

Secularism

Gil Anidjar

From these distinctions, which were given their hegemony by the culture, no one could be free.

—EDWARD W. SAID

Note the problem of religion taken not in the confessional sense but in the secular sense of a unity of faith between a conception of the world and a corresponding norm of conduct. But why call this unity of faith “religion” and not “ideology,” or even frankly “politics”?

—ANTONIO GRAMSCI

In the chapters that follow, the reader may be certain, however, that as a white man I locate myself—all but a painfully extracted sliver of myself—*within* the process under scrutiny.

—RICHARD DRINNON

Oppositional Criticism

The alternative appears deceptively simple. It is either the case that, when using the word *secular*, Edward W. Said did not mean to take an oppositional stance vis-à-vis religion (“At no point is *secular* used in his work in simple opposition to the religious per se,” explains Aamir Mufti).¹ Or, insisting on being an oppositional critic, he was in fact, and for a number of elaborate reasons, *against religion*.² One could rephrase the entire matter in milder terms and suggest that the question is whether Said concerned himself with religion at all and, if he did, how so. Finally, and given whatever formulation and lines of interrogation are adopted, one could go on to ask whether the term *secular* summarizes or simply exhausts Said’s stance (or nonstance) on religion or indeed on the formations and abuses of power he thought should be opposed. One may even reach a conclusion that agrees with those who, like Bruce Robbins, Mufti, and others, assert that “the most crucial meaning of *secular*, in [Said’s] usage, is as an opposing term not to religion but to nationalism.”³

1. Aamir Mufti, “Critical Secularism: A Reintroduction for Perilous Times,” *Boundary 2* 31 (Summer 2004): 3; hereafter abbreviated “CS.”

2. See Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), p. 29; hereafter abbreviated *WTC*.

3. Bruce Robbins, “Secularism, Elitism, Progress, and Other Transgressions: On Edward Said’s ‘Voyage In,’” *Social Text*, no. 40 (Fall 1994): 26; and see Mufti, “Auerbach in Istanbul: Edward Said, Secular Criticism, and the Question of Minority Culture,” *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Autumn 1998): 95–125.

Without retreating from or immediately adjudicating these matters, it is important to acknowledge that, within the limited field of academia, a number of scholars and critics have learned from Said or taken their point of departure from his work on religion, as it were, first and foremost in *Orientalism*. In his footsteps, they have sought to explore the role and function of religion in the dissemination of colonial knowledge and the founding of institutions (not only in the creation of modern academic discourse and disciplines), in the imperial spread of the secular nation-state, in the making, in short, of what Nicholas Dirks has called “the ethnographic state” and its more recent incarnations.⁴ They have also learned from Said when theorizing not only culture and imperialism but also religion and imperialism and further what has been described as the globalization of religion. Whether critical of Said’s secularism, understood here as adverse to religion and which they see as a lingering effect of the very colonial knowledge he criticized; approving “the deployment of ‘secular’ as an epistemological concept” that has prompted a reexamination of “the roles of secular and religious discourses in both constructing and disputing systems of critical epistemology;”⁵ or simply ignoring or bracketing Said’s own positions (or lack thereof) when arguing about religion and the joined operations of “*Orientalism and Religion*” (as Richard King’s book by that title has it), scholars of religion have made palpable a growing sense that the discipline of religious studies, though something of a latecomer in engaging Said’s propositions, has much to learn from his work and from that of his followers. (In the spirit of symmetry, toward which this essay will incidentally take an oppositional stance, one may wonder whether the reverse is true, whether Said and his more proximate followers have had any use for religion and religious studies; one may also wonder whether it matters.)

By insisting, however, that Said was *not*—or at least not primarily—concerned with religion when he called for secular criticism, his less than religiously inclined advocates (or, for that matter, critics) appear to be ignoring a key moment of Said’s argument, namely, that, as “an integral part of European *material* civilization and culture,” Orientalism—which min-

4. See Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, N.J., 2001), pp. 125–227.

5. Gauri Viswanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief* (Princeton, N.J., 1998), p. 45.

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imally includes the study and phenomena of religion—functions *across* disciplines and discourses.⁶ Beginning, perhaps, with “the strange lineage of the sacred/secular distinction” that Said found in Giambattista Vico’s *New Science* (and which Said curiously seems to exonerate from his critique of Orientalism in spite of his explicit recognition of the central contribution Vico’s self-proclaimed “study of piety” made to it), Orientalism operates, in fact, as the epistemological foundation of, the very structuring principle (and power) behind, disciplinary and discursive divisions (see *O*, pp. 117–20, 133, 137).⁷ Hence, those who keep a reverential distance, who show much deference or an ironic respect vis-à-vis the disciplinary or epistemological boundaries protecting it, are effectively abandoning religion to scholars of religion, as well as to the massive hermeneutical and mobilizing energies of religious communities, leaving them perhaps in the pre- or ahistorical, indeed “sacred,” sphere to which Vico himself had respectfully confined the chosen people (or peoples, if one recalls that Vico was writing, in this context, of Jews and Christians) and their “true religion.”⁸ As they take their varied distances from religion, Said’s advocates are also repeating what they claim would have been his own gesture, namely, one of benign indifference toward religion (“Above all,” explains Mufti, “his concern has been with domination through the classification and management of cultures, and of human collectivities, into mutually distinct and immutable entities, be they nations, properly speaking, or civilizations or ethnicities—*not* religions”) (“CS,” p. 3). In the event, however, that (as one may be forgiven for considering somehow more likely) one could nonetheless find a measure of negativity toward religion in Said’s work and in some of his followers, it would become legitimate to wonder whether religion, for Said, did not come to function in the way the Orient had for Orientalists, occupying an analogous position in relation to it. This, at any rate, is William Hart’s harsh argument, which seeks perhaps to “rescue” not so much “Islam from Orientalism” as much as religion from Said. Hart writes that

6. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1979), p. 2; hereafter abbreviated *O*.

7. See also W. J. T. Mitchell, “Secular Divination: Edward Said’s Humanism,” in *Edward Said: Continuing the Conversation*, ed. Homi Bhabha and Mitchell (Chicago, 2005), p. 107. William Hart describes how “according to Said, Vico construes beginning as a Gentile act that inaugurates a *secular* order of meaning that is other than the *sacred* order of meaning characteristic of Hebrew religion” (William D. Hart, *Edward Said and the Religious Effects of Culture* [Cambridge, 2000], p. 152). On Vico’s *New Science* as “the study of piety,” see Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, trans. Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch (Ithaca, N.Y., 1968), §1112, p. 426. See also Joseph Mali, *The Rehabilitation of Myth: Vico’s “New Science”* (Cambridge, 1992), p. 116.

