The Birth of Orientalism (review)

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compares Nursi with Thomas Merton very successfully and shows how their interpretation of prayer is intimately connected with social justice and results in social action. Ian Kaplow considers the possibility of a better world that is based on Nursi’s ethics and understanding of justice.

In brief, this book is an introductory work and a guide to Nursi’s views on justice and theodicy. It is an important approach to his ideas on these topics.


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With the passage of time, the title *Orientalism* in Edward Said’s famous (or notorious) book of that name appears increasingly unfortunate. Giving the term the Foucauldian meaning of an alienating stance taken by the European “self” toward the Middle Eastern “other,” Said went on to argue that the Orientalist scholarship undertaken by Western scholars in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries largely served the purpose of imperial domination. It is true that in his book Said confined his attention to the Middle East, but both he and his epigones extended the thesis to include other parts of Asia. So strong was Said’s influence for a while that “Orientalism” began to acquire the meaning of a willful ignorance and distortion of the East on the part of Westerners. Evidence may, of course, be found for this thesis in this particular chapter of East-West interaction, but the more important point is that this particularity is by no means representative of the much broader and vastly more nuanced field of Oriental studies. This is not at all to deny the imperialist tendencies of some Orientalist scholarship; but to tar the whole field with that unnuanced brush is both inaccurate and misleading.

Urs App’s, in *The Birth of Orientalism*, follows in the tradition of authors who, by displaying the vast background against which the encounters between Asia and Europe took place, give the lie to attempts such as Said’s at narrowing what is in fact a very broad and deep history. In so doing, he joins the company of scholars like Raymond Schwab (*La Renaissance Orientale* [Payot, 1950]), Wilhelm Halbfass (*India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* [State University of New York Press, 1988]), Jarava Lal Mehta (*India and the West: The Problem of Understanding* [Scholars Press, 1985]), and J. J. Clarke (*Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought* [Routledge, 1997]). In contrast to Halbfass and Mehta, Apps’ account of the encounters between Asia and Europe remains Eurocentric in that he is concerned with various European reconstructions and evaluations of Asian religions and key personages and themes, but not with the other side of the dialogue. Indeed, it would be false to characterize App’s attempt as being dialogical at all, concerned as it is entirely with European thinkers and their appropriation of Asian religious ideas and texts.

The other focal point of the book is that it is religious ideology, rather than political or economic motives that, according to App, provides the central drama and agenda of these encounters. Even though there are a few philosophers chosen for
consideration like Voltaire and Diderot, it is their thoughts on Asian religions rather than philosophy or politics that is the center of App’s interest in this book. Needless to say, this is a partial history of East-West interaction in this period. Much else was examined—philosophical ideas of monism and nondualism, questions of civil society in the state, and matters of race and gender, to mention just a few topics—but that is not the focus of this book, which asserts that it was religion that was the center of interest in these particular discussions.

A curious feature of the book has to do with its title—the birth of Orientalism. The author is well aware that the communication between Asia and Europe goes back to classical antiquity and to Hellenism, and he acknowledges that “the present book does not claim to furnish a history of orientalism as a whole. Its much more modest aim is to elucidate through relatively extensive case studies a crucial phase of the European encounter with Asia: the century of Enlightenment” (p. xi). In point of fact, App covers, selectively, a fairly broad period of cultural history stretching from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, although the case studies as such start with Voltaire in the eighteenth century and conclude with the French scholar and author Constantin Volney (1757–1820), whose book Les Ruines was widely read and was broadly influential. Of course, when the birth of something is announced, one is curious to know about the creature or creation in question. “Orientalism” after Said has acquired a particular and rather skewed meaning, namely European discourse about Asia serving as an appendage to imperialism in the area. One of the aims of this book is to radically question and deconstruct this definition and to argue that the European encounters with Asia had a far broader and more nuanced character than that described by Said. But if the definition of “Orientalism” is broadened, then it is obvious that Orientalism taken more widely to mean European discourse about the East predates the eighteenth century.

A vast amount of careful and meticulously documented research has gone into App’s case studies, research that demonstrates that there were a variety of motivations and points of interest in the European discussion of Asia—the missionary interest of Matteo Ricci in China and of Roberto de Nobili and Bartholomaeus Ziegenbalg in India; the cultural-historical goal of the deist Voltaire of relativizing the religious authority of the Bible and of Christianity and of showing that true religion had to be natural and rational, and thus accessible to all cultures; the religious-historical aim of Diderot of describing a pan-Asian religion that mixed features of Brahmanism and Buddhism, which, according to him, had a largely quietist and world-denying character; and the global-theological interest of Anquetil-Duperron, author of the greatly influential Oupnek’hat, a two-volume Latin translation of the Upanishads that impressed Schopenhauer among many others, and who was one of the early pioneers in the field of comparative theology. There are other important figures whom App discusses, like the scholar of Chinese religions Joseph De Guignes, or the British administrator John Holwell, but their contributions are probably of greater interest to historians of religion.

