquainted with the consequences of thirteen centuries of *Dhimmitude* that befell my people, I am baffled by the fact that many survivors of *Dhimmitude* during the 19th and 20th Centuries can harbor such animus vis-à-vis the West. Quite often, they have been educated by Westerners, and received high positions at Western institutions of higher education. And yet, they seem to be impelled by some mysterious force to write and lecture breaking all the rules of genuine scholarship just to prove their flawed thesis.

Unfortunately, Said was not the only Levantine who “volunteered” his services to defend, directly or indirectly, Islam and its imperialistic ventures. Many years ago, while I was in my early years and having learned to read unvoiced Arabic books, I remember coming across a novel about the Arab conquest of Spain. The heroes were *Charles Martel* and his Arab counter-part, *Abdul-Rahman al-Ghafiqi*. It painted such a romantic picture of the sympathetic Arab general who treated a Spanish widow and her daughter in a very humane and chivalrous manner! The author was an Egyptian Christian, with Lebanese roots! He did his best to describe the Islamic conquest of Spain as if it were liberation of its people! What a distortion of history, and what a faulty historiography it represented!

What makes Edward Said's legacy so disastrous at this time in history is that he left behind many disciples who continue in his tradition of lashing out against Western Orientalists. Added to that, is the fact that many Leftist professors and writers have joined him in denouncing the West, and its so-called lust for world domination. I worry about many of our young students who have enrolled at Middle East Studies Department at several of our universities, and are unaware that the disciples of Said persist in dishing out propaganda, rather than objective lectures on Islam, and its imperial designs!

So, I am very thankful to God that He has raised people like Bat Ye'or, Malcolm Kerr, Robert Spencer, Daniel Pipes, Martin Kramer, and several other contemporaries, who are unafraid to tell the real story of Islam. We owe them, and a host of European and American Orientalists, a debt of gratitude for their untiring labors to enlighten us about the true face of Islam, in these crucial times, as we face a global onslaught of militant and jihadist Islam, bent on world conquest.

Notes:

*Edward Said (pronounced, Sa'eed) died on 26 September 2003, at the age of 67. For a full account of his life and work, please consult the article, "**Who is Edward Said ...really**" in the September, 1999 issue of **Commentary Magazine**.

Malcolm Hooper Kerr was born in 1931, in Beirut, Lebanon. His parents came to the Middle East in 1919 to work with the **Near East Relief, an agency that looked after the survivors of the Armenian Genocide. Eventually, his father taught at the American University of Beirut. He was raised on the AUB campus during the days of the French Mandate. After WWII, and having finished his education at Princeton University under the Lebanese scholar Philip Hitti, he held several important teaching positions, both in the US, Europe, and the Middle East. He became the President of the AUB in 1982, during the Lebanese Civil War, and was assassinated on its campus by an Islamist terrorist, in 1984.