
Said's *Orientalism* and the Study of Christian Missions

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In 1978 Edward W. Said (sah-eed) published his masterful and highly controversial book *Orientalism*, subtitled "Western Conceptions of the Orient."¹ In the quarter century that has followed, scholars in several fields have conducted an ongoing debate over the particulars of Said's thesis that Western scholarship about Asia, which he calls Orientalism, has historically "constructed" a false, demeaning, and self-serving representation of the Orient. Said (1935–2003) accuses the orientalists with using their false, fabricated body of knowledge to aid and abet the European and American domination of Asia. He writes with power and passion about his subject in a tone that has captivated and converted some and driven others to fiery dissent. Important in its own right, *Orientalism* is also important because of the quality of the debate it has inspired.² That debate has in some ways modified, in other ways softened, and in still other ways fleshed out Said's thesis so that his blunt attack on Western scholarly treatments of the Oriental "Other" has become a more balanced and useful tool for understanding how Western scholars have comprehended the peoples of the Orient. In light of this debate and the broad influence Said has exercised in the scholarly study of Western ways of "constructing the Other," the adjective frequently applied to *Orientalism* is "seminal."

A survey of issues and concerns debated by missiologists over the last twenty-five years, however, shows Said to be largely absent from the missiological literature. Many students of missions may not be aware to any extent of the Orientalism debate, which has taken place in journals and forums they do not normally read or attend. Others may have been put off by Said's unremitting attack on the West and reluctant to submit the history of missions to an attack of that nature. Still others may have written Said off as "just another postmodernist," a trendy savant of only passing interest. There are, to be sure, missiological studies that have made use of Said,³ but they do not constitute a trend, and there is no indication that Said or his critics and supporters have played a role in the study of missions comparable to their contribution to other fields.

The purpose of this essay is not to present yet another review of Said and his critics. It intends, rather, to point out a variety of ways in which the scholarly debate concerning Orientalism can contribute to the study of historical and contemporary international missions. It looks upon that debate as a tool for critical analysis and for cross-cultural reflection, a tool of potential value to the field of missiology.

Said's Critique

While Said did not invent the term "Orientalism" and was hardly the first to describe and criticize European orientalists,⁴ the term has become associated with his name far more than anyone else's. Orientalism, according to Said, is a bundle of interrelated characteristics. In a narrow sense, it is a centuries-old traditional body of knowledge created by European and, more recently, American writers who are considered experts on the Orient. They include scholars, novelists, travelers, diplomats, and missionaries, with scholars standing closest to the center of Said's

critical bull's-eye. According to Said, this unified, international body of knowledge describes Orientals as being uncivilized, unprogressive, immoral, passive, emotional, sensual, and an extensive list of other unsavory characteristics. This body of knowledge is embodied in what Said calls a "discourse," borrowing the term and some of his understanding of it from the French historian-philosopher Michel Foucault. Said focuses on the written discourses produced by orientalists and submits a significant number of them to a sharp, at times brutal, scrutiny. He also acknowledges, although with far less precision, that European policies and actions toward Orientals are a part of the orientalist "discourse."

Said emphasizes the traditional nature of Orientalism, which has been so powerfully embedded in Western thinking about the Orient from ancient Greece onward that it constitutes an unquestioned habit of mind. When it comes to Asia, in effect, the West wears a set of blinders called Orientalism. At points, Said contends that there is no real or actual "Orient"; it is merely a mythical discourse invented by Europeans on the basis of their hereditary fear of the Arabs and especially of Islam. At other times, however, Said clearly assumes that there is a real Orient and feelingly condemns the ways in which coercive, aggressive, and oppressive orientalists have misrepresented the Orient. At the end of the day, Europe and America have used this orientalist body of knowledge as a tool for establishing and expanding Western power in Asia; Orientalism is a tool of Western colonialism and imperialism.

Said, finally, stresses the dualistic nature of Orientalism, which dualism makes hard and fast distinctions between the "civilized West" and the "uncivilized East." Orientalism revolves around the distinction between Us and Them. Orientalists, as a consequence, assume that while the West is progressive and dynamic, the East is essentially stagnant and unchanging. Orientals, according to traditional orientalist discourse, are also ignorant, and they do not know themselves nearly as well as the orientalists know them. In one of his numerous summary descriptions of Orientalism, Said states that it is "the discipline by which the Orient was (and is) approached systematically, as a topic of learning, discovery, and practice." Or, again, it is "that collection of dreams, images, and vocabularies available to anyone who has tried to talk about what lies east of the dividing line" (p. 73).