8. “Vico’s Hebrews stand apart from the gentiles as a philosophical *arche*, rather than in their midst as a teleologically driven nation” (Frederick R. Marcus, “Vico and the Hebrews,” *Vico Studies*, no. 13 [1995]: 26; and see Mali, *The Rehabilitation of Myth*, pp. 75, 92). The similarities with Renan—himself a great admirer of Vico—and with his assertions on the Semites should be obvious; see, for example, *O*, p. 143.

if we substitute religion for the Orient, those things to be feared with religious-cultural effects (sacred violence), and those things to be controlled (by quarantine and trivialization), then the irony will be evident. Said Orientalizes religion at the very point that he rescues Islam from Orientalism.⁹

Following this familiar logic, and in order to be coherent within his own critique, Said should have extended more respect toward, showed more consideration for, religion. He should have refrained from denigrating it and from advocating secularism, refrained perhaps from being a secularist altogether. He should not have “orientalized” religion. Why? Apparently because reversal could amount to the same thing it opposes on an entirely leveled playing field (as if Orientalism were “primarily a practice of essentializing, a discursive practice stripped of its entanglement with specific forms and institutions of power in which Orientalist discourse was and remains embedded”),¹⁰ and the kind of hegemony for which the Orientalist was an agent can be reproduced, in the very same terms, by his adversary of comparable weight, the Occidentalist (a well-known professional occupation, I suppose, benefiting from departmental support, government and corporate funding all over the non-Western world, and so forth).¹¹ Only within such a perspective can Said be accused of doing to religion what the Orientalist did to the Orient, which would presumably justify the wagging of impatient fingers at him. And what would those answer who argue that Said did not, in fact, primarily concern himself with religion, who say that religion was not his most direct or even crucial adversary? Given the importance of religion today, given, if you will, “the return of the religious” (to be praised or opposed, as if that made a significant difference), they may suggest that religion simply persists as an error or an illusion, an archaism and an aberrant fossil, the opiate of the people or what not, and thereby vindicate the fact that Said had little to contribute to a better understanding of this phenomenon’s significance—or indeed lack thereof. Everything occurs here as if nothing more needed to be said about religion either because religion is not what Said made of it or because the truly important (and somehow surprisingly unrelated) matter is instead secularism. Or, all things being equal again, culture. Let me already indicate that I do not find the alternatives compelling since I read Said somehow differently.

9. Hart, *Edward Said and the Religious Effects of Culture*, p. 86.

10. Nadia Abu El-Haj, “Edward Said and the Political Present,” *American Ethnologist* 32 (Nov. 2005): 541.

11. Akeel Bilgrami has just written an illuminating critique of Occidentalism; see Akeel Bilgrami, “Occidentalism, the Very Idea: An Essay on Enlightenment and Enchantment,” *Critical Inquiry* 32 (Spring 2006): 381–411.

It is my contention (and not, I think, a particularly original one) that Said was participating in the general movement of opposition to religion carried by the terms *secular* and *secularism*. As W. J. T. Mitchell pointed out, in the broad range of critical realms Said engaged and struggled against—and Orientalism is obviously the first—“it is the domain of religion that Said so often characterizes in terms of fairly reductive stereotypes: dogmatic, fanatical, irrational, intolerant, and obsessed with mystery, obfuscation, and human helplessness in the presence of the inscrutable divine (or demonic) design.”¹² Let us recognize, then, that Said was quite unequivocal in battling for secularism and against that “curious veering toward the religious” which he was, he claimed, witnessing, in arguing against “this basically uncritical religiosity,” and in discerning “religion as the result of exhaustion, consolation, disappointment” (*WTC*, pp. 292, 291). Yet, and this will be my second contention, in waging that battle Said appears simply to have forgotten the lesson taught by this most important of books, namely, *Orientalism*. For if *Orientalism* teaches us anything, it is that Orientalism is secularism.

Covering Religion

Clearly, Said’s use of the term *secular* was idiosyncratic, although I am not aware of his ever deploying, and certainly not in this particular case, that key phrase of bona fide academic rhetoric, “what I would like to call x.” If Said called or named secularism, if he talked about what he allegedly *chose* to call secularism and secular criticism out of some personal commitment, it is first of all because he wished vocally to oppose secular criticism to religious criticism, because he did think and write about religion, about theological and quasi-theological structures and institutions, religious and quasi-religious issues and practices. How idiosyncratic was that? It is hardly a matter of contention that the particular performance that consists in naming anything new or anew is not simply the result of individual choice or authority, the humanist version of a divine fiat.¹³ Jonathan Z. Smith may have argued, in typically polemical fashion, that the word *religion* is a “second-order, generic concept,” that it is “a term created by scholars for their intellectual purposes and therefore is theirs to define” (others, again, may try to follow suit by advocating the use of *culture* instead of *religion*), but Said himself never attributed such power to scholars alone.¹⁴ On the con-

12. Mitchell, “Secular Divination,” pp. 103–4.

13. Said’s critique of the Orientalist as taking on the role of a “secular creator” can be found in *O*, p. 121.

14. Jonathan Z. Smith, “Religion, Religions, Religious,” in *Critical Terms for Religious Studies*, ed. Mark C. Taylor (Chicago, 1998), p. 281; for a proposal to substitute *religion* with *culture*, see Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India, and “The Mystic East”* (London, 1999), and Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (New York, 2000).

trary, Said made very clear that no matter how significant the lone individual voice might be (“Unlike Michel Foucault,” Said wrote, “I do believe in the determining imprint of individual writers upon the otherwise anonymous collective body of texts constituting a discursive formation like Orientalism” [O, p. 23]),¹⁵ it is never the sole or even a privileged source of its own social power nor the ground for its own institutional and political authority. Hence, Julien Benda is “surely wrong . . . to ascribe so much social power to the solitary intellectual whose authority, according to Benda, comes from his individual voice and from his opposition to organized collective passions.” At best, the individual is “an isolated voice out of place but very much *of* that place, standing consciously against the prevailing orthodoxy” (WTC, p. 15). Being himself “of that place,” Said argues against any simple notion of authority or emancipation, against a gesture that would have the individual pull himself up by his own bootstraps, as it were, and will himself into a new or autonomous lexicon or private vocabulary, a metajargon, if not a metalanguage. It may be true, therefore, that “the word *secular* has usually served as a figure for the authority of a putatively universal reason, or (narratively speaking) as the ideal endpoint of progress in the intellectual domain.”¹⁶ And it is undoubtedly true that forms of authority and domination have changed. Usually, however, or rather, *hegemonically*, the word *secular* has functioned in another history and served another role, and with enduring authority. It has operated in a differential relation with, indeed, in opposition to, the word *religious*, doing so within a specific religious tradition (on which more anon), where it had earlier served to mark that which is separated from the sacred or theological. This is so to such an extent that it is not yet possible to argue for any secular position without articulating some understanding of, precisely, religion. Hence, when Talal Asad argues for “an anthropology of secularism,” when he claims that the secular is “neither continuous with the religious that supposedly preceded it (that is, it is not the latest phase of a sacred origin) nor a simple break from it,” it is emphatically because the *argument* needs to be made, and it needs to be made against “the idea that the secular is a mask for religion, that secular political practices often simulate religious ones,” and, finally, because what needs to be shown is that “the ‘religious’ and the ‘secular’ are not essentially fixed categories.”¹⁷ No one has done more than Asad (and, arguably, Said) to show *in the same gesture* the urgency of reflecting on religion and the religious *as well as* on the secular and all its

15. See also Abu El-Haj, “Edward Said and the Political Present,” p. 547.

16. Robbins, “Secularism, Elitism, Progress, and Other Transgressions,” p. 27.

17. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, Calif., 2003), pp. 25, 26, 25.

ensuing distinctions. As Said wrote in another context, “from these distinctions,” between the religious and the secular, between religion and politics, indeed, from distinctions “which were given their hegemony by the culture, no one could be free” (*WTC*, p. 14).

