

1 *Article*

2 Orientalism: have recent developments in the study of Islam gone beyond Said's seminal  
3 critique of 'Orientalism'?

4 **Fatima Rajina**

5 <sup>1</sup> Kingston University London, f.rajina@kingston.ac.uk

6

7 **Abstract:**

8 This paper undertakes a critical analysis and evaluates the recent developments in the study  
9 of Islam and how it has gone beyond *Orientalism*; as Martin and Ernst remark in the preface  
10 and acknowledgements of *Rethinking Islamic Studies: from Orientalism to*  
11 *Cosmopolitanism*<sup>1</sup> that the last three decades – after the publication of *Orientalism* in 1978  
12 – “has been a liberating experience for us as scholars initially trained in narrowly textual  
13 ‘Orientalist’ approaches, as we have been forced by circumstance to address many issues of  
14 contemporary political and social relevance.”<sup>2</sup> However, I will also acknowledge the  
15 alternate perspective that these developments may not have gone beyond Said's *Orientalism*,  
16 but have rather reinforced and maintained - and have “decidedly worsened”<sup>3</sup> - the very ideas  
17 Said introduced in *Orientalism* because of issues such as: Islamic fundamentalism and the  
18 aftermath of 9/11, and how the study of Islam has been influenced by these issues in modern  
19 times thus returning to the Orientalist approach. I will look at the history of Orientalism in  
20 the study of Islam, then the emergence of space for self-representation, and then I will look  
21 at the current study of Islam. Esposito argues that Orientalism has taken a new form, and no  
22 longer romanticizes the Middle East as having sandy deserts where genies, thieves and evil  
23 sorcerers vied after scantily clad princesses amid a backdrop of white palaces and peasant-  
24 ridden streets, as presented in the film ‘Aladdin.’<sup>4</sup>  
25

26 **Keywords: Orientalism, postcolonialism, Islamic Studies, Islam, representation,**  
27 **Muslims, history**

28

## 29 **1. Introduction**

30 Edward Said introduces ‘*Orientalism*’<sup>5</sup> as a discourse, which, through a broadly  
31 sociological, economic and historical perspective, is ‘a style of thought based upon an

---

<sup>1</sup> Carl W. Ernst and Richard C. Martin, *Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism*. (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., viii.

<sup>3</sup> Ken Shulman, “Q&A/Edward Said: Roots of the West's Fear of Islam”. *New York Times*, 11<sup>th</sup> March, 1996. Available online: <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/03/11/news/11iht-qanda.t.html> [Accessed 14th October 2018].

<sup>4</sup> *Aladdin* (1992) Film. Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker. USA: Walt Disney Pictures.

<sup>5</sup> Said, E. (1978) *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon). In order to make a distinction, I will refer to Said's *Orientalism* in italics whereas Orientalism will be referring to the field.

32 ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time)  
33 "the Occident." Thus a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists,  
34 philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the  
35 basic distinction between Orient and Occident as the starting point for elaborate theories,  
36 epics, novels, social descriptions, and political accounts concerning the Orient, its people,  
37 customs, "mind," destiny, and so on.<sup>6</sup> According to Said, the discipline of Orientalism can  
38 be defined as a hostile ideology in Western scholarship, which promotes the 'West-and-  
39 Islam' dualism, Western superiority, and the idea that others are less human, by nature in  
40 order to justify some structured patterns of domination and exploitation.<sup>7</sup> In his book, Said  
41 summarises four prevalent dogmas that Western studies of Islam suffer from:

42

43 'First, Orientalism stresses the absolute and systematic difference between the  
44 West—which is rational, developed, humane, superior—and the Orient, which is  
45 aberrant, undeveloped, inferior. Second, abstractions about the Orient, particularly  
46 those based on texts representing a classical Oriental civilization, are always  
47 preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern Oriental realities. Third, the  
48 Orient is eternal, uniform and incapable of defining itself; therefore it is assumed  
49 that a highly generalized and systematic vocabulary for describing it from a  
50 Western standpoint is inevitable and even scientifically 'objective'. Fourth, the  
51 Orient is something either to be feared, or to be controlled by pacification, research  
52 and development, or occupation.'<sup>8</sup>

53

54 However, as Esposito has pointed out above, Orientalism has taken a new form, and no longer  
55 romanticises the Middle East as having sandy deserts where genies, thieves and evil sorcerers  
56 vied after scantily clad princesses amid a backdrop of white palaces and peasant-ridden  
57 streets, as presented in the film 'Aladdin'.<sup>9</sup> Said himself writes in *The Nation* how a  
58 'remarkable burgeoning of academic and expert interest in Islam, and, second, an  
59 extraordinary revolution in the techniques available to the largely private-sector press and  
60 electronic journalism industries,' and that 'together these two phenomena, by which a huge  
61 apparatus of university, government and business experts study Islam and the Middle East  
62 and by which Islam has become a subject familiar to every consumer of news in the West,  
63 have almost entirely domesticated the Islamic world.'<sup>10</sup> In this paper, I hope to evaluate the  
64 recent developments in the study of Islam and how it has gone beyond *Orientalism*; as Martin  
65 and Ernst remark in the preface and acknowledgements of *Rethinking Islamic Studies: from*

---

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pp. 1-2.

<sup>7</sup> Viswanathan, G. (2001) *Power, Politics and Culture. Interviews with Edward W. Said*. New York: Vintage Books.

<sup>8</sup> Said, E. (2003) *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books, pp.300-301

<sup>9</sup> *Aladdin* (1992) Film. Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker. USA: Walt Disney Pictures.