Orientalism is a book that forces its readers to take sides, and no little part of the earlier debate that swirled around it amounted to either a passionate acceptance or rejection, usually clothed in apparently reasonable, academic dress. More recently, however, several scholars have built on Said to achieve a more useful understanding of the meaning and role of Orientalism. They have demonstrated, for instance, that there have been many "good" orientalists who wrote about Orientals with sympathetic understanding in spite of wider European prejudices. More recent scholarship has also found that many Asians actually contributed in various ways to sustaining Orientalism and that orientalist discourse has even been used in a variety of creative ways by Asians to counteract the power of Europe. Indian nationalists, for example, used orientalist descriptions of a non-violent and pacific India to encourage a nonviolent approach to national liberation. Scholars of Asia have also found, less hap-

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pily, that Asians at times developed their own versions of Orientalism, which they applied to other Asians. In the dying days of the Ottoman Empire, for example, the ruling Turkish elite articulated an "Ottoman Orientalism" that looked down on the other peoples of the empire as unprogressive, barbaric, and in need of modernization by the progressive, civilized Ottoman government.⁵ Many scholars are beginning to see that "Orientalism" as described by Said was actually but one instance of a larger assemblage of Western ways of dealing with the Other, be they Asians, Africans, the urban poor, Native Americans and aboriginals, Jews, or the many other peoples who stand at the margins of local, national, or global society.

The passionate debate over Said appears to have receded in the last decade or so. It has been replaced by passing references to him as the starting point or inspiration for new applications of the concept of Orientalism. It is this refined Orientalism that is of value to the historical and contemporary study of foreign missions.

Missionary Discourse and Orientalism

Turning to the possible uses that missiologists can make of Said's *Orientalism*, it is important to observe from the outset that missionary writings comprise a stream of discourse that displays many of the characteristics of orientalist discourse. The intensive search by missiologists and missionaries across the theological spectrum for ways to break with older missionary attitudes and discover more contextual ways to present the Christian message in and of itself suggests that traditional missionary discourse was a form of Orientalism. At various points, Said himself implies a

connection between Christianity, including Christian missions, and Orientalism. He claims, for example, that while Orientalism was primarily a secular discourse, it originated in Christian religious discourse and that even in its secularized forms "it also retained, as an undislodged current in its discourse, a reconstructed religious impulse, a naturalized supernaturalism" (p. 121). He thus considers Orientalism to be a set of structures that are "naturalized, modernized, and laicized substitutes for (or versions of) Christian supernaturalism" (p. 122). Said also links Protestant missions in the Middle East to European colonial expansion into the region (p. 100). While Said does not focus on the religious elements of Orientalism or give them anything more than passing, oblique notice, the hints and passing comments concerning the religious aspects of Orientalism deserve closer consideration. Hart has written, thus, of "Said's cryptic, fugitive, but persistent reference to the sacred, religious, theological, and Manichaeic."⁶

Said apparently sees one of the key links between Orientalism and Christianity to be the dualistic, Us/Them nature of orientalist thinking mentioned above. This dualism stands close to the heart of what he finds both fundamental to and fundamentally objectionable in Orientalism. It comprises the constant lens by which the orientalists describe and understand the supposedly eternal, unchanging essence of what it means to be an Oriental. Orientals, that is, by their very nature are traditionally described by orientalists as being inescapably backward, degenerate, and completely unequal to progressive, moral European civilization (see p. 206). Said refers repeatedly to the dualistic nature of Orientalism, and in his summary description of four widely held

key orientalist “dogmas,” he lists dualism first and describes it as being “the absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior” (p. 300). In his brief account of how Europe came to see the Orient “as its great complementary opposite,” Said cites a long list of sources of the dualistic vision, with the first item on his list being the Bible and “the rise of Christianity” (p. 58).

Protestant missionary discourse has historically exhibited a dualism that closely parallels the orientalist dualism described by Said. Missionary writings have consistently divided the world into two antagonistic, incompatible realms of Christian and non-Christian. Missionary literature, especially up to 1920, frequently describes the non-Christian world as being immoral, benighted, idolatrous, pagan, barbaric, infidel, and so on down a long list of other terms that may be summarized best in that old-fashioned word “heathenism.” Although the term “heathen” fell out of fashion after World War I, it is a word with a long history, going back at least to the ninth century according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which lists fifteen forms of the term from heathendom to heatheny. The nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature of missionaries, as students of that literature know, is brimming with descriptions of the nature of heathenism, frequently comparing contemporary heathenism with that described by Paul in Romans.

