

Contending Visions of the Middle East

The History and Politics of Orientalism

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3 Orientalism and empire

Over the course of the nineteenth century, Europeans and Americans would increasingly come to see the Orient as divided into two distinct units: a "Near East" comprising southeastern Europe, the Levant (as I mentioned in Chapter 2, the lands along the eastern shores of the Mediterranean and their hinterlands) and other parts of western Asia nearer to Europe, and a "Far East" encompassing India, southeast Asia, China and Japan. By the latter part of the nineteenth century, the term "Oriental" had in popular usage in the United States come to refer largely to people from East Asia, especially the Chinese whose arrival as immigrants was often met by considerable hostility.

Nonetheless, the Orient remained a powerful category in nineteenth-century European popular and scholarly culture. It was in this period that the term Orientalism actually entered French, English and other European languages as (among other things) the special name for the scholarly field which focused on the Orient, including the predominantly Muslim lands of Asia, reflecting the dramatic expansion and institutionalization of scholarship in the field over the course of the nineteenth century. Over the previous century or two the study in Europe of the languages, histories, religions and cultures of the Orient had been sustained by a scattered handful of scholars. But a revival took place in the nineteenth century which would for a time feed into what a French scholar called "the Oriental renaissance," with a powerful impact on several arenas of European thought and culture.¹

However, the nineteenth century also witnessed a new stage in the lengthy and uneven process of extending European hegemony over most of the planet that had begun three centuries earlier. As we have seen, European states had begun to carve out economic and political spheres of influence, and then colonial empires, in Asia, Africa and the Americas from about 1500 onward. Along the way, those states (particularly Britain, the Netherlands, and France) had begun to exercise direct or indirect rule over growing numbers of Muslims, mainly in India and southeast Asia (especially today's Indonesia); by the 1700s Russia

was also vigorously expanding into Central Asia, inhabited mainly by Muslims. But it was only after 1800 that the European colonial powers were able to secure more or less effective and direct political dominion over significant portions of the predominantly Muslim lands of Asia and Africa. Through the eighteenth century, the major Muslim states closest to Europe – including the Ottoman empire, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and Persia (today's Iran) – had been able to preserve their independence, though they were often relatively weak and had in some cases already lost significant territory to expanding European powers (mainly Russia and Austria). In the nineteenth century, however, the expansion of European power into every other corner of the globe, the proximity of the Middle East and North Africa to Europe, and the potential value of these lands in the power struggles among the European powers made it all but inevitable that European states (including such latecomers to imperialist expansion as Germany and Italy) would seek to extend their economic and political influence (and if possible control) into this region as well.

As we have seen, from the medieval period onward European perceptions of Islam and of Muslims, particularly those in the lands of western Asia and northern Africa, had been influenced by, and had helped shape, the power relations between Europeans and their Muslim neighbors. This was true of the nineteenth century as well: the growth and dissemination of Western knowledge about the Orient and the generation of certain images of the Orient in Western culture in this period were linked, in complex ways which we will be exploring through the remainder of this book, with the simultaneous growth of European (and later American) power over Muslim lands and peoples.

The Oriental(ist) Renaissance

In the late eighteenth century French and British scholars (some of the latter served in the administration of British-ruled India) began learning Sanskrit, largely from Indian scholars for whom it was still the living language of the sacred texts of what would become known as Hinduism, and introducing Western audiences to the ancient learning of India, of which they had previously had little or no knowledge. Not long after, new translations of parts of the classical literature of Persia began to appear. In the 1820s, Jean-Francois Champollion (1790–1832) and other scholars began to decipher the hieroglyphs in which ancient Egyptian was written and thereby unlocked the door to the scientific study of that civilization. These developments contributed to the rapid growth in western and central Europe of both scholarly and popular interest in the Orient.

In the nineteenth century Orientalism as a scholarly discipline came to be embodied in new institutions and career paths as well as in numerous translations and scholarly publications. France was one important center of this emerging field. A School of Living Oriental Languages was established in Paris in 1795, at the height of the French Revolution. Silvestre de Sacy (1758–1838), who taught Arabic at the new school early in his career, would go on to help lay the foundations of modern Orientalism: he published numerous scholarly works and translations from Arabic, Persian and Turkish, he trained several generations of scholars and translators, he advised the French government on Muslim affairs, and he served as the first president of the Société Asiatique (the “Asiatic Society”), founded in 1821 to bring together scholars, officials and others interested in the lands of Asia (including the Muslim Near East). The formation of such national organizations dedicated to the study of Asia and Islam and sponsoring scholarly meetings and publications – including the American Oriental Society, established in the 1840s – was eventually followed by the emergence of international networks linking scholars in different countries. The first international congress of Orientalists convened in 1873, and such gatherings took place more or less regularly from then on.