<sup>10</sup> Said, E., (1998) 'Islam through Western Eyes'. *The Nation*, 1<sup>st</sup> January, p. 1. Available online: <http://www.thenation.com/article/islam-through-western-eyes?page=0>, [Accessed 27th October 2018].

66 *Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism*<sup>11</sup> that the last three decades – after the publication of  
67 *Orientalism* in 1978 – ‘has been a liberating experience for us as scholars initially trained in  
68 narrowly textual ‘Orientalist’ approaches, as we have been forced by circumstance to address  
69 many issues of contemporary political and social relevance.’<sup>12</sup> However, I will argue that  
70 these recent developments themselves are still prisoners of the pre-*Orientalism* essentialist  
71 mentality and have thus rather reinforced and maintained - and have ‘decidedly worsened’<sup>13</sup>  
72 - the very ideas Said introduced in *Orientalism* because of issues such as: Islamic  
73 fundamentalism and the aftermath of 9/11, and how the study of Islam has been influenced  
74 by these issues in modern times therefore returning to the Orientalist approach.

75

## 76 **Brief History**

77

78 I will provide a brief history of the study of Islam in the Occident and the main concerns of  
79 the pre-*Orientalism* era. The study of Islam – historically known as Oriental Studies – in  
80 Western Christendom in the pre-nineteenth century ‘represented the doctrinal unity of  
81 Christendom in its political opposition to Islamic society, a clear social function that  
82 correlated military and intellectual aggression.’<sup>14</sup> He argues that this ‘powerful polemic  
83 framework’<sup>15</sup> took shape when the Christians seized power in Muslim areas, especially in  
84 Spain. The one area where Christians found common ground with the Muslims was on the  
85 topic of Christ:

86

87 ‘It might most reasonably edify a Christian to understand the great praise of Christ  
88 that is to be found in the Qur’an, and it tended to make them feel better about  
89 Muslims. This praise was often quoted in words very close to the words of the  
90 Qur’an, or in its very words (translated), and sometimes the spirit of it was  
91 successfully conveyed, because the subject was congenial.’<sup>16</sup>

92

93 However, it was the absence of miracles, which Prophet Muhammad himself denied the need  
94 for, because of his emphasis on being a mere mortal being as other believers and that he had  
95 not the gift, was used to ridicule Muslims, and, according to Christians, ‘his embarrassed  
96 followers invented miracles in spite of his denial.’<sup>17</sup> It was the feeling of contempt towards  
97 Prophet Muhammad that left little room for an understanding with Muslims. Here, Norman  
98 Daniel argues that:

---

<sup>11</sup> Ernst, Carl W. and Martin, Richard C. (eds.) (2010) *Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press)

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, pp. viii.

<sup>13</sup> Shulman, K. (1996) ‘Q&A/Edward Said: Roots of the West's Fear of Islam’. *New York Times*, 11th March. Available online: <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/03/11/news/11iht-qanda.t.html> [Accessed 27th October 2018]

<sup>14</sup> Daniel, N. (1993) *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (Oxford: Oneworld), pp. 302.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, pp. 302.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, pp. 304.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, pp. 305.

99

100 '...in order to preserve a scandalous picture of him unblurred it was often necessary  
101 to prefer a false account to a true one; certainly it was normal to accept as many  
102 false but desirable elements as were believable. If those who should have known  
103 better were perversely malignant, the uninformed were more credulous than  
104 vicious.'<sup>18</sup>

105

106 This contempt during the medieval period was further extended to the concept of heaven. In  
107 Islam, heaven, or paradise, could be achieved by determinist ethics as well as through death  
108 in a holy war, which typified the irrationality of the Qur'an to Christians, as the description  
109 is entirely sensual. For the Christians there was a lack of chastity and reason in such  
110 teachings, which are ironic, as history demonstrates that reason came 'to be used against the  
111 church that made so much of it in the service of cultural unity. Another is that 'lust' is a  
112 pejorative no longer much in use in the West, where there is little sympathy for Islamic sexual  
113 restrictions.'<sup>19</sup>

114

115 According to Hourani, 'the first systematic study of Islam and its history in western Europe  
116 goes back to the late sixteenth century.'<sup>20</sup> He provides the examples of the regular teaching  
117 of Arabic at the Collège de France in Paris in 1587 where 'the first two professors were  
118 medical doctors, and that is significant of one of the ways in which knowledge of Arabic was  
119 important at the time; the third was a Maronite priest from Lebanon, and that too is significant  
120 in another way, as this was showing the first collaboration between European and indigenous  
121 scholars.'<sup>21</sup> Daniel, however, argues that it was in the seventeenth century when 'much more  
122 authentic information became available than had been made so since the thirteenth century.'<sup>22</sup>  
123 It was in 1734 when George Sale published a translation of the Qur'an that, as stated by  
124 Daniel, was 'the first considerable attempt at an entirely academic judgment.'<sup>23</sup> Sale  
125 compared and contrasted Islam to Christianity, and asserted the latter is divinity whereas the  
126 former 'is certainly one of the most convincing proofs that Mohammedanism was no other  
127 than a human invention, that it owed its progress and establishment almost entirely to the  
128 sword.'<sup>24</sup> One of Sale's contemporaries, Lodovico Marracci, produced a Latin version of the  
129 Qur'an in 1698 – which was a source for Sale's translation – consciously harked back to 'the  
130 medieval tradition'<sup>25</sup> to which he wanted to give new life to, as he believed that Christian  
131 apologists neglected to attack Islam. Though Sale attempted to provide an accurate

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, pp. 305.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, pp. 306.