Dualistic missionary discourse, thus, shares a number of important characteristics with orientalist discourse. It is a traditional body of knowledge employing a specialized language and embodied in a set of self-aware organizations, institutions, and

practices. Those who share in Christian missionary discourse take it to be composed of essential, unchanging truths, such as the claim that heathenism now is exactly what it was in Paul’s time or that idolatry now is exactly what it was in the time of the Hebrew prophets and psalmists. Like Orientalism, missionary discourse traditionally has been aggressive, and derogatory in its treatment of Asians of other faiths, expressing attitudes that have frequently also included negative views of indigenous cultures. Said states at one point, as we have seen above, that Orientalism designates “that collection of dreams, images, and vocabularies available to anyone who has tried to talk about what lies east of the dividing line.” Missionary discourse, as both written and practiced, similarly contains the “dreams, images, and vocabularies” used by missionaries and other Christians to describe those who are “east of the dividing line” of the faithful versus the infidel.

The parallels between missionary and orientalist discourses are close enough that Said draws on theological terms to describe Orientalism. He, for example, calls the basic tenets of Orientalism “dogmas.” He accuses a key orientalist of having a “metaphysical attitude.” He specifically accuses yet another orientalist of articulating the European drive to dominate the Orient in the “Romantic redemptive terms of a Christian mission” (pp. 300–301, 283, 172). Missionary and orientalist discourses, in other words, share significant characteristics that locate both of them in the larger family of European discourse. It can only be concluded that Said’s *Orientalism*, as a seminal, widely influential work on Orientalism, deserves serious, intensive attention from those engaged in the study and practice of missions.

Issues Relevant to Missiology

Missiologists will find Said unremittingly negative and vociferously critical of Western thought as it is revealed in Orientalism. Some, at least, will hesitate to introduce his approach and views into the realm of mission studies, fearing that to do so will result in nothing more than another round of “missionary bashing.” Impassioned rejection of Said by those who once wore the title “orientalist” with pride echoed for many years through the journals and tomes of several disciplines, particularly West Asian area studies.⁷ Yet it is recognized today that in his one-sided, judgmental, polemical, almost liturgical attack on the institutions of Orientalism, the very nature of his passionate assault continues to stimulate an enormous range of creative responses. Scholars of India, China, and Japan have found themselves looking at their subjects with fresh insights, and even where Said is wrong, his mistakes provoke thought and inspire revisions.⁸ *Orientalism* is far from a perfect piece of work, but it has a central integrity to it that kindles new avenues of research and reflection. From a Christian missiological perspective, there is something prophetic in Said, as secular as he himself may be, that recalls the ancient Hebrew prophets’ passionate pursuit of justice and truth.

Realizing that missiologists will also have to work on Said, softening, cutting, and trimming as needed, still we recognize that he directs our attention to a number of critically important areas. First, Said emphasizes the relationship of knowledge and discourse to power. He rejects Orientalism not simply because it misrepresents the real Asia but because that misrepresentation has led to the colonial, imperial oppression of many Asians in general and Arab peoples in particular. The people of Asia have suffered and continue to suffer at the hands of the orientalists. In terms of missions, insights gained from reading Said’s *Orientalism* might well inspire us to ask, How has missionary discourse in both words and deeds embodied and used power? This question applies with particular force to missionary relationships with “native” churches. In Thailand, as just one example, there is the case of a mainline American mission that dissolved itself in the 1950s, only to have its senior members lodge themselves in

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positions of power in the Thai national church, which as a consequence did not become functionally independent for another quarter of a century. There is also the example of an evangelical mission, also in Thailand, that refused to allow its churches to establish their own denominational structures on the premise that the New Testament does not mandate such structures—while the mission itself remained a distinct supra-church body that retained functional power over the churches in its own hands. How much more powerful were the missions in the age when the missionaries still judged “their” converts as being tainted with heathenism? How did that power influence the communication of the Gospel? How did it influence the historical emergence of Asian churches? Said helps to expose the missionary relationship to the convert church as a power relationship, one that does not always benefit the churches.

Second, and related to the point just made, Said makes it

clear that Orientalism functions as blinders that restrict the orientalists’ vision so that they tend to see the worst in the East and the best in the West. In missionary literature we sometimes discover a similar tendency to describe perceived weaknesses among Asians as being essential traits of their Asian-ness. Asian achievements, when they are acknowledged at all, are written off as the work of particular individuals. Said views Orientalism as an “archive” that embodies the European experience with the Orient and from which has been created a set of types and typical responses. He calls these responses “encapsulations” or “bins,” and he observes that orientalists use these categories to make sense out of the totality of their experiences with Orientals. In those cases where orientalists discover something new or unusual, they will invariably recast the experience in terms of the negative stereotypes of Orientalism (pp. 58, 102). It seems evident that earlier generations of missionaries brought their own cognitive bins and encapsulations with them from home and rendered the alien world of the mission field into a dualistic, blinkered version of the familiar. It is well worth studying the nature and extent of missionary prejudices. How have those prejudices, where they have existed, influenced missionary relationships with the people of other cultures and faiths? How have they influenced missionary relationships with the churches they founded? To what extent have such prejudices been a barrier to the international missionary movement?