Now, when Hart argues that Said was hostile to religion, that he was in effect orientalizing religion, it seems once more that this was Said’s special whim or initiative, a fit of personal inconsistency or creative idiosyncrasy that managed, intentionally or not, to put religion where Orientalists had put the Orient. Here again the power of the sole individual appears momentous and quite arbitrary. So perhaps the question we should ask is how such an apparently random substitution—of the religious or of the secular—became possible. How did religion come to function in this analogous way for Said (and for others as well)? More precisely, and to be somehow Foucauldian about it, given the quasi-inextricable links that discursively join and disjoin the secular to the religious, how did this configuration imprint its relevance upon the Orient? And vice versa: How did the Orient come to occupy or announce the place of religion? Finally, whence and why is the generic term *religion* shared by Said, by his followers and critics alike? Clearly, we are concerned here with particular historical traditions and not just with generic religions. The secularized religion of which Said writes, for example, which was the privileged agent of Orientalism, is after all not just any religion. Nor was it just any theology or culture (two generic terms that poorly *translate*, that rather level and flatten, the process whereby differences are found and produced, as well as the nature of their content). It was Christianity, and more precisely, Western Christendom.¹⁸

More than an idea, Christianity is not quite an essence that would be determined by a selfsame logic. It is rather a massively hegemonic—if divided, changing, and dynamic—corporate institution, a set of highly plastic institutions, and the sum total of philosophical and scientific, economic and political achievements, discursive, administrative, and institutional accomplishments. Its complexity, singularity, and specificity cannot therefore be doubted (“culture and imperialism,” “societies for, rather than against, the state,” and so forth).¹⁹ Is it not, for example, Christianity that had (and continues to have) a significant and multilayered investment in one particular Oriental city, one particular Oriental land, and one (or two) particular

18. This argument has been made most famously, perhaps, by Karl Löwith in *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* (Chicago, 1949). It was further substantiated by Amos Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, N.J., 1986).

19. See Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993), and Pierre Clastres, *La Société contre l'état: Recherches d'anthropologie politique* (Paris, 1974).

religion(s)? And is it not *this* secularized religion—Christianity—that has elaborated and deployed a peculiar discourse *about itself* and *as it understood itself and its history* (in relation to the privileged others to which Said attended), a discourse that consisted in the critique of religion, that articulated itself as secular criticism? To ask such questions is not to suggest that formations of the secular did not occur in other cultures or that some cultures (or religions—assuming we can effectively differentiate between the two) are incapable of so-called secular progress. Nor is it meant to judge whether the entire non-Western world is or is not religious (who wants to know? And who *translates*? In the name and use of what power? And for what purpose, finally?). Rather, it is to underscore the fact that one particular religion is the one whose self-identification with, whose understanding and enforced institutionalization of that most Latin of words, shaped the current, hegemonic use and dissemination of that very same word and its ensuing division of the real, what Jacques Derrida has called *mondialatinisation* and Peter van der Veer “the globalization of Christianity.”²⁰ This one but complex and, again, divided entity has turned against itself, as it were, emancipating itself as if by fiat, by renaming itself religion rather than preserving the name it had long given itself as *vera religio*: Christianity.²¹ Christianity—what Lynn White has referred to as “our detailed and massive continuity with the European Middle Ages”—is a problematic name, no doubt, but it is a very different generic, because self-ascribed, category.²² The term, deployed perhaps most efficiently as a target of criticism by Friedrich Nietzsche, is thus perfectly understandable in its limits and divisions and even more so in its *effects*.²³ It is, at any rate, much less inaccurate historically than the generic *religion* (and even more so than *the West*, for example). Christianity, then, actively disenchanting its own world by dividing itself into private and public, politics and economics, indeed, religious and secular.²⁴ And Christianity turned against itself in a complex and ambivalent series of parallel movements, continuous gestures and rituals, reformist and

20. See Jacques Derrida, “Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of ‘Religion’ at the Limits of Reason Alone,” trans. Samuel Weber, *Acts of Religion*, trans. Weber et al., ed. Gil Anidjar (New York, 2002), pp. 42–101, and *Conversion to Modernities: The Globalization of Christianity*, ed. Peter van der Veer (New York, 1996).

21. See Serge Margel, *Superstition: L’Anthropologie du religieux en terre de chrétienté* (Paris, 2005).

22. Lynn White, Jr., “The Legacy of the Middle Ages in the American Wild West,” *Speculum* 40 (Apr. 1965): 191. See Mary Anne Perkins, *Christendom and European Identity: The Legacy of a Grand Narrative since 1789* (Berlin, 2004).

23. See Friedrich Nietzsche, “*The Anti-Christ*,” “*Ecce Homo*,” “*Twilight of the Idols*” and *Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge, 2005).

24. See José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago, 1994). All of Casanova’s “case studies” are Christian cases.

counterreformist, or revolutionary and not so revolutionary upheavals and reversals while slowly coming to name that to which it ultimately claimed to oppose itself: religion.²⁵ Munchausen-like, it attempted to liberate itself, to extricate itself from its own conditions; it *judged* itself no longer Christian, no longer religious. Christianity (that is, to clarify this one last time, Western Christendom) judged and named itself, it *reincarnated* itself as secular.

Christianity did so—we all know this, of course—at the very moment it was freeing itself, spreading its gentle and loving white wings ever further in a world unsuspecting of enchantment or disenchantment, on the efficient heels of earlier missionaries and merchants and by means of the diligent agency of its own “unequal languages” and translators,²⁶ redemptive missionaries of old and new kinds (self-described Christians all, good or bad, but always faithful and devoted), its industrious foot soldiers, and its imaginative and unique scientific achievements. All of these were marvelous possessions, indeed, of the one and only “religion of technology.”²⁷ There were ships, guns, and bombs (later demography and census, airplanes and bigger bombs, and hospitals, too, to take care of the wounded) that testified not to technological superiority, as some persistent and insidious evolutionism would claim, but to a particular mode—a decisive comportment—concerning the usage and deployment of technology.²⁸ Imperial and impervious, there, where it extended itself, Christianity was as unique and worldly as ever (for not every culture practices the Balinese cockfight, perfects the water fountain or the use of medicinal plants, or radically transforms and expands weapons and their efficacy or the institution of slavery). Colonizing the world since 1492, Christianity slowly granted other communities and traditions—those it exploited or converted, massacred and “civilized,” enslaved and exterminated—new structures of authority and domination, new and newly negotiable configurations of power. It granted them the name it had only ever attributed to itself, the very name of religion.²⁹ It—a complex and even inchoate, often unintentional “it,” but one

25. Compare Peter Harrison, *“Religion” and the Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1990).

26. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore, 1993), p. 189.

27. See David F. Noble, *The Religion of Technology: The Divinity of Man and the Spirit of Invention* (New York, 1999).

28. Compare Clastres, *La Société contre l'état*, esp. chap. 11, and see also Timothy Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley, 2002).

29. In addition to the writings mentioned in these notes, first and foremost those of Asad, much is owed on this question to the works of Jean and John Comaroff, David Chidester, Peter van der Veer, and Tomoko Masuzawa, as well as, I argue below, Edward Said.

geographically proximate in its origins and governing base and massively unified across national and denominational boundaries—did all this in its own name, in the self-avowed name of Christianity, even if not always openly or even knowingly so. Christianity did this, by means of soldiers and missionaries, scholars and politicians, writers and merchants. It, and not just any religion, not just any culture, did it all by determining the terms of ensuing negotiations (as well as the conditions and objects of resistance), the terms of discourse—chief among them, *religion*.