<sup>20</sup> Hourani, A. (1991) *Islam in European Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 231.

<sup>21</sup> P. Casanova, *L'enseignement de l'arabe au Collège de France* (Paris, 1910). Cited in Hourani, A. (1991), pp. 231-232.

<sup>22</sup> Daniel, N. (1993), pp. 317.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, pp. 322.

<sup>24</sup> Sale cited in Daniel, N. (1993), pp. 322.

<sup>25</sup> Daniel, N. (1993), pp. 321.

132 translation and a reduced level of prejudice in his work, he nevertheless was a product of his  
133 society, and produced that which he inherited from his predecessors. It is evident that the  
134 scientific study of Islam post-Middle Ages struggled to relieve itself from medieval modes  
135 of thought, and continued to reiterate a polemic framework.

136

137 The nineteenth and early twentieth century bore witness to a growing number of scholars in  
138 the study of Islam, as colonialism enabled an extensive interaction between Islam and the  
139 West. This new interest in Islam was ‘closely tied to the political, economic and, most  
140 importantly, colonial circumstances of the nineteenth century, during which time a handful  
141 of European countries had proceeded to occupy a good part of the Islamic world.’<sup>26</sup> During  
142 the colonial period, colonial officers were sent to the Orient to study the subjects they were  
143 ruling over. It was during this period that ‘the completion of the groundwork for the full-  
144 fledged establishment of what came to be known as Orientalism—a new set of categories,  
145 typologies, classifications, terminologies, and methods of coming to terms with things  
146 Oriental and Islamic.’<sup>27</sup> Orientalists were presenting Islam as a faith that borrowed from  
147 others – as was the perception in the Middle Ages, especially stories about prophets’ lives  
148 also mentioned in the Bible. For example, Renan attacks Islam in matters of science and  
149 philosophy and states “we are entirely Greek”; even the so-called Arabic sciences were a  
150 continuation of Greek sciences, carried on not by Arabs but by Persians and converted  
151 Greeks, that is to say, by Aryans.’<sup>28</sup> This framework ensured Islam and Islamic thought to  
152 fail in the Western world, as it lacked ‘originality’.

153

154 Furthermore, the pioneers of this field tended to lack objectivity, and the field, according to  
155 Norman Daniel, had ‘been infiltrated by subjective ideas of cultural, political and social  
156 prejudice’<sup>29</sup> only to ‘demonstrate the superiority of the Christian faith,’<sup>30</sup> as I have shown  
157 above. It is precisely this assumed religious and cultural superiority of the orientalist  
158 tradition in the Occident that Said condemns in *Orientalism*. Thus one can note how,  
159 historically, the study of Islam has been hindered by the problems of prejudice.<sup>31</sup> Charles  
160 Adams, in the foreword of *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*,<sup>32</sup> referred to why there  
161 were problems, historically, when studying Islam: ‘historians of religions have failed to  
162 advance our knowledge and understand of Islam as religion and that Islamicists have failed

---

<sup>26</sup> Kalin, I. (2004) ‘Roots of Misconception: Euro-American Perceptions of Islam Before and After September 11’ in *Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition: Essays by Western Muslim Scholars*. Ed. Joseph E.B. Lumbard. Bloomington: World Wisdom, Inc, pp. 161.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, pp. 161.

<sup>28</sup> Renan cited in Hourani, A. (1991), pp. 252.

<sup>29</sup> Daniel, N. (1993), pp. 324.

<sup>30</sup> Vakily, A. (2001) Methodological Problems in the Study of Islam, and Ali Shariati’s Proposed Methodology of the Study of Religions. *The American Journal of Human Sciences*, 18 (3), pp. 92.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, pp. 92.

<sup>32</sup> Adams, C. J. (1985) *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard Martin (Tucson: University of Arizona Press).

163 to explain adequately Islamic religious phenomena.<sup>33</sup> However, the Muslim scholar, Fazlur  
164 Rahman, for example, believed that it was not the gap between historians and the Islamists,  
165 which was the problem in the study of Islam; but the lack of scientific objectivity by the  
166 Western scholars is what caused the suffering of the discipline.<sup>34</sup> Citing the problems,  
167 Rahman explained that: ‘pre-nineteenth- century Western treatments of Islam suffered  
168 from... (religious prejudice), while nineteenth and early twentieth-century scholarship  
169 suffered particularly from... (cultural and intellectual prejudice).’<sup>35</sup> Said discusses the same  
170 point – the cultural and intellectual prejudice – and makes a reference to Carl Becker, who  
171 argued that Islam is not ‘an ‘original’ religion, but as a sort of failed Oriental attempt to  
172 employ Greek philosophy without the creative inspiration that we find in Renaissance  
173 Europe.’<sup>36</sup>

174

175 Having looked at the brief history of Orientalism, what we can draw from Rahman and Said’s  
176 point is that, even in the post-Enlightenment Western scholarship there was a lack of  
177 objectivity and, as Vakily states, the scholarship ‘carried an inherent western bias.’<sup>37</sup> In the  
178 Middle Ages, it seems that ‘there were political, even sociological, reasons why Islam  
179 should be suspect, and why untrue things should seem more probable than true ones, and be  
180 believed. It is quite often apparent that in the Middle Ages there was no interest in Islam  
181 itself, but only in inducing some particular state of mind about it in Christians.’<sup>38</sup> Such  
182 prejudices, whether intellectual or cultural, led to the further essentialisation of the Orient  
183 and were presented in the Occident as people who lacked ‘the sense of law’ and that ‘anything  
184 is possible to the Oriental. The supernatural is so near that it may touch him at any moment.’<sup>39</sup>  
185 Such essentialism, one could argue, has returned to the current study of Islam, especially  
186 reinforced by scholars like Bernard Lewis. I will look at this issue in greater detail below;  
187 however, in the meantime I will observe how the issue of objectivity was tackled post-  
188 *Orientalism*.