Third, Said accuses orientalists of having what he calls a “textual attitude” that falsely assumes “that the swarming, unpredictable, and problematic mess in which human beings live can be understood on the basis of what books—texts—say.” Orientalists, he claims, depend on this textual attitude when they encounter “something relatively unknown and threatening and previously distant.” “In such a case,” Said writes, “one has recourse not only to what in one’s previous experience the novelty resembles but also to what one has read about it” (p. 93). True to the general thesis of *Orientalism*, Said understands this textual mentality to represent yet another dualistic orientalizing strategy for defining (negatively) the “essence” of the Orient. His argument raises an important question concerning the role of the Bible in the work of traditional Protestant missions. Missionary literature well into the twentieth century was liberally seasoned with quotations and passing references to the King James Version of the Bible, and missionary writers clearly relied on it as a medium for understanding heathenism and justifying to themselves and others their attitudes and actions toward the heathen. What, then, is the role of the Scriptures in missional relations with people of other cultures and faiths? Is it fair to say that missionaries in the past have frequently misused Scripture, turning it into an ideological textbook? If fair, what has been the impact? If not fair, how do we understand historical missionary uses of the Bible? Said, in any event, has the value of encouraging us to look at the biblical text as a historical factor in missionary behavior and thinking.

Fourth, Said describes the relationship between orientalists and the Orient as being one of “intimate estrangement.” The orientalists knew the Orient well, even intimately, but still felt superior to it and essentially different from it. Said argues that this sense of estrangement, in particular, comprised a distinguishing characteristic of the orientalist tradition that was handed on from generation to generation of orientalists (pp. 248, 260). The letters and reports of nineteenth-century missionaries, at least in Thailand, reflect a relationship to local cultures that is hauntingly similar to Said’s “intimate estrangement.” The missionaries knew the people, spoke their languages, ate their food,

visited their homes and villages, and spent much of their daily lives in close proximity to the “natives.” But they seemed never quite to forget that those natives were representatives of a less advanced and heathen nation. They described families who worked at single-family mission stations as being “alone” and “isolated,” even though they lived in the midst of thousands of local people. Again, Said’s observations raise important questions about the relationships of missionaries to local cultures, local people, and local Christians. Did they live in “intimate isolation”? If so, how did that relationship influence the reception of the Christian faith by local peoples?

Space constraints forbid fuller exploration of other Saidian themes. It is important to mention, however, examples of at least two ways in which other scholars have built on and corrected Said’s work. First, Ussama Makdisi has written an intriguing description of what he and others term “Ottoman Orientalism.” He uses the term to describe the ways in which the ruling elite of the Ottoman Empire, on the one hand, resisted European Orientalism, while they, on the other hand, created a parallel Orientalism with which they defined themselves as the creative, dynamic, modernizing element of the empire and described other peoples as backward, violent, and traditionalistic stumbling blocks to modernization.⁹ Makdisi provides us with an example of how Asians took over European racist, orientalist thinking as their own and used it against Asians. Churches in the so-called Third World provide what appears to be a parallel phenomenon to the Asian use of Orientalism against other Asians. In many parts of the world, convert churches have historically defined people of other faiths as “outsiders” who are damned to eternal punishment and suffering. In Buddhist nations, at least, such Christian attitudes have been a serious impediment to the sharing of the Gospel and, to an extent, forced Christian minorities to live in their own theological ghettos sealed off religiously from their larger societies.

Second, along the same line of reasoning, but more positively, we have already noted that Asians now and then made creative, positive use of Orientalism. Richard Fox has thus noted that in British India the Sikhs accepted the British stereotype of them as militant and militaristic and in turn fostered these traits and ethos among themselves to resist British occupation. Fox faults Said for failing to “map” ways that Orientalism itself became a weapon in the Asian arsenal of resistance to European colonialism.¹⁰ Can it be argued, by the same token, that Asian Christians have appropriated positive aspects of missionary discourse and put them to good use in the communication of the faith in their own contexts—as well as in the life of the church more generally?