For Sacy as for many of the new breed of modern Orientalist scholars who came after him, the key to scholarly understanding of the Orient (as of other civilizations) was philology, the historical analysis and comparison of languages, pursued largely through the study of written texts which, it was believed, could yield unique insights into the timeless essence of a civilization. The training of scholars specializing in Islam gave pride of place to the acquisition of Arabic, Persian, Turkish and other languages of the region, and to the techniques required for the retrieval, reconstruction, analysis, translation and publication of texts in those languages. Indeed, philological training was often deemed all that was necessary to achieve a profound understanding of what this subset of Orientalists regarded as their object of study: Islamic civilization. As a result, the methods and approaches forged by emerging new disciplines from the mid-nineteenth century onward, including anthropology, sociology, economics and “scientific” history, were often deemed irrelevant, even misleading, when applied to this segment of humanity.

The expansion of scholarly Orientalism, manifested in a growing number of translations from ancient and modern languages, the proliferation of scholarly studies on Oriental (including Islamic) history and culture, and new scholarly institutions and networks coincided with, and contributed to, a growing interest in – sometimes even an obsession with – the Orient among many of the thinkers, writers and artists identified with the

Romantic movement in European literature and art in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Rejecting the rationalism of the Enlightenment and instead stressing emotion, imagination and intuition, some of the Romantic poets, novelists, dramatists and philosophers saw the Orient as the repository of a hitherto inaccessible source of wisdom on which they might draw in order to revive and redeem a spiritually exhausted and increasingly materialistic West. For some of them the work of the Orientalist and Egyptologist scholars indicated, as one enthusiastic French writer put it in 1841, that “an antiquity more profound, more philosophical, and more poetical than that of Greece and Rome was emerging from the depths of Asia,” heralding “a new Reformation of the religious and secular world.” In 1820 Victor Hugo asserted that “in the century of Louis XIV one was a Hellenist; today one is an Orientalist . . . the Orient – as an image or as an idea – has become for the intellect as well as for the imagination a sort of general preoccupation. . . .”²

It was in this context that, for example, the great German poet, novelist and dramatist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) produced work that drew heavily on Muslim imagery and themes and emulated Arabic and Persian literary styles. European architects and designers developed styles that utilized ancient Egyptian stylistic elements.³ In the 1820s this strain of Romantic Orientalist exoticism emerged strongly in the work of a number of artists, most of them French; as Maxime Rodinson put it, their work would “capture the European imagination and fascinate such a widespread audience for years.” The images used in this Orientalist genre of painting were “characterized by fierce and lavish scenes in a wild array of colors; harems and seraglios; decapitated bodies; women hurled into the Bosphorus in sacks; feluccas and brigantines displaying the Crescent flag; round, turquoise domes and white minarets soaring to the heavens; viziers, eunuchs, and odalisques [female slaves or concubines]; refreshing springs under palm trees; *giaours* [captive Christians] with their lustful captors.”⁴ Some of these themes can also be found in the work of poets and writers, including the authors of influential accounts of travel in the Levant, notably Nerval, Flaubert and Chateaubriand.

The images that writers and painters influenced by this cultural Orientalism evoked were sometimes eroticized and titillating, drawing on and further developing much older European depictions of Muslims as violent, lusty and sexually perverse. Muslim women played a particularly crucial role in European perceptions of Islam in the nineteenth century; in fact, one scholar went so far as to say that “[t]here is no subject connected with Islam which Europeans have thought more important than the condition of Muslim women.”⁵ As we have seen, some European observers, like Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, depicted upper-class Ottoman women

as relatively free and socially empowered even though veiled and kept from contact with men who were not relatives or servants. But it was much more common to portray Muslim women as terribly oppressed and subjugated, indeed as little more than slaves, constantly available for the erotic gratification of oversexed Muslim men. Just as Ottoman sultans and other Muslim rulers were said to tyrannize their subjects, so Muslim men were said to tyrannize their wives and daughters. Not surprisingly, the degraded status of Muslim women would later be cited as a justification for European intervention and colonial rule.

European writers and artists were particularly fascinated by what they imagined went on in the "harem," the private quarters of upper-class households, and by the institution of polygamy. To satisfy this curiosity Orientalist artists produced highly suggestive paintings of nude or semi-nude Muslim women in the harem, even though, with rare exceptions, they had little or no contact with Muslim women and had never been inside the family quarters of a Muslim home. Later, photography made possible the dissemination of lurid images of women on a much larger scale, including quasipornographic postcards which were widely circulated; the photographers who produced them generally used prostitutes as their models, since no respectable woman would pose for them. Such depictions of Muslim women, as well as suggestive depictions of boys, gave Europeans a socially acceptable way to express their own fantasies while simultaneously reaffirming the moral superiority of the West.