A gloss on Foucault (which I provide in brackets in the following quote) may be of assistance here, particularly if we recall that, in contrast with Said, Foucault has hardly been seen as advocating a form of Occidentalism and even much less as fostering an essentializing of the West or of Christianity. Foucault's words—published in English in the same year as Said's *Orientalism*—will, I think, further clarify that which still “ought to make us wonder today”:

We are often reminded [but are we really? by whom?] of the countless procedures which Christianity once employed to make us detest the body [and, more recently, religion]; but let us ponder all the ruses that were employed for centuries to make us love [that is, also, hate] sex [and indeed religion], to make the knowledge of it desirable and everything said about it precious. Let us consider the stratagems by which we were induced to apply all our skills to discovering its secrets, by which we were attached to the obligation to draw out its truth, and made guilty for having failed to recognize it for so long. These devices are what ought to make us wonder today.³⁰

Following Foucault, then, one would have to reconsider what it might mean today to be for or against religion, the way Christianity proposed to make its followers into adversaries for or against the body, the way it made them love some bodies and detest others, as if *free* from the body and, later, from religion. Perhaps the awkward and singular logic of this possible but peculiarly unworldly gesture could be highlighted were a community of interpretation to claim and proclaim, in turn, that they are against spirit or, better yet, against culture and against language? Would it be considered meaningful to be, say, for politics and for economics but against knowledge? Or, as Martin Heidegger made clear, against technology? This clever *agencement* of approval or refusal, this rhetoric of freedom as critique—yes, no—about which Nietzsche had much to say, is what Foucault is asking us

30. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley, vol. 1 of *The History of Sexuality* (New York, 1990), p. 159.

here to consider anew. Following his insight, I propose to take for granted that the religious and the secular are terms that, hopelessly codependent, continue to inform each other and have persisted historically, institutionally in *masking* (to invoke Asad's term) the one pertinent religion, the one and diverse Christianity and Western Christendom in their transformations and reincarnations, producing the love (or hatred) of religion. Like that unmarked race, which, in the related discourse of racism, became invisible or white, Christianity invented the distinction between religious and secular and thus *made* religion. It made religion the problem—rather than itself. And it made it into an object of criticism that needed to be no less than *transcended*.

The two terms, *religious* and *secular*, are therefore not masks *for* one another. Rather, they function together as covers, strategic devices and mechanisms of obfuscation and self-blinding, doing so in such a way that it remains difficult, if not impossible, to extricate them from each other—or us from either of them—as if by fiat. Ultimately, of course, their separation would be detrimental to an analytics of the power they enable, support, and maintain, an understanding of its strategic and disciplinary operations. It certainly has been detrimental thus far. Along with the discourse of and on religion (hardly limited to academia, as we know), secularism and secular criticism are unified practices that continue to function in the way Christianity has for centuries, give or take more or less important differences and complexities. Secularism is part of a discourse of power and of institutions that are bent on making us *invest* religion, making us *cathect* it (positively or negatively or even—one can almost see Freud [and Saint Paul] smiling—*indifferently*), bent on making the knowledge of it desirable (or, for that matter, unnecessary), making us know or recognize religion for what it is (mostly bad, but others would say, as they did about the Orient, *good*; anti-Semitism and philo-Semitism are never far apart, and “Napoleon tried everywhere to prove that he was fighting *for* Islam”), and mostly, for what it is *not*: Christianity, secularized (*O*, p. 82). Most importantly, moreover, secularism is a name Christianity gave itself when it invented religion, when it named its other or others as religions. And the question now remaining is whether there was a specific religion that was particularly targeted with this name. Was there one (or two) that was—and may still be—more heavily cathected? Is there still? And if so, which?

In order to answer this question, I will soon turn to *Orientalism* and argue that it must be read as a critique of Christianity, secularized or not. This should not be surprising. Orientalism is secularism, and secularism is Christianity. Said took us on these syllogistic steps, substantiating his claim in various ways and first of all by pointing out that as a field of study, “in the Christian West, Orientalism is considered to have commenced its formal existence with the decision of the Church Council of Vienne in 1312 to

establish a series of chairs in ‘Arabic, Greek, Hebrew, and Syriac at Paris, Bologna, Avignon, and Salamanca’” (*O*, pp. 49–50). Moreover, Christianity—which is to say, Orientalism—invented both religion *and* secularism. Consider, for example, how, recasting the sacred/secular divide as a distinction between the Hebrews and all other nations (in effect, turning on its head Augustine’s political theology, which located the Jews outside of the history of salvation, outside of the Age of Grace), Vico—whose historicism and cultural relativism was significantly “preparing the way for modern Orientalism”—at once reinscribed and participated in the transformation of “the distinction between Christians and everyone else” (*O*, pp. 118, 120).³¹ More generally, in its secularized form, Christianity invented (or fashioned or produced or enforced or yet definitely institutionalized by way of knowledge and law—whichever of these you think is better to describe the massive power of hegemony and its operations) Judaism and Islam—the Jew, the Arab, or, to be perfectly historical about it, the Semites—as religions and, more precisely, as being at once *the least and the most religious of religions. And of races*. Subsequently, it cleared the Jews of theological and religious wrongdoings (heaping upon them, in its more elaborate versions, the new anathema of racial inferiority) and made Islam the paradigmatic religion, the religion of fanaticism. In doing so, Orientalism—that is to say, secularism—became one of the essential means by which Christianity failed to criticize itself, the means by which Christianity *forgot and forgave* itself.

This endeavor, needless to say, was not about academic politics (and do consider that the unavoidable disingenuousness of this last remark in this publishing context does not make it less valid). It was no academic or scholarly matter, nor simply the subject of epistemic shifts. It took place as Orientalism “accomplished its self-metamorphosis from a scholarly discourse to an imperial institution,” its self-metamorphosis from Christianity to secularism (*O*, p. 95). It took place, as *Orientalism* demonstrates, *across* discourses of knowledge and power; as culture *and* imperialism, economics *and* politics, religion *and* secularism. It still does today.

Said repeatedly, *oppositionally*, pointed to the significance of a ruling elite, which employed or made use of an intellectual elite—seldom unwill-

31. On the place of the Jews in Christian theology, and its enduring effects, see Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley, 1993), and see also Amnon Raz-Krakotzkin’s groundbreaking “Exile, History, and the Nationalization of Jewish Memory,” the annual Meyerhoff lecture at the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, 1 Feb. 2006. Raz-Krakotzkin further elaborates on the role of Hebraism in this history, and most specifically on its importance as one of the proximate ancestors of modern Orientalism; see Raz-Krakotzkin, *Censorship, Editing, and the Text: Catholic Censorship and Hebrew Literature in the Sixteenth Century* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem, 2005); finally, for the current context, see Raz-Krakotzkin, “The Zionist Return to the West and the Mizrahi Jewish Perspective,” in *Orientalism and the Jews*, ed. Ivan Davidson Kalmar and Derek J. Penslar (Waltham, Mass., 2005), pp. 162–81.

ing executioners—who together massively created, expanded, sustained, and legitimized a vast structure of political, economic, and cultural domination over the Orient and ultimately over most of the world (“the accommodation between the intellectual class and the new imperialism might very well be accounted one of the special triumphs of Orientalism” [O, p. 322]).³² Yet Said did not intend thereby to legitimate the enduring activities of the very same—even if new and improved, indeed, plastic—structures of domination and oppression, legitimated by the same institutions (academic, literary, and economic) bent on advocating or simply endorsing the continuing domination of suspiciously analogous ruling elites, themselves employing or using (different? more culturally diverse?) intellectual elites (academics or journalists and, today, definitely privileging the latter) and their highly imaginative, collaborative, and distracting abilities. These same elites, occupying the same places and functions (and a not altogether different dress code), were and remain devoted, wittingly or not, to the training and exercise of the power of the few over the millions, indeed, billions of individuals conveniently located in the very same neighborhoods, the very same areas of the world colonized and administered, massively transformed by good and bad Christians since 1492 (national and denominational distinctions being, of course, essential to uphold in order to deny the hegemonic unity of a joined, if also divisive and divided, lasting endeavor). Like Nietzsche, Said was oppositional to the extent that he was only attacking victorious causes. And—is this really news?—secularism *is* a victorious cause. It participates in a set of devices that make religion (the religion of the others, that is, or their nationalism, primitivism, militarism, and terrorism) more of an ominous danger than, say, the dealings of the ruling and no-longer-welfare states, the practices of gigantic corporations and their national and international backing, to say nothing of homeland security and its consequences. Secularism—external *and* internal colonialism—is produced and reproduced by way of law and rhetoric, national and international institutions, chief among them the modern states, those hardly declining commercial and security apparatuses.³³ Secularism continues to be fostered by the same institutions and structurally identical elites, who work out of the same centers of power that earlier spread their “civilization” and continue to expand their mission, be it economic, military, cultural, humanitarian even. It still has the bigger bombs—it *is* the history of

32. For a striking example of such intellectual agency, which incidentally constitutes one of the most powerful addendums to the question of Germany’s contribution to Orientalism, see Sheldon Pollock, “Indology, Power, and the Case of Germany,” in *Orientalism: A Reader*, ed. Alexander Lyon Macfie (New York, 2000), pp. 302–23.