189

---

<sup>33</sup> Adams (1985) as cited by Ernst, C. W. and Martin, R. C. (eds.) (2010) *Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press), pp. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Vakily, A. (2001), pp. 93

<sup>35</sup> Rahman, F. (1985) ‘Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies: Review Essay,’ in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard Martin (Tucson: University of Arizona Press), pp. 193.

<sup>36</sup> Becker, C. H. *Das Erbe der Antike im Orient und Okzident* (Leipzig: Quelle & Meyer, 1931) as cited by Said (1993) in *Orientalism*, pp. 104.

<sup>37</sup> Vakily, A. (2001), pp. 93.

<sup>38</sup> Daniel, N. (1993), pp. 323.

<sup>39</sup> Said (1978), pp. 277.

190 **One of the key developments: self-representation**

191

192 The study of Islam pre-*Orientalism*, especially in the early 70s, carried trajectories such as  
193 politics, identity, and inclusion, which played a ‘large role in situating Islam.’<sup>40</sup> It was during  
194 the 70s that the focus was on the migration of the study of Islam out of Middle Eastern studies  
195 and into departments of religious studies.<sup>41</sup> When *Orientalism* appeared, there was a reaction  
196 against Orientalism and the ills of colonialism and imperialism, which paved the way for  
197 minorities who ‘were seeking equitable, if not preferential, access to academe.’<sup>42</sup> The  
198 minorities wanted to represent themselves, their cultures, and religious traditions, and using  
199 Said’s critique of the discipline’s genealogy, one could see that previously the ‘academic  
200 study of the Islamic world and the Middle East had always fallen within the purview of white  
201 European males.’<sup>43</sup> It was during this decade that the minorities wanted to minimise the  
202 prejudices and achieve a greater extent of scientific objectivity, and they received the support  
203 of Wilfred Cantwell Smith. He proposed that ‘scholarly research which concerns a religious  
204 community should be verified by member of that community itself.’<sup>44</sup>

205

206 Therefore, a statement about religion, in order to be valid, ‘must be intelligible and acceptable  
207 to those within,’<sup>45</sup> not just according to the evidence drawn by the scholars who are non-  
208 Muslims. Even Al-Azhar writers believed that ‘the study of Islam can only be done fairly at  
209 the hands of Muslims.’<sup>46</sup> However, does this provide an overall scheme to the overall  
210 objectivity or is it further essentialising Islam? Rahman, on the other hand, has argued that  
211 the principle of the ‘insiders approach’ does not necessarily entail a universal coherence  
212 among all Muslims, as he states: ‘There are many statements made all the time by some  
213 insiders that are repudiated by other insiders.’<sup>47</sup> After the publication of *Orientalism*, one  
214 can see how the study of Islam, though it was gravitated out of Middle Eastern Studies, it  
215 nevertheless became increasingly associated with the politics of identity and representation.  
216 This can be seen as a development in the study of Islam and moved beyond *Orientalism*, as  
217 Said argued that Orientalism denied Orientals the possibility of representing themselves.<sup>48</sup>

218

---

<sup>40</sup> Hughes, A. W. (2008) *Situating Islam: the past and future of an academic discipline* (London; Oakville, CT: Equinox Pub.), pp. 50.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid, pp. 50.

<sup>42</sup> Kramer, M. S. (2001). *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America*. (Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy), pp. 33.

<sup>43</sup> Hughes, A. W. (2008), pp. 52.

<sup>44</sup> Vakily, A. (2001), pp. 93.

<sup>45</sup> Smith, W. C. (1959: 52) as cited in Hughes, A. W. (2008), pp. 59.

<sup>46</sup> Aruri, N. and Shuraydi, M. A. (eds.) (2001) *Revisiting Culture, Reinventing Peace: the Influence of Edward W. Said* (New York: Olive Branch Press), pp. 113.

<sup>47</sup> Rahman, F., (1985), pp. 193.

<sup>48</sup> Said (1978), pp. 21.

219 Though, on the one hand, the invitation of proponents of various religions into the scholarly  
220 field, and in this case Islam, is commendable and laudable, Richard C. Martin argues that ‘it  
221 also indicates the apparent willingness of some religious studies faculties to be more  
222 impressed by confessional than academic credentials.’<sup>49</sup> Charles Kurzman, on the other  
223 hand, argues that ‘the critique of Orientalism means a critique of Western treatment of  
224 Muslims, both politically (colonialism, imperialism, neo-imperialism) and cognitively  
225 (derogatory, essentialising, stereotyping).’<sup>50</sup> This is further exacerbated because those who  
226 do so, including Muslims, ‘do it from a Western standpoint’ and ‘they only ‘count’ as ‘studies  
227 of Islamic movements’ if they have the trappings of Western academic discourse, which  
228 includes a commitment to the Western project of understanding social movements.’<sup>51</sup> This  
229 argument presented by Kurzman indicates the intrinsic and embedded Orientalism within  
230 academia that despite having ‘insiders’ explaining their religion they are having to do so  
231 within a specific trajectory that is set by Western scholars.