But even when images of Middle Easterners were not explicitly sexualized, they were often still exoticized. Nineteenth-century European artists, photographers and writers tended to portray Muslim women and men and the lands in which they lived either as alien and mysterious, or as picturesque backdrops for the things that really interested European visitors and audiences, for example Palestine as the land of the Bible.⁶ Popular images of these peoples and lands also continued to be shaped by such classics as the *Thousand and One Nights*, refracted through a multitude of travelers' accounts, literary works, and adventure stories for adults and children set in an Orient that was strange, exotic and sometimes threatening. There was, by contrast, relatively little interest in how the indigenous inhabitants of these lands actually lived, what they thought, or how they saw the world.⁷

The age of European encroachment

In the summer of 1798, as the revival of scholarly Orientalism was just getting under way, a French army commanded by an ambitious young general named Napoleon Bonaparte landed near Alexandria, in Egypt.

At the time, Egypt was nominally a province of the Ottoman empire, but in reality it had long been dominated by a Turkish-speaking military caste known as the Mamluks. Revolutionary France was at war with Britain and most of the monarchies of Europe, and by invading Egypt the French government hoped to acquire a potentially valuable new colony, undermine British naval control of the eastern Mediterranean, and perhaps even secure a springboard for an eventual invasion of British-ruled India.

Before invading Egypt Napoleon had sought to learn all he could about the country; among his most valuable sources were the Comte de Volney's 1787 account of his travels in Egypt and Syria, and another book by Volney on the current state of the Ottoman empire. Though in his books Volney had discussed the prospects for French colonial expansion in the Levant, he had expressed pessimism about such a project. Yet the fact that he could even entertain the idea, and that just a few years later his careful study of Egypt and Syria would be used to help make that project a reality, suggests the close connection between what contemporary Europeans were thinking and writing about the Levant and the imminent exertion of European power over it.

Napoleon's army quickly defeated the Mamluks, proceeded to conquer most of Egypt and tried to conquer Syria as well. The French saw themselves as bringing science and civilization to the benighted Orient, and so a team of scholars and scientists accompanied Napoleon's forces to Egypt, where they conducted comprehensive studies of the country's geography, population, archeological remains, economy and technology, later published in many volumes as the *Description de l'Egypte*. It was French soldiers in Napoleon's army in Egypt who in 1799 found a stone bearing inscriptions (the "Rosetta stone") which would later allow Champollion and others to begin to decipher the written language of ancient Egypt. But the French expedition to Egypt was short-lived and ended in failure: by 1801 the British and their ally the Ottomans had compelled the French forces occupying Egypt to surrender and withdraw. Napoleon himself had long since returned to France, where he used his initial victories in Egypt as a springboard for seizing power and eventually making himself dictator and later emperor. Nonetheless, the French invasion of Egypt inaugurated a new era in which the lands of the Middle East and North Africa would be increasingly subject to European economic and political encroachment, and finally European colonial rule (see Map 3).

In 1830 France invaded Algeria, which the French had come to see as a prime site for colonial expansion. Algerians resisted the French conquest by force of arms, and decades would pass before indigenous resistance was completely crushed, with great brutality. France eventually came to

regard Algeria as a territory in which colonists from France and other European countries could be settled, on land seized from Algerians. The European settlers in Algeria (which the French came to treat not as a colony but as a part of France that happened to be situated on the other side of the Mediterranean) became a privileged elite, endowed with all the rights of French citizens, while the Muslim majority was disenfranchised, dispossessed and largely impoverished. In 1881–83, the French seized Algeria's neighbor Tunisia and made it into a protectorate, nominally autonomous under a local dynasty but in reality completely under French control. In 1912, after extensive maneuvering among the European powers, most of Morocco fell under French control, with a portion placed under Spanish rule. By that time the French had also carved out a vast empire to Morocco's south, in Saharan and sub-Saharan Africa, while Italy had invaded Libya, the last Ottoman province in North Africa. The Ottomans were in no position to block the Italian invasion, but Libyan resistance to Italian conquest continued for twenty years.