33. See Ashis Nandy, “The Politics of Secularism and the Recovery of Religious Toleration,” in *Secularism and Its Critics*, ed. Rajeev Bhargava (New Delhi, 1998), pp. 321–44.

bombing—and the bigger police, security, military, and financial forces.³⁴ It builds the bigger walls. It leads the war on terror. Minimally, it maintains its hold on the institutions that preserve and reproduce a power structure and a ruling and intellectual elite that suffers or holds with true *Gelassenheit* (and a few international laws and trade agreements) those billions in abject poverty, judging unsatisfactory their inability to escape the dark theological ages out of the depth of which they allegedly seek artificial comfort and solace. Or the ground of their misguided resistance. *There* would be the problem, along with the demonstration of the poor man and woman's inability to restrain their theological or quasi-theological failings.

Thus to uphold *secularism* (or, for that matter, *religion*) as the keyword for critical endeavors and projects today is, I am afraid, not to be all that worldly. It is to oppose the world rather than that which makes it what it is not (or at least not yet). It is to oppose the world and those who inhabit it rather than those who make it unlivable. It is, at any rate, certainly not to deal with local and worldly situations, if by that one means the world populated by the oppressed (and by a perfectly secular play of market forces gently trickling down on them), those all too often considered to have no critical distance vis-à-vis their own lives, “archaic” ideals, and, in fact, worlds. Indeed, how could religion ever be considered otherworldly? How could otherworldliness ever be considered otherworldly? In what world? As being-in-the-world, religion is not inequality. Inequality is. Religion—whatever goes under that name, but we will see that it is not just any name, not just any religion—cannot be willed out of worldly existence by secularists who deny its fictional or oppressive escape while affirming the cultural and political importance of that other fictive production based on infinite credit and credulousness: literature—or is it the market? To uphold secularism today is to erase the fact that secularism continues to serve inequality. It serves mostly, and certainly it has *historically* served, one particular religion (the missionizing activities of which have anything but slowed down, by way of secular institutions of higher learning, the Pope, other corporations, or, if there is a difference, those megachurches) and one intricate economic game, one elite-serving apparatus, namely, the secular nation-state (and the agencies and corporations to which, Hannah Arendt—and Marx—were already reminding us, it continues to cater), the discourse of power that legitimates itself and presents itself as secular, as if *indifferent* to religion yet *producing religion as a (generic) problem*.³⁵ Secularism's keywords—consensual words for one keyword among others—are *human rights, international law, sovereignty, democracy*, and so forth, all of

34. See Sven Lindqvist, *A History of Bombing*, trans. Linda Haverty Rugg (New York, 2001).

35. This, once again, is the lesson that Asad taught us in *Genealogies of Religion*.

which are avowedly secular projects that have yet to achieve equality. Is it possible to be for or against these? However reductive this might be as well, it is not difficult to see that such words are the new or resuscitated names of a not-so-new civilizing mission and that they work in tandem with the negated binary terms they seek to oppose or repress (but in fact *produce*, as Foucault taught us). It is not that Said's words on religion recall the Orientalists' Orient as if by *analogy*. Rather, religion *is* the Orient, the imperial realm to be governed and dominated, bombed, reformed, and civilized. That is why it is so easily possible to quote Said and substitute *religion* for the *Orient*:

As momentous, generally important issues face the world—issues involving nuclear destruction, catastrophically scarce resources, unprecedented human demands for equality, justice, and economic parity—popular caricatures of [religion] are exploited by politicians whose source of ideological supply is not only the half-literate technocrat but the superliterate Orientalist. [O, p. 108]

What does secularism make us hate, then? Racism, nationalism, sexual inequalities, and, alright, religion. But whose religion? And where? And who, finally, advocates secularism? Who opposes racism, nationalism, sexual inequalities (sartorial rights, in particular), and religion, and from where? With what effects? What are the geopolitics of that struggle for justice, the struggle against oppression of women and, yes, against anti-Semitism? Said's own keywords—*Orientalism*, *Imperialism*, *Secularism*—may not be so different from each other after all (“Long ignored as an object of Said scholarship, in favor of the concept of Orientalism or the rubric of culture and imperialism, this term [that is, secularism] and its significations are now coming to be seen as a constellation that animates Said's critical practice as a whole” [“CS,” p. 2]).³⁶ To repeat, then: Secularism is Orientalism. And Orientalism is Christianity. It is Christian imperialism. Said knew it, too (as I shall attempt to show in the remainder of this essay), by which I mean that he *demonstrated* it. Only he forgot that he had; he forgot that he had written the book on it, a book dedicated, as it were, to religion.

Orientalism: A Critique of Christianity

In fact, you cannot be a philologist or doctor without being *anti-Christian* at the same time.

—FRIEDRICH NIETZSCHE, *The Anti-Christ*

So, what in the world is religion? For purposes of expediency and clarity, I will restrict my pursuit to *Orientalism* because the “Semitic Orient” still

36. See for a diametrically opposed view based on the same premises, Hart, *Edward Said and the Religious Effects of Culture*, p. 8.

holds a special place, a paradigmatic one, in fact, in relation to other, even if sometimes more fatally loved, colonized and missionized areas; and Melville's "metaphysics of Indian-hating" does come to mind here.³⁷ *Orientalism* reveals that religion is a discursive device that enables the workings of power, or, in Timothy Fitzgerald's more contained formulation, "religion" derives its plausibility and apologetics as a generally viable analytical category, in the face of a mass of contradictory evidence, from its mystifying function in western liberal capitalist ideology."³⁸ So much for a news flash. But this was 1979 and the return of the religious (read, the Iranian revolution) had yet to become obvious to otherwise oblivious observers, who had managed to convince themselves that religion had vanished from this enlightened world. The device—religion—operates in such a precise way that the key distinctions it produces or participates in producing, whether epistemologically, politically, or legally, are made to disappear and reappear in tune with their tactical usefulness. One key distinction is, again, the distinction between religious and secular (as in, "we" are secular, "they" are religious). Another is that between nationalism and religion. Underscoring or advocating one term means forgetting or indeed masking the other. (Is it possible not to notice—in spite of Azmi Bishara's tireless efforts to remind us—that American foreign policy, like its British, French, and other seasoned and enduring counterparts, has long been intent on strategically playing Islam against Arab nationalism, ethnicity against religion, and national against religious unity? Is it possible not to notice that religion and nationalism are strategically divided and must therefore be considered in their joined operations?) Hence, the secularization of religion, for someone like Ernest Renan, who, finding inspiration in Vico, was "determined to be as Christian as he once was, only now without Christianity and with what he called 'la science laïque' (secular science)" (O, p. 134),³⁹ is the enduring condition for the rise of nationalism.

What is a nation? It is the separation, the transcending of particularity, whether race or religion, that is done in the name of a new universal.⁴⁰ Such a motion from particular to universal, that paradigmatically and self-consciously Christian trajectory, should of course not jar in a writer as Christian

37. See Richard Drinnon, *Facing West: The Metaphysics of Indian-Hating and Empire-Building* (1980; Norman, Okla. 1997).

38. Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, p. 6.