232

233 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, in the meantime, provides a different and an alternative approach to  
234 the study of Islam, which he refers to as ‘personalist’ or ‘dialogic’<sup>52</sup> approach. He reminds  
235 us that one ought to pay more sensitive and informed attention to the study of Islam, and not  
236 provoke objections from the propagators of a normative Islam – as this is another opinion  
237 coming from ‘within’ – for ‘any reading of these materials will fail to grasp the faith of  
238 Muslims if it yields explanations and interpretations that are not in accord with what Muslims  
239 themselves say they mean.’<sup>53</sup> He asserts that: ‘...where the encounter is between the  
240 academic tradition of the West and a particular religion, the statement that is evolved much  
241 satisfy each of two traditions independently and transcend them both by satisfying both  
242 simultaneously.’<sup>54</sup> This approach allows one to analyse the received truths, which hold  
243 authority and are already established within Islamic studies, but also to incorporate a relation  
244 to the reality of the object, which is studied.

245

246 Despite the attempts to produce a ‘scientific’ methodology by including the voice of the  
247 ‘insiders’ during the 70s, there were, however, aspects of Orientalism within the field. For  
248 example, Patricia Crone and Michael Cook’s book, *Hagarism, the Making of the Islamic*

---

<sup>49</sup> Martin, R. C. (1985) ‘Islam and Religious Studies: An Introductory Essay’ in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard Martin (Tucson: University of Arizona Press), pp. 9.

<sup>50</sup> Kurzman, C. (2004) ‘Conclusion: Social Movement Theory and Islamic Studies’ in *Islamic activism: a social movement theory approach* edited by Quintan Wiktorowicz (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press), Chesham: Combined Academic, pp. 296.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, pp. 296.

<sup>52</sup> Martin, R. C. (1985), pp. 9.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid, pp. 9.

<sup>54</sup> Smith cited in Roff, W. R. (1985) ‘Pilgrimage and the History of Religions: Theoretical Approaches to the Hajj’ in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard Martin (Tucson: University of Arizona Press), pp. 78-79.



249 *World*,<sup>55</sup> reflects the adoption of the medieval methodology, and ‘rejects the evidence of any  
250 Muslim about the beginnings of Islam.’<sup>56</sup> Not using the traditional methods and sources to  
251 speak about Islamic traditions not only contradicts the Muslim perceptions and beliefs but it  
252 demonstrates the authors’ frivolous attitude towards the subject/s they are studying.  
253 However, Rippin argues that Crone and Cook successfully ‘draw attention to the problems  
254 involved in the study of Islam’ and that ‘they have not been able to get beyond the limitations  
255 inherent in the sources, for they are all of questionable historical authenticity and, more  
256 importantly, all are treaties based in polemic.’<sup>57</sup> Muhammad Abdul Rauf holds the belief  
257 that an outsider will inevitably distort the origins of the faith because ‘in the name of being  
258 scientific, the origins of Islam are explained as arising out of economic or other cultural  
259 phenomena.’<sup>58</sup> Why is there such distrust towards the Muslim sources? Is it because scholars  
260 regard Muslims as objects of curiosity, and not a people in their own right? If one wishes to  
261 pursue the study of Islam and wants it to remain a scholarly endeavour with intellectual  
262 integrity, then it is necessary and of paramount importance to incorporate the Muslim  
263 sources, as the study of Islam would be incomplete without the Muslims’ contribution and  
264 will merely reproduce the medieval thoughts and treat Muslims as mere ‘subjects’ without a  
265 voice.

266

267 As can be noted from above, the politics of identity and self-representation on the part of  
268 those who belonged to Islam created another set of imaginings and perceived essences, as  
269 these new representatives brought a distinct epistemology based on an ontology of what it  
270 means to be colonised and represented by others. What is dangerous about such ‘authentic’  
271 experiences, contrary to Rahman’s position, is that these experiences are not universal, is that  
272 they are, unfortunately, ‘labelled ‘universal’ and then neatly applied to other spatial and  
273 temporal periods in something that is problematically labelled as ‘Islamic civilisation’.’<sup>59</sup> On  
274 the contrary, Rahman contends that as long as ‘the Qur’an and sunna’ are used and recognised  
275 by those studying Islam ‘as normative criterion-referents for all expressions and  
276 understandings of Islam,’<sup>60</sup> then an intellectual understanding and appreciation of Islam is  
277 possible, irrespective of whether one is an ‘insider’ or ‘outsider’. Though the academic study  
278 of Islam has offered the ‘insiders’ the opportunity to represent themselves; however, it has  
279 constructed a set of ideas of how Muslims perceive themselves and construct their identity  
280 thus accepting such constructions as essential, which leads to essentialising Islam from  
281 ‘within’.

282

---

<sup>55</sup> Crone, P. and Cook, M. (1977) *Hagarism, the making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge)

<sup>56</sup> Daniel, N. (1993), pp. 325.

<sup>57</sup> Rippin, A., ‘Literary Analysis of *Qur’ān, Tafsīr, and Sīra: The Methodologies of John Wansbrough,*’ in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard Martin (Tucson: University of Arizona Press), pp. 153.

<sup>58</sup> Abdul-Rauf, M. (1985) ‘Outsiders’ Interpretations of Islam: A Muslim’s Point of View’ in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard Martin (Tucson: University of Arizona Press), pp. 185.