Britain's imperial interests lay further east, in Egypt, the Persian Gulf and Persia itself. After the withdrawal of the French in 1801, Egypt came to be ruled by Mehmet Ali (known in Arabic as Muhammad Ali), an Albanian Muslim who had arrived in Egypt as an officer with the Ottoman forces. Muhammad Ali won autonomy from the Ottomans and rapidly restructured Egypt's finances, economy, military and administration in order to secure the country and its resources for himself and his family and create a state which could withstand not only Ottoman claims but also the very real threat of European encroachment. But some of the measures he and his successors implemented had a paradoxical effect: for example, the large-scale planting of cotton, which Muhammad Ali envisioned as a lucrative export crop, eventually bound Egypt ever more tightly to the Europe-centered world economy. Similarly, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 dramatically enhanced Egypt's geostrategic as well as economic importance, especially to Britain, which wanted to control this vital link in the fast route to its most important colony, India.

Muhammad Ali's successors borrowed heavily from European banks in order to bolster their grip on Egypt and develop its infrastructure, and by the mid-1870s the country was bankrupt. European financial control was imposed to ensure that European banks and investors who held Egyptian bonds were repaid, which provoked demands from nationalist Egyptian army officers and civilians for an end to European interference in Egypt's affairs and constitutional government. In 1882 British forces occupied Egypt to overthrow a nationalist government which seemed to threaten European financial and political influence. Britain would remain in full control of Egypt until 1922, when the country was granted limited

self-rule, and a greater measure of independence would be achieved in 1936. But the last British soldiers would not be withdrawn from Egypt until 1956, and they would be back just a few months later when Britain, France and Israel jointly attacked Egypt in the ill-fated "Suez campaign."

The British also made themselves the dominant power on the southern and eastern fringes of the Arabian peninsula during the nineteenth century, seizing the port of Aden in 1839 for use as a coaling station on the route to India and establishing de facto protectorates over many of the small Arab principalities along the west coast of the Persian Gulf. Britain and Russia came to dominate Persia's foreign trade and a growing proportion of its economy and together exerted powerful political influence over that country, though it remained nominally independent.

In a series of wars in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Russia seized extensive lands which had once been under direct or indirect Ottoman control around the Black Sea, and additional territories in the Caucasus which had previously been ruled by or subject to Persia. Tsarist Russia expanded by conquering and annexing adjacent lands rather than by seizing overseas territories, as Britain and France had done; but all three empires (along with the Dutch in what is today Indonesia) had by the end of the nineteenth century come to encompass large numbers of Muslim subjects.

The Ottoman empire, once the most powerful and feared state in Europe, managed to survive through the nineteenth century – but only barely. With the support of Russia and/or Austria, and sometimes of other European powers, many of the largely Christian provinces the Ottomans had long ruled in southeastern Europe revolted and broke away to form more or less independent states (Serbia, Greece, Romania, Bulgaria and Montenegro), while Austria took control of the heavily Muslim provinces of Bosnia and Herzegovina. To preserve what was left of the empire and prevent its complete dismemberment, the Ottoman ruling elite desperately sought to modernize its military and administrative institutions, with limited success. The Ottoman empire thus remained weak and on the defensive, and the "Eastern Question" – the fate of the Ottoman empire and disputes among the European states which coveted its territories – preoccupied European statesmen and caused a series of diplomatic crises down to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914.

The rise of *homo islamicus*

As I suggested earlier, in the nineteenth century the ways in which European scholars, writers and artists analyzed, imagined and depicted the Orient were often intertwined, in complex ways, with the reality of

growing European power over those peoples and lands. This is not to suggest that every Orientalist was a conscious agent of imperialism or that every scholarly or artistic product of Orientalism served to justify or legitimate colonialism; as we will see, there was never an entirely monolithic European stance toward Islam, Muslims, the Orient or colonialism. At the same time, however, the dramatic expansion in this period of European power over vast stretches of the Muslim world served to bolster certain premises and assumptions, certain ways of understanding and defining Islam and the Orient (as well as the West) rather than others. This in turn made it more likely that scholars would define what they were studying, and the questions they were asking, in certain ways rather than others, yielding interpretations which in turn served to bolster largely taken-for-granted assumptions about the sources and character of Western superiority and of Islam's inferiority and decadence.