39. I have modified Said's translation of "la science laïque" as "lay science" to "secular science" for obvious reasons of accuracy and emphasis.

40. See Stathis Gourgouris, *Dream Nation: Enlightenment, Colonization, and the Institution of Modern Greece* (Stanford, Calif., 1996).

or post-Christian as Renan, or Comte, or countless others. Said made this perfectly clear as well: “No less than Schlegel, Wordsworth, and Chateaubriand, Auguste Comte—like [Flaubert’s] Bouvard—was the adherent and proponent of a secular post-Enlightenment myth whose outlines are unmistakably Christian” (*O*, p. 115). Another key distinction, subsumed under the nation for Renan and others, but one more directly engaged in *Orientalism*, is that between race and religion. Indeed, with the rise of secular science “race, color, origin, temperament, character, and types overwhelmed *the distinction between Christians and everyone else*” (*O*, p. 120; emphasis added).⁴¹ Thus, it is not simply that “the old religious patterns of human history and destiny and ‘the existential paradigms’” were “reconstituted, redeployed, redistributed in the secular frameworks.” It is not simply the case that what “Orientalism *did* and what Orientalism *was*” consisted in the retention of “an undislodged current in its discourse, a reconstructed religious impulse, a naturalized supernaturalism” (*O*, p. 121). It is not simply the case because that particular “religious impulse” did not originate in just any religion. It was not the substitute or offspring of just any past history or culture. Rather,

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, redispersed, and re-formed by such disciplines as philology, which in turn were naturalized, modernized, and laicized substitutes for (or versions of) *Christian supernaturalism*. [*O*, p. 122; emphasis added]

Does this all mean that Said (in my reading, at least) denies agency to non-Christians, attributing it only to an all-powerful, determining Christianity? Absolutely not. Yet, before rushing to all-too-common counterfactual arguments about the equal-opportunity devastation *potentially* unleashed by *all* cultures if they only had the chance, Said elaborates a theory of agency that permits dwelling on historical occurrences, on the actual deployment of hegemonic power in its specific modes and strategies and in its effects. We have seen that Said draws our attention once again to the fact

41. Incidentally, this description is one of the rare moments in which Vico’s role and position in the emergence of modern Orientalism is made explicit in Said. With Vico, “the classifications of mankind were systematically multiplied,” yet these were also “refined beyond the categories of what Vico called gentile and sacred nations” (*O*, p. 120). Much as he bracketed sacred history out of the “new science,” Vico bracketed the Jews (and Semitic languages) out of history; see, for example, Vico, *The New Science*, §62, pp. 37–38.

that the scholar (or the individual, dominantly male) does not create his own language, his own institutional location, *ex nihilo*. In doing so, Said underscores what the increased usage of the word *agency* in academic discourse has tended to ignore, namely, one of the major semantic dimensions of that word. He suggests that “the Orientalist could be regarded as the special agent of Western power as it attempted policy vis-à-vis the Orient.” In some cases, the Orientalist could even perform his role “as a kind of secret agent *inside* the Orient” (*O*, p. 223). The scholar, indeed, the intellectual class in the Orient, as well as *of* the Orient, the Orient itself, can all be understood as agents, double agents, even, and therefore as having agency. But the operations of such agencies function across disciplines and discourses, between knowledge and power, without much deference or respect for the Weberian notion of the modern separation of spheres. The equally divided agency that Orientalism is, such that it persists in its being, pursues and fosters the case of religion (or of secularism, for that matter) in ways that have remained insufficiently explored. “That is why questions about what it is possible for agents to do must also address the process by which ‘normal persons’ are constituted.”⁴² But there are many agencies, of course, other than the individual, even though this, too, along with its operations, remains understudied (in Partha Chatterjee’s terms, one could say that we still do not have, but perhaps desperately need, “a Kalabari anthropology of the white man” no less than we need to confront the difficulties involved in an “anthropological description of Christianity”).⁴³ The description and critique of the network of agencies, of Christian agencies, that produce and institutionalize the division between religious and secular constitute, to my mind, one of the cores of Said’s argument. And it is one that was (and remains) difficult to keep in mind. Even for Said himself.

Said did not make it easy on his readers, but, rather than fault him, we should probably admire the fact that here too he was working against all odds. As I have already suggested, Christianity made itself increasingly forgettable by foregrounding religion as a generic category and a target of criticism (and look today at all the smart bombs aimed at a generic and leveled “monotheism”), doing so at the same time it was arguing for the end of religion in its own practice, often pushing its colonial endeavor explicitly as a kind of critical secularism, a secular science.⁴⁴ No wonder, then, that

42. Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, p. 13.

43. Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* in *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus* (New Delhi, 1999), p. 17, and Margel, *Superstition*, p. 31.

44. See, for example, Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New Delhi, 1989).

religion seems mostly absent from Said's own pathbreaking account of the operations of Orientalism. Indeed, as "a style of thought," Orientalism drafted into its service "a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators," but apparently neither priests nor theologians, neither religious scholars nor missionaries. And what these free agents, these critical and secular agents, diligently produced were "elaborate theories, epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts," but no religious accounts. They produced "the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively," they "designated Asia or the East, geographically, morally, culturally," but not, or so it would seem, religiously. Certainly, "the scientist, the scholar, the missionary, the trader, or the soldier" all had a collective hand in this production (*O*, pp. 2, 3, 31, 7). They all had a hand in the emergence of the Orient, but the theological relevance, the religious dimension of that not-so-invisible hand and its products, appears almost marginal, an afterthought.

There emerged a complex Orient suitable for study in the academy, for display in the museum, for reconstruction in the colonial office, for theoretical illustration in anthropological, biological, linguistic, racial, and historical theses about mankind and the universe, for instances of economic and sociological theories of development, revolution, cultural personality, national or religious character. [*O*, pp. 8–9]

This conspicuously marginal, almost belated status of the religious and of "religious character" would explain why Orientalism functions as "a *distribution* of geopolitical awareness into aesthetic, scholarly, economic, sociological, historical, and philological texts," why it deploys a series of "interests" by means of "scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description" (*O*, p. 12). "Indeed, the very project of restriction and restructuring associated with Orientalism can be traced directly to the inequality by which the Orient's comparative poverty (or wealth) besought scholarly, scientific treatment of the kind to be found in disciplines like philology, biology, history, anthropology, philosophy, or economics" (*O*, p. 150). It would explain why the "distinctive differences" at stake are "differences between races, civilizations, and languages" (*O*, p. 233), with religion nowhere to be found or heard of.

Or, perhaps unreadable and invisible in its magnitude, religion is everywhere.⁴⁵ After all, "can one divide human reality, *as indeed human reality*

45. This was Vico's suggestion, of course, which divided the entire world of nations on the basis of (the newly universalized category of) religion, whether "revealed" or "pagan" (or "civil"). Hence, Vico dismisses as no more than "travelers' tales" (written only "to promote the sale of their books by the narration of portents") those claims to describes societies "without any knowledge of

seems to be genuinely divided, into clearly different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, even races, and survive the consequences humanly?" (O, p. 45; emphasis added). Do we not need to ask, therefore, "what other sorts of intellectual, aesthetic, scholarly, and cultural energies went into the making of an imperialist tradition like the Orientalist one? How did philology, lexicography, history, biology, political and economic theory, novel-writing and lyric poetry come to the service of Orientalism's broadly imperialist view of the world?" (O, p. 15). If, "as historians of science and knowledge have observed, the organization of scientific and learned fields that took place during the nineteenth century was both rigorous and all encompassing" (O, pp. 190–91), what of the field of religion? What of its force field? Is it not the case, in other words, that if we can (as in fact we must) treat "the cultural, historical phenomenon of Orientalism as a kind of *willed human work*" it may ultimately be because it has everything to do with a particular form of will and works, indeed, with faith and works (O, p. 15)?