<sup>59</sup> Hughes, A. (2008), pp. 55.

<sup>60</sup> Rahman, F. (1985), pp. 198.

283 **Current Study of Islam**

284

285 The modern academic study of Islam, as I have argued above, emerged out of a distinct  
286 academic trajectory – from Oriental Studies to the Middle Eastern Studies – and now, owing  
287 to Said’s critique, has become a part of the religious studies departments. However, the  
288 apologetic foundation ‘upon which the edifice of Islamic Studies rests’<sup>61</sup> continues to prevail  
289 in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

290

291 It was an event, not academic in the slightest, that created a change ‘in the ways that  
292 Islamicists perceived themselves and were perceived by others, not only inside the academy  
293 but also outside of it.’<sup>62</sup> The events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, increased the public interest in  
294 Islam, and the ‘evidence for this includes a new abundance of faculty openings and  
295 curriculums in colleges and universities that deal with the Islamic religious tradition’, and as  
296 a consequence, ‘Islamic studies as a field in departments of religion in North America has  
297 recently become more apparent than in the past.’<sup>63</sup> It is interesting to note that ‘Islam did not  
298 even have a primary presence in the major professional society for faculty of religion, the  
299 American Academy Religion (AAR).’<sup>64</sup> The event also led to many specialists in medieval  
300 Islamic jurisprudence or philosophy to defend Islam, and suddenly, became experts in  
301 ‘Islamic mentalities’.<sup>65</sup>

302

303 Many of the Islamicists and their statements made in the aftermath of 9/11 are not new, and  
304 in fact, have emerged from the previous trajectories I examined above. The return to  
305 essentialism – that stressed the rhetoric of faith and the ‘insiders approach’ – by modern  
306 scholars became a discourse ‘all too easy to rely upon and to invoke with pre-packaged  
307 slogans in the aftermath of 9/11.’<sup>66</sup> Experts do not invent essentialist ideas and thus start  
308 essentialising a discourse from nowhere; it has to be there to begin with. Some examples of  
309 such essentialisms include: the need to equate Islam with peace (*salām*) since both have the  
310 same root, s-l-m<sup>67</sup> or many employed binaries, which may be considered outmoded theories  
311 of religion, such as that between heterodox/orthodox – this was used to claim that the  
312 perpetrators of 9/11 ‘could not have been ‘Muslims’ because something monolithically  
313 known as Islam does not condone terrorism.’<sup>68</sup> One could argue here that the aftermath of  
314 9/11 led to the return to Orientalist ways of approaching and ‘explaining’ Islam, as the  
315 medieval descriptions of Islam as the religion of the sword, Islam is monolithic, violent, and

---

<sup>61</sup> Hughes, A. (2008), pp. 92.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, pp. 93.

<sup>63</sup> Ernst and Martin (2010), pp. 1.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, pp. 1.

<sup>65</sup> Hughes, A. (2008), pp. 93.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, pp. 96.

<sup>67</sup> Ayoub, Mahmoud. M. (2002) ‘The Islamic Tradition’ in Willard G. Oxtoby, ed., *World Religions: Western Traditions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press) pp. 341.

<sup>68</sup> Hughes, A. (2008), pp. 95.

316 so on, became prevalent thus reinforcing the very ideas Said argued against in *Orientalism*.  
317 This is also stated by Rodinson that the ‘success of political movements under the guise of  
318 religion can only encourage a resurgence of essentialism.’<sup>69</sup> Furthermore, contemporary  
319 focus on the field relies on the study of ‘Arabic legal and exegetical texts from the eighth to  
320 the twelfth centuries is sufficient to define Islamic civilization in a normative sense.’<sup>70</sup> The  
321 mere study of seminal texts without explaining and linking it to the living context and reality  
322 of Muslims, and the Muslim world, is a step backwards and brings the study of Islam to a  
323 standstill.

324

325 Bruce Lawrence, as cited by Ernst and Martin, has attempted to tackle the association of  
326 Islam with evil and violence, and Lawrence states that in Western scholarship of Islam  
327 ‘reference to the experience of colonialism and postcolonial struggles’<sup>71</sup> is missing. Kalin  
328 believes that prior to September 11, ‘many academics, policy-makers, and the so-called  
329 terrorism experts have repeatedly portrayed Islam as a religion that condones and produces  
330 violence on a consistent basis.’<sup>72</sup> Such essentialist, long-held, and constructed perceptions  
331 of Islam were already embedded in the medieval era and have been transported into the 21<sup>st</sup>  
332 century. Kalin further succinctly stipulates: ‘The images of suicide bombers, hijackings,  
333 assassinations, street riots and uprisings, which have a profound impact on the European and  
334 American perceptions of the Islamic world, inform the coded language of “militant Islam,”  
335 and their *raison d’être* is attributed in an astonishingly simplistic way to the religion of Islam  
336 or Muslim culture rather than to the particular political circumstances that have given rise to  
337 them. In some cases, religious elements have been openly brought into the debate to explain  
338 the anti-Western and anti-American sentiments in the Islamic world.’<sup>73</sup>

339

340 This manifestation of essentialism where scholars are involved in a political fight to defend  
341 their objects they have been studying for decades (e.g. Esposito<sup>74</sup>) could have negative  
342 repercussions on the future of the academic discipline. The discipline would then produce  
343 essentialisms and generalisations to defend Islam and merely convince others of a  
344 hermeneutical Islam thus not providing a critical discourse, which accepts that Muslims do  
345 kill in the name of religion, just as other religions have done in the past, e.g. Bharatiya Janata  
346 Party in India. The opposite academic reaction to the events came from various scholars,  
347 including Bernard Lewis. In his article, *What Went Wrong*, he states that: ‘If the peoples of  
348 the Middle East continue on their present path, the suicide bomber may become a metaphor  
349 for the whole region, and there will be no escape from a downward spiral of hate and spite,

---

<sup>69</sup> Rodinson, M. (1987) *Europe and the Mystique of Islam*, Trans. Roger Venius. (London: I.B. Tauris), pp. 121.