The Western engagement with non-Abrahamic Asian religions—that is, excluding its contacts with Judaism and Islam for the moment—is both protracted and deep. App focuses largely on the eighteenth-century French chapter of this history
though there are references to influential British scholars like William Jones (1746–1794), founder of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784, and Charles Wilkins (1749–1836), whose translation of the Bhagavad Gītā in 1785 had a great impact on the cultural and literary imagination of Europe and America. (See Amit Chaudhuri’s new introduction to the Folio Society 2011 edition of the Gītā, at www.foliosociety.com.) As in all hermeneutical encounters, the background contexts of the protagonists shape the reading and the reception of key Chinese and Indian texts. In the restricted space at my disposal, I can only mention a few aspects of the rich eighteenth-century history of modern Orientalism, which App carefully and painstakingly documents. One of the many contributions that his work makes is the demonstration that it is quite mistaken to think that modern European writing about the East, using contemporary tools of scholarship, starts in the late eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries as an appendage to European imperialism, as is often believed in the wake of Said’s book. There is also an implicit critique of the view that colonialism had necessarily to be accompanied by Eurocentric chauvinism. Rather, App attempts to show that at least in certain influential intellectual circles there was a move away from Eurocentrism and triumphalism as Biblical and Christian authority declined, and Christianity itself was beginning to be seen within the larger map of world religious history.

App goes on to argue that eighteenth-century Oriental scholarship was the culmination “of a centuries-long gradual broadening of perspectives beyond the sphere circumscribed by Abrahamic religions and the Bible,” and goes so far as to assert that these developments produced a “paradigm change” in Europe’s self-regard (p. xiii). Not only did the eighteenth century witness the founding in 1795 of Europe’s first secular institution for the autonomous study of Oriental languages divorced from the ambit of Christian theology and Biblical studies, the École Spéciale des Langues Orientales Vivantes in Paris; it also gave rise to the rapid growth of disciplines like philology and linguistics, Sinology, and Indology, as well as the creation of university departments specializing in them. Whether these academic developments were symptomatic of a broader “paradigm change” in the way Asia was generally viewed relative to Europe is debatable. After all, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, Hegel was arguing that the arc of world history moves from East to West and that Christianity represents the telos and fulfillment of world religions. And for almost a century from Hegel to Max Weber, at least in German circles, a belief in European exceptionalism held sway. In France, Comte and the social philosophers he influenced, Lévy-Bruhl and Émile Durkheim among them, found little use for India or China in their “positivistic” philosophies.

Still, on the whole, App is right to argue that evolving ideas and images of Asia’s religious landscape changed the worldview and self-perception of many of Europe’s thinkers at the time, though not perhaps quite as dramatically as he asseverates. Nowhere was this more evident than in the Romantic movement in Germany and England in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in such philosophers and poets as Herder, Goethe, Schelling, Novalis, the Schlegel brothers, Wordsworth, and Coleridge. This Romantic current remained a strong force in European life as a counter-discourse to the more “official” view.
The shifting landscape is particularly evident in the obsession with origins, a preoccupation both of the Romantics and of thinkers like Voltaire and the French encyclopedists. Where did our languages and religions come from? How did they evolve? And what does this evolution tell us about cultural identity and the trajectory of European life? These were questions that largely preoccupied the thinkers of the time. The cultural historian Raymond Schwab, in his influential *La Renaissance Orientale*, which App cites, argued at great length that the search for origins both of language and of religions was motivated by intellectual curiosity, but also by the expectation of a cultural regeneration of Europe coming from the Orient. The discovery in Europe of the richness of Sanskrit grammar and philology aroused hopes that Sanskrit might perform a parallel role to that of Greek language and culture in the first Renaissance: hence the rapid expansion in the numbers of university chairs of Indology and Sinology in Germany and France over a short period of time. And with the discovery and close study of Chinese and Indian texts, the pendulum swung gradually from the cultural arrogance of Hegel to the admiration for Asian culture of Schopenhauer, Paul Deussen, and Max Mueller. App mentions the case of Constantine Volney (1757–1820), influential in French cultural and political circles, who regarded the Bible as an imitation of a far older Veda emanating from the East, and his view of Christianity “as a relatively insignificant and local religion based on local varieties of solar myth” (p. xiv).

In all, Urs App has provided us with a first-rate and expertly documented study in the history of modern Orientalism. Students of comparative philosophy and of East-West interaction in general stand greatly in his debt. It is to be hoped that his work will serve as a foundation for complementary studies in the areas of philosophy and political thought that might round out the picture of Asia’s influence on Europe. But equally, this study should serve as a spur to scholars of Asia, both indigenous and foreign, to promote their side of the conversation in terms of how these European ideas and images were received and assimilated in Asian contexts.