Building on Orientalism

Lying between the extremes of enthusiastic converts to a full-blown Saidianism and the absolute rejectionism of those who cannot abide the book or the man, the reaction of the academic community at large to Said’s *Orientalism* has been a pensive, appreciative “yes, but” response. His work, precisely because it has prodded the thinking of so many others, has become central to the scholarly enterprise in several fields of study, to the point

that it is not even mentioned in so many words; his insights are now simply assumed. For reasons described above, missiologists will do well to subject *Orientalism* and the larger literature it has inspired to their own scrutiny. It can be expected that some will respond with a “no, never” and others with a “yes, always” reaction. One trusts, however, that the majority of mission scholars will take Said’s passionate negativism with the requisite grain of salt and realize that, “Yes, Said is in many ways correct, but, *no*, he has not told the whole story, has told parts of it incorrectly, and has failed to reach the proper conclusion in other places.” Said is seminal partly because of the questions he inspires. Engaging Said, grappling with him, will surely lead to fruitful explorations of difficult but exciting issues in the study of missions.

There is one final return that might be expected from closer study of Said by missiologists. One of the greatest strengths of *Orientalism* has been the way in which it ignores the boundaries

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between scholarly disciplines. It combines aspects of history, sociology of knowledge, literary criticism, and other fields, so that when today one reads Said, one is reading a shared work that has had a powerful impact on global intellectual thought. When one reads the wider literature related to Said, Asian names abound. At the same time, Said draws on postmodernist thinking without apparently being a “real” postmodernist (he commits the crimes of “essentializing,” writing a “universalizing metanarrative,” and being a closet “realist” who believes there is a real Orient). Working through Said, then, opens one to much wider cognitive horizons, ones that missiologists will surely want to explore so as to better understand how the Gospel relates to the world. Communication of the Gospel, we now understand, always requires sensitive appreciation of context. Said’s *Orientalism* has become one important source for reflection both on our own histories and contemporary situations and on our relationship as Christian communicators to those with whom we would communicate.

Missiological readings of *Orientalism*, in sum, offer missiologists the opportunity to reflect critically on their own field of study. Those readings raise new questions and look at old questions in new ways. They offer missiologists the opportunity to engage contemporary intellectual thought, which is immediately relevant to their own enterprise. Said and *Orientalism*, that is, present a patently Asian challenge to missiologists. Said addresses them, albeit indirectly, as potential orientalists themselves, and he seeks to reorient their perception of their subjects, their field of knowledge, and their research methods. Said’s challenge is a powerful, prophetic one, and if he overstates and even misstates his case at times, the issues he raises are crucial to the study of Christian mission and ministry in Asia and in the rest of the world.

Notes

1. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (1978; reprinted with a new afterword, London: Penguin Books, 1995). Page references in the text are to the 1995 edition.

2. For one listing of key works in the debate over Said’s *Orientalism*, see Valerie Kennedy, *Edward Said: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), pp. 162–73.

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3. See, for example, Jonathan Ingleby, "The Involvement of Christian Missions in Education: Colonial Ploy or Commitment to the Poor; Historical Resources in the Contemporary Debate," *Journal of the Henry Martyn Institute* 18, no. 2 (1999): 48–61.
 4. See Donald P. Little, "Three Arab Critiques of Orientalism," *The Muslim World* 69, no. 2 (1979): 110–31.
 5. See Ussama Makdisi, "Ottoman Orientalism," *American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (2002): 768–96.
 6. William D. Hart, *Edward Said and the Religious Effects of Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2000), p. ix.
 7. For early rejections of Said, see, for example, Malcolm H. Kerr, review of *Orientalism*, by Edward W. Said, *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 12, no. 4 (1980): 544–46; and Bernard Lewis, "The Question of Orientalism," *New York Review of Books* (June 24, 1982): 49–56. One of Said's best known critics is James Clifford. See, especially, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1988), 225–76. For a summary of criticisms of Said and *Orientalism*, see Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (London: Verso, 1997), 34–73.
 8. See, for example, Arif Dirlik, "Chinese History and the Question of Orientalism," *History and Theory* 35, no. 4 (1996): 96–118; Milica Bakić-Hayden, "Nesting Orientalisms: The Case of Former Yugoslavia," *Slavic Review* 54, no. 4 (1995): 917–31; and Gyan Prakash, "Orientalism Now," *History and Theory* 34, no. 3 (1995): 199–212.
 9. Makdisi, "Ottoman Orientalism," pp. 768–96. See also Bakić-Hayden, "Nesting Orientalisms," pp. 917–31.
 10. Richard G. Fox, "East of Said," in *Edward Said: A Critical Reader*, ed. Michael Sprinker (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 146, 152.
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