<sup>70</sup> Ernst and Martin (2010), pp. 14.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid, pp. 11-12. What is interesting about Lawrence defending such a position is that he published his book in 1998 – this demonstrates how a lot of issues have transferred from the last decade into the post-9/11 world to verify that ‘these people’ have been like this all along.

<sup>72</sup> Kalin, I. (2004), pp. 166.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid, pp. 166-167.

<sup>74</sup> Esposito, J. L. (2003) *Unholy War: Terror In The Name of Islam*. (New York: Oxford University Press)

350 rage and self-pity, poverty and oppression.<sup>75</sup> For Lewis to reiterate Huntington's hypothesis  
351 'clash of civilisations'<sup>76</sup> and that if the people do not change themselves there will be,  
352 inevitably, rage towards them demonstrates the resurfacing of medieval prejudices held about  
353 Islam, Islam is a monolithic religion, backward, static, and violent. Such comments by a  
354 prominent historian and someone who was one of the 'major influences on George W. Bush's  
355 Pentagon and National Security Council,'<sup>77</sup> will lead to further essentialisation, as there will  
356 be no room for a critical approach to Islam. Also, the politicisation of Islam has led to many  
357 scholars 'expressing concerns about possible governmental interference in their teaching and  
358 research, whilst others noted fears of funding being streamed towards specific political  
359 agendas.'<sup>78</sup>

360

### 361 **Conclusion**

362

363 Having considered the recent developments in the study of Islam and if they have gone  
364 beyond Said's *Orientalism* in detail, one can note that far from representing an eternal and  
365 unchanging essence, Islam is an entity that has shifted in meaning as 'different actors have  
366 appropriated it.'<sup>79</sup> As mentioned above, the lack of objectivity, prejudice – whether religious  
367 or intellectual – were the core issues related to the study of Islam; however, are these issues  
368 still relevant? The study of Islam may have migrated from different academic departments,  
369 but that does not necessarily mean that essentialism was no longer applied in the discipline.  
370 As I have argued above, whether it was the notion of self-representation or the events of 9/11,  
371 the many essentialist prejudices held pre-*Orientalism*, are still being reinforced causing the  
372 critical scholarship of the study of Islam to remain static. In order for the study of Islam to  
373 advance, instead of retreating, the discipline needs an unprejudiced approach, and a great  
374 need for dialogue and understanding. Moreover, as Carl Ernst remarks, the 'key to recovering  
375 Islamic studies for religious studies is summarised by two words: comparative and critical.'<sup>80</sup>  
376 The comparative dimension will provide the complexity of Islam, which is frequently lost in  
377 the persistent belief that Islam, though vast, is generally the same everywhere. In addition, a

---

<sup>75</sup> Lewis, B. (2002) *The Atlantic Monthly*; What Went Wrong? Volume 289, January, No. 1, pp. 43-45. Available online: <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/2002/01/lewis.htm> [Accessed 27th October 2018]

<sup>76</sup> Huntington, S.P. (1997) *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster)

<sup>77</sup> Said (1978), pp. xv.

<sup>78</sup> Higher Education Funding Council for England Report (HEFCE) (2008) '*International Approaches to Islamic Studies in Higher Education*' (London), June, pp. 8. Available online: [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/2008/rd07\\_08/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/2008/rd07_08/) [Accessed 29th October 2018]

<sup>79</sup> Ernst, Carl W. (2004) *Rethinking Islam in the contemporary world* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), pp. 200.

<sup>80</sup> Ernst, C. W. (1998) '*The Study of Religion and the Study of Islam*' Paper given at Workshop on 'Integrating Islamic Studies in Liberal Arts Curricula,' University of Washington, Seattle WA, March 6-8. Available online: <http://www.unc.edu/~cernst/study.htm> [Accessed 29th October 2018].

378 major concern of contemporary scholarship is the association of violence with religion. The  
379 reality is far more layered when one confronts the multitude of ethnicities, languages,  
380 environments, continents and social patterns of organisation, which manifest throughout any  
381 single Muslim-majority country, let alone the entire Muslim world. The politics created by  
382 these realities make the study of Islam uniquely challenging and rewarding. The critical  
383 approach, according to Ernst 'takes account of the most stringent recent theoretical tests and  
384 methodologies, to elevate this study out of the unselfconscious attitudes of 19th-century  
385 positivism that too often characterized Orientalism.'<sup>81</sup> Only by engaging in the comparative  
386 and critical approach will we become more 'self-reflexive of how and why we have situated  
387 Islam as we have done, and as we will no doubt continue to do in the future.'<sup>82</sup>

388

389 **Funding:** This research received no external funding.

### 390 **References**

391 Abdul-Rauf, M. 1985. 'Outsiders' Interpretations of Islam: A Muslim's Point of View.' In  
392 *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard Martin. Tucson: University of Arizona  
393 Press, pp. 179-189.