In the early history of the Orient's making, Said states very clearly, "Christianity completed the setting up of the main intra-Oriental spheres: there was a Near Orient and a Far Orient" (O, p. 58). The secure distance at which even the *near* Orient could be held at bay by Western Christendom quickly vanished, however, as Islam came closer and closer, looming ever larger as a theological and political challenge prior to the Crusades that enabled its being reframed as *distant* and as it is to this day. Islam was *in* Europe (it still is: "the Orient and Islam are always represented as outsiders having a special role to play *inside* Europe" in marked contrast with, say, India, which "never provided an indigenous threat to Europe" [O, pp. 71, 75]), and it evoked mainly fear and terror. Christian Europe—or in Said's own words "Christianity," "Christians," and "Christian authors"—responded to Islam "with very little except fear and a kind of awe." This is why Islam is not simply an arbitrary moment chosen by Said for reasons of "personal investment." Rather, Islam is the key figure in the making of the Orient (and hence the Occident), indeed, a paradigmatic one. "The European encounter with the Orient, and specifically with Islam. . . . turned Islam into the very epitome of an outsider against which the whole of European civilization from the Middle Ages on was founded." And so, "given its special relationship to both Christianity and Judaism, Islam remained forever the Orientalist's idea (or type) of *original* cultural effrontery, aggravated naturally by

God." For Vico, "all the nations . . . believe in a provident divinity," for, indeed, "a nation of fatalists or casualists or atheists never existed in the world" (Vico, *New Science*, §§334, 602, pp. 97, 220). Interestingly, Mitchell suggests that "Vico's 'rational civil theology' is the best name for Edward Said's religion of reading and writing, humanism and democratic criticism" (W. J. T. Mitchell, "Secular Divination," p. 107).

the fear that Islamic civilization originally (as well as contemporaneously) continued to stand somehow opposed to the Christian West.” Thus, it was “with regard to Islam and the Islamic territories, for example, [that] Britain felt that it had legitimate interests, as a Christian power, to safeguard” (*O*, pp. 59, 75, 76, 260, 100). No Orientalism without Christianity, nor without Islam (or Judaism). But is Islam a religion?

It is quite striking to consider that, when reading *Orientalism*, the answer to this question is far from obvious. When describing the early Christian responses to Islam, Said emphasizes that it appears “a radically new form of life,” a “raw novelty,” and, more negatively, “a fraudulent new version of some previous experience, in this case Christianity” (*O*, p. 59). Said knows well that Islam was often considered a heresy and that this was more or less the full extent of its theological content, if it had any. Over the course of that early encounter, there undoubtedly emerged a “rigorous Christian picture of Islam” (*O*, p. 61), and it is from that picture, it seems, from that Christian picture, that Europe embarked on its Oriental journey. Having started with Islam, “it is as if, having once settled on the Orient as a locale suitable for incarnating the infinite in a finite shape, Europe could not stop the practice” (*O*, p. 62). The Christian theological dimension of Orientalism, and the way it has honed itself on Islam as a privileged object from its earliest stages, can hardly be doubted. But this does not mean that Islam is already understood as a religion. Quite the opposite. Among the many texts Said cites, we can mention a few as representative. The 1697 *Bibliothèque orientale* by Barthélemy d’Herbelot states quite explicitly that Muslims *claim the name of religion*, something to which they have in fact no right (“This is the famous imposter Mahomet, Author and Founder of a heresy, *which has taken on the name of religion*, which we call Mohammedan” [quoted in *O*, p. 66; emphasis added]). In 1787, the Comte de Volney published his *Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie*, “an almost oppressively impersonal document,” the climax of which “occurs in the second volume, *an account of Islam as a religion*” (*O*, p. 81; emphasis added). And recall Caussin de Perceval’s 1847 thesis “that the Arabs were made a people by Mohammed, Islam being essentially a political instrument, not by any means a spiritual one” (*O*, p. 151). Islam would thus be “an exclusively political movement,” void of any religious force (*O*, p. 152). Finally, in 1931, the German Orientalist Carl Becker still felt the urge to argue that “to understand Islam one needed above all else to see it, not as an ‘original’ religion, but as a sort of failed Oriental attempt to employ Greek philosophy without the creative inspiration that we find in Renaissance Europe” (*O*, p. 104). Hence, Said rightly comments on this enduring, if at times waning, Christian perspective, that far from being a religion, Islam would have been an “imitation of a Christian

imitation of *true religion*” (O, p. 66; emphasis added). This is how “the Orient is accommodated to the moral exigencies of Western Christianity,” how the Orient as a nonreligion and later as paradigmatically religious is shaped as an event within the history of religion. Not until the nineteenth century does the division so neatly marked (and also undone) today between a secular West and a “mystic East” (as Richard King recalls) come to establish itself so forcefully. Edgar Quinet may have put it most succinctly when he wrote in his 1832 *Le Génie des religions*: “L’Asie a les prophètes, l’Europe a les docteurs” (quoted in O, p. 79). But the phenomenon reaches much wider than Quinet’s own peculiar view. The series of transformations whereby Islam could *become* a religion, rather than be released “from the narrowly religious scrutiny by which it had hitherto been examined (and judged) by the Christian West” (O, p. 120), was a general one and included Napoleon’s identification with Muslims (“Nous sommes les vrais musulmans,” he proclaimed in 1798), his conviction that “he was fighting *for* Islam,” and his apparently “obvious veneration for the Koran” (O, p. 82). Positive or negative (and for scholars like Goldziher, Massignon, and Gibb, it was overwhelmingly, even if not exclusively, positive), Islam is at the center of the Orientalist imagination. That it is not alone there does not diminish its paradigmatic value. On the contrary. For whether understood as the twin image of the Jew in the anti-Semitic imagination or as the paradigmatic Semitic figure in its opposition to the Aryan, Islam remains the main target of Orientalist schemes. As did the Jews, as Said never tires of recalling.⁴⁶ It is that which must, but perhaps cannot, be understood, the privileged site of an endless enterprise of explanation and preoccupation. More importantly, it is the target of all the efforts of what Said calls the “secularized religion” of Orientalism.

From the promotion of Christian knowledge and the continuous, if more aleatory missionary activities of the British and French empires, to the “reconstituted theology” and “natural supernaturalism” of the eighteenth century (O, p. 114) and the claim by the German romantics that “it was Indian culture and religion that could defeat the materialism and mechanism (and republicanism) of Occidental culture” (O, p. 115); from the “borders of Christian Europe” that “no longer served as a kind of custom house” (O, p. 120) to “the reconstructed religious impulse” of Orientalism as a whole and to the Orientalist’s celebration of “his method, and his position, as that of a secular creator, a man who made new worlds as God had once made

46. Although I am leaving it in the background in this essay, I have tried to follow the consequences of this related argument linking Orientalism (and Islamophobia) to anti-Semitism in my *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy* (Stanford, Calif., 2003).

the old" (O, p. 121), the subjects of Orientalism are "unmistakably Christian" (O, p. 115), but they are also mourning—or celebrating—the loss of their religion. "In other words, modern Orientalism derives from secularizing elements in eighteenth-century European culture" (O, p. 120). Which is to say that with the invention of new, comparative disciplines ("philology, anatomy, jurisprudence, religion" [O, p. 117]), Europe is discovering its own gods to be part of a different and much larger pantheon. It is discovering anew the old languages, which it can now classify in novel fashion: Aryan versus Semite. Indeed, "Arabic and Hebrew are Semitic languages, and together they dispose and redispense the material that is urgently important to Christianity" (O, p. 74). It is at this point—and at this point only—that Christianity can become one among many religions rather than the Church confronting Jews, Muslims, and other heretics. Said delves into the details of this transformation; if it is not the fulfillment of the law, it is at least the completion and achievement of Christianity—Renan and others might say its *aryanization*, too—in and through science, in and through Orientalism, such as it occurs in de Sacy ("he acted in his writing like a secularized ecclesiastic for whom his Orient and his students were doctrine and parishioners respectively" [O, p. 124]) and Renan (who "assimilated himself to philology according to his own post-Christian fashion" [O, p. 135], whose "study of Semitic [was] replacing his faith" [O, p. 140]). More importantly, what Said demonstrates by focusing on these key figures is that Orientalism is an enterprise that produces rather than reproduces religion, a general attempt by Orientalists "radically to recast into terms appropriate to the historical and intellectual circumstances of their own age, the Christian pattern of the fall, the redemption, and the emergence of a new earth which will constitute a restored paradise" (Renan, quoted in O, p. 138). *Wo es war*—where Christianity was, there is now religion.

Consider the titles of the works Said highlights. Whereas earlier Orientalists focus on travel and the discovery of the strange and foreign (Edward William Lane is still operating under this older regime of "pilgrims and pilgrimages," studying "manners and customs"), nineteenth-century Orientalists install the foundations of modern knowledge. Before sociology and anthropology, before literature even, there was the Orient as religion. Indeed, these Orientalists were quickly on their way to becoming experts on nothing but religion, creating in fact the very field of comparative religion and religious studies (Max Müller, Renan) as they made or unmade religions. Among "the innumerable Orientalist texts on Islam" (O, p. 109) it is therefore imperative to consider the founding texts of the modern making—the modern *covering* (to invoke another of Said's works)—of "religion": Quinet, *Le Génie des religions* (a "key text" and "a work that an-

nounced the Oriental Renaissance and placed the Orient and the West in a functional relationship with each other" [O, p. 137]); Constant, *De la religion*; Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites*; Duncan MacDonald, *The Religious Attitude and Life in Islam*; and so forth. At stake is the repetitive and performative power of a magisterial demonstration intent on arguing and showing that "the Semites are rabid monotheists who produced no mythology, no art, no commerce, no civilization," only religion (Renan, quoted in O, p. 142). Thus is established and sedimented that which had hardly been obvious earlier, namely, that Islam is, in fact, "a living and vital religion" (Hamilton A. R. Gibb, quoted in O, p. 281). Semites—that is, Muslims and Jews, but soon no longer the Jews—are nothing but a religion, the best and the worst of it.

But what, again, is religion? What is *a* religion? In this paradigmatic case, it is first of all something that, essential to the Orientalist vision, "could be studied apart from the economics, sociology and politics of the Islamic peoples" (O, p. 105). "History, politics, and economics do not matter. Islam is Islam, the Orient is the Orient" (O, p. 107). This tautological mantra ironically recalls that for which Islam is in turn praised or, more often, blamed: God is God. Before the work of Durkheim and other sociologists and anthropologists of religion, then, there was the work of Orientalism. It formulated the notion that a religion is not a nation, something that produced an insistence on the religious dimension of the Orient—and primarily, urgently of Islam. This had the effect, in turn, of diminishing, even erasing, the political dimension of Islam (and vice versa, as we have seen). That is why Arab or Islamic nationalism is said to be anything but political, why it is anything but nationalism, why it "lacks, in spite of its occasional use as a catchword, the concept of the divine right of a nation, it lacks a formative ethic, it also lacks, it would seem, the later nineteenth-century belief in mechanistic progress" (Gustave von Grunebaum, quoted in O, p. 297). Finally, a religion (which is to say, Islam as religion) is the quintessential enemy of secular civilization: "the sword of Muhammed, and the Kor'ān, are the most stubborn enemies of Civilization, Liberty, and the Truth which the world has yet known" (Reinhart Dozy, quoted in O, p. 151). One could thus conceive without difficulty of the following analogy (were it possible to claim that it is only an analogy): Islam is to Europe what religious criticism is to secular criticism, what religion is to secularism.

"My contention," Said says, "is that Orientalism is fundamentally a *political* doctrine willed over the Orient because the Orient was weaker than the West, which elided the Orient's difference with its weakness" (O, p. 204; emphasis added). Said was right, of course, but his statement can now be understood in a more exhaustive way. For on the one hand, what he *says* is

right, making clear the political, imperial dimension of Orientalism, making amply clear as well that nationalism, Arab nationalism in particular, was always a major target of Orientalist ire. What Said *does*, on the other hand, is to show and underscore how, essential to an understanding of that East/West difference in political, indeed, theologico-political terms, there is the active transformation of both East and West into religions, the conversion of Orientalism as Western Christendom into Orientalism as secularism (that is, as a new and improved, reformed and secularized Western Christendom). But this is no simple transformation, not a new and *equal* division of the world into religious entities. Rather, covering Islam means covering religion, making and masking it. That is one of the key, arduous, and momentous lessons of *Orientalism*.

Now, it is of course true that, as Tomoko Masuzawa has compellingly shown, Europe came to a distinct kind of self-consciousness through the operations we have been following. Whereas “for many centuries Europeans had a well-established convention for categorizing the people of the world into four parts, rather unequal in size and uneven in specificity, namely, Christians, Jews, Mohammedans (as Muslims were commonly called then), and the rest,” what came to pass in the course of the transformation Said so cogently describes is that “this conventional ordering began to lose its ruling authority.” Instead, argues Masuzawa, “there suddenly appeared an entirely new system, namely, a list of roughly ten to a dozen ‘world religions.’”⁴⁷ Like Said, Masuzawa underscores the peculiar status of Islam in the Orientalist, Christian, or secular perspective. In it, Islam oscillates between its complete lack of theological validity and a paradigmatic, extreme, religious fanaticism. But what Said shows is that the category of religion (albeit invisible at times) is part of a much larger apparatus that functions *across* Weberian divisions. It cannot therefore be reduced to the religious or to religions but must include rather a wider logic of contemporary, discriminating separations and divisions into nations, races, and cultures (as well as sexual difference, as Said also underscores). It is in the demonstration of the full extent of this complex and internally divided, highly hierarchical apparatus as it emerges from the Christian West, the power of which it strenuously opposes, that resides *Orientalism’s* momentous achievement. That is why Orientalism is no mere *political* doctrine (although it is that, too); it is also a *religious* one (and, to be sure, an economic and scientific one as well). To be more precise, then, before Claude Lefort asked about a “permanence of the theologico-political,”⁴⁸ Said demon-

47. Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago, 2005), p. xi.

48. See Claude Lefort, “Permanence of the Theologico-Political?” *Democracy and Political Theory*, trans. David Macey (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 213–55.

strated the persistence of Christianity as a singular deployment of that division in its multiple configurations, at once religious and secular. That is why *Orientalism* is a critique of Christianity and also why, if accessorially and marginally so, it is an essential work for the study of religion (not just of religious studies), that is to say, for an understanding of the global division between religious and secular (religion and race, religion and nationalism, religion and politics, and so forth). Had Said recognized his own considerable accomplishment, he would have had to acknowledge that his work was indeed critical of religion but that it was also, and for reasons of hegemony perhaps more profoundly, opposed to secularism. More precisely, though, Said could have refrained from being for or against religion, for or against secularism. Instead, and in truer Nietzschean fashion, Said would have had to become what he already was. He would have had to be—how is this for oppositional criticism?—anti-Christian.