394

395 Adams, Charles J. 1985. *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*. ed. Richard Martin.  
396 Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

397

398 *Aladdin*. 1992. Directed by Ron Clements and John Musker. USA: Walt Disney Pictures.

399

400 Aruri, N, and Shuraydi, M. A. (eds). 2001. *Revisiting Culture, Reinventing Peace: the*  
401 *Influence of Edward W. Said*. New York: Olive Branch Press.

402

403 Ayoub, Mahmoud M. 2002. 'The Islamic Tradition.' In *World Religions: Western Traditions*,  
404 Willard G. Oxtoby, ed., 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. New York: Oxford University Press.

405

406 Crone, P, and Cook, M. 1977. *Hagarism, the making of the Islamic World*. Cambridge.

407

408 Ernst, Carl W. 1998. 'The Study of Religion and the Study of Islam' Paper given at Workshop  
409 on '*Integrating Islamic Studies in Liberal Arts Curricula*,' University of Washington, Seattle  
410 WA, March 6-8. Available online: <http://www.unc.edu/~cernst/study.htm> [Accessed 29th  
411 October 2018].

412

413 Ernst, Carl W. 2004. *Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh  
414 University Press.

415

---

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Hughes, A. (2008), pp. 116.

- 416 Ernst, Carl W. and Martin, Richard C. (eds). 2010. *Rethinking Islamic Studies: From*  
417 *Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism*. Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press.  
418
- 419 Esposito, John L. 1999. *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* New York: 3<sup>rd</sup> edition.  
420
- 421 Esposito, John L. 2003. *Unholy War: Terror In The Name of Islam*. New York: Oxford  
422 University Press.  
423
- 424 Higher Education Funding Council for England Report (HEFCE). 2008. '*International*  
425 *Approaches to Islamic Studies in Higher Education*' (London), June, pp. 8. Available online:  
426 [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/2008/rd07\\_08/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/2008/rd07_08/) [Accessed 29<sup>th</sup> October 2018]  
427
- 428 Hourani, A. 1991. *Islam in European Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.  
429
- 430 Hughes, Aaron W. 2008. *Situating Islam: the past and future of an academic discipline*.  
431 London; Oakville, CT: Equinox Pub.  
432
- 433 Huntington, S.P. 1997. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New  
434 York: Simon & Schuster.  
435
- 436 Kalin, I. 2004. 'Roots of Misconception: Euro-American Perceptions of Islam Before and  
437 After September 11.' In *Islam, Fundamentalism, and the Betrayal of Tradition: Essays by*  
438 *Western Muslim Scholars*. Ed. Joseph E.B. Lumbard. Bloomington: World Wisdom, Inc.  
439
- 440 Kramer, Martin S. 2001. *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in*  
441 *America*. Washington, DC: The Washington Institute for Near East Policy.  
442
- 443
- 444 Kurzman, C. 2004. 'Conclusion: Social Movement Theory and Islamic Studies.' In  
445 *Islamic Activism: A Social Movement Theory Approach*. Ed. by Quintan Wiktorowicz,  
446 Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, Chesham: Combined Academic, pp. 289-305.  
447
- 448 Lewis, B. 2002. [The Atlantic Monthly](http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/2002/01/lewis.htm); What Went Wrong? Volume 289, January, No. 1, pp.  
449 43-45. Available online: <http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/2002/01/lewis.htm>  
450 [Accessed 27<sup>th</sup> October 2018]  
451
- 452 Martin, R. C. 1985. 'Islam and Religious Studies: An Introductory Essay.' In *Approaches to*  
453 *Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard Martin. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, pp. 106-  
454 125.  
455
- 456 Norman, D. 1993. *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*. Oxford: Oneworld.  
457

- 458 Rahman, F. 1985. 'Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies: Review Essay.' In *Approaches*  
459 *to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard Martin. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, pp.  
460 189-202.
- 461
- 462 Rippin, A. 1985. 'Literary Analysis of *Qur'ān*, *Tafsīr*, and *Sīra*: The Methodologies of John  
463 Wansbrough.' In *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard Martin. Tucson:  
464 University of Arizona Press, pp. 151-164.
- 465
- 466 Rodinson, M. 1987. *Europe and the Mystique of Islam*. Trans. Roger Venius. London: I.B.  
467 Tauris.
- 468
- 469 Roff, W. R. 1985. 'Pilgrimage and the History of Religions: Theoretical Approaches to the  
470 Hajj.' In *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard Martin. Tucson: University  
471 of Arizona Press, pp. 78-87.
- 472
- 473 Said, E. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon.
- 474
- 475 Said, E. 1998. 'Islam through Western Eyes'. *The Nation*, 1<sup>st</sup> January.  
476 Available online: <http://www.thenation.com/article/islam-through-western-eyes?page=0,0>  
477 [Accessed 27th October 2018].
- 478
- 479 Said, E. 2003. *Orientalism*. London: Penguin Books.
- 480
- 481 Shulman, K. 1996. 'Q&A/Edward Said: Roots of the West's Fear of Islam'. *New York Times*,  
482 11<sup>th</sup> March. Available online: <http://www.nytimes.com/1996/03/11/news/11iht-qanda.t.html>  
483 [Accessed 27th October 2018].
- 484
- 485 Vakily, A. 2001. Methodological Problems in the Study of Islam, and Ali Shariati's Proposed  
486 Methodology of the Study of Religions. *The American Journal of Human Sciences*, 18 (3).
- 487
- 488 Viswanathan, G. 2001. *Power, Politics and Culture. Interviews with Edward W. Said*. New  
489 York: Vintage Books.