One key (but never uncontested) element of mainstream nineteenth-century European (and later American) thought about the Orient was a particular conception of the difference between East and West. Alongside the fascination with the Orient characteristic of segments of the Romantic movement, there developed a widespread (but of course never universal) sense that Westerners were fundamentally different from, and culturally superior to, Muslims and everyone else now defined as non-Western. Maxime Rodinson effectively summarized the shift in European attitudes:

The Oriental may always have been characterized as a savage enemy, but during the Middle Ages, he was at least considered on the same level as his European counterpart. And, to the men of the Enlightenment, the ideologues of the French revolution, the Oriental was, for all his foreignness in appearance and dress, above all a man like anyone else. In the nineteenth century, however, he became something quite separate, sealed off in his own specificity, yet worthy of a kind of grudging admiration. This is the origin of the *homo islamicus*, a notion widely accepted even today.⁸

For Rodinson the term *homo islamicus* (Latin for "Islamic man") referred to the perception that the Muslim constituted a distinct type of human being, essentially different from "Western man." As I have already discussed, western Europeans were coming to see themselves as belonging to a distinct and unique civilization, the West, which was fundamentally different from all other civilizations, including Islam. Underpinning this view of the world was the premise that the key entities into which humankind was divided were not states or empires but civilizations, each with its own distinctive essence and its unique core values which powerfully shaped the consciousness and actions of those subject

to it. Human history was thus essentially the story of the rise and decline of civilizations.

The view of history as a succession of civilizations (and of Islam as a once-great civilization now in decay) was widely accepted in the nineteenth century and remains powerful even today. The idea was central to the thinking of the enormously influential German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel (1770–1831). Hegel portrayed the history of humanity as the story of the successive rise and fall of civilizations, each of which contributed something from its own unique spirit or "genius" and then faded away. For Hegel this manifested the process whereby what he called the "Absolute Spirit" – his term for the totality of all that is real, actually a sort of philosophical reconceptualization of God – moved dialectically toward self-consciousness. As Hegel saw it, the historical trajectory of the Absolute Spirit ran from east to west, from its infancy in the Orient via Greece and Rome to adulthood with the rise of the Germanic peoples. Along the way the Jews had contributed monotheism, the belief in one all-powerful and all-knowing god rather than many, while the relatively minor role of Islam had been to preserve and hand on to Europe the heritage of Greek and Roman civilization, after which it had faded into senescence. Now, in the nineteenth century, all the older civilizations had disappeared or decayed, but the Absolute Spirit could finally achieve full self-knowledge in the modern West – more precisely, in Hegel's native Germany.

But even many of those less inclined to grandiose philosophical-historical schemes accepted the civilization as the basic unit of historical analysis and traced the roots of the civilization they termed the West back to ancient Greece, where they believed that many of the core values and beliefs which they saw as the distinguishing characteristics of Western civilization – including liberty, democracy, philosophy, science and rationalism – first surfaced in human history. It was this conviction that would allow the English philosopher and economist John Stuart Mill (1806–73) to assert that "the Battle of Marathon [where the Greeks defeated the Persians in 490 BCE], even as an event in English history, is more important than the battle of Hastings [where the invading Normans defeated the Anglo-Saxons in 1066 CE]."⁹ This assertion could make sense to Mill (and others) because they saw Athens in the fifth century BCE as the direct and necessary progenitor of nineteenth-century English culture and liberty, a perspective which had the effect of dismissing much of what had happened over the course of the intervening twenty centuries and rendering invisible or unimportant many other factors and processes which had shaped England's historical development.

Well into the twentieth century, many historians and philosophers advanced similar views. The philosopher Oswald Spengler (1880–1936), whose influential book *The Decline of the West* was published after the First World War, traced what he saw as the growth and decay of successive civilizations, culminating in the contemporary West, which he argued had now entered its final stage of development. Arnold Toynbee (1889–1975), a prominent British historian who was influenced by Spengler and who had a significant impact on several generations of historians, including some who wrote about Islam and the Middle East, also accepted the premise that civilizations, which he saw as large, coherent and relatively stable cultural entities, were the proper unit of analysis for historians. In his monumental twelve-volume work *A Study of History*, published between 1934 and 1961, he undertook a comparative study of twenty-one civilizations (including Islam) in recorded history, tracing their origins and development and attributing their ultimate decline to an inability to respond adequately to moral and religious challenges. Though many scholars criticized Toynbee's tendency to make sweeping historical generalizations and his reading of history along Christian teleological lines, we will see later on that aspects of the approach he adopted remain influential to this day.

Orientalists and others who took this view of human history for granted regarded Islamic civilization as having arisen, young and vigorous, in the seventh century, reached the height of its political and military might and cultural glory (its "golden age") in the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries under the 'Abbasid dynasty whose capital was Baghdad, and then gradually lost its vigor, its powers of cultural creativity, its ability to absorb and be enriched by new ideas and cultural influences. The Ottomans constituted something of a last gasp, a final burst of territorial expansion and perhaps cultural flowering, before the inexorable decline of Islamic civilization resumed. In this view Islam grew increasingly rigid, inflexible, tyrannical, intolerant, and hostile to outside influences, and thus proved unable to absorb and keep up with dynamic new ideas and techniques first developed elsewhere, in the West. As the West surged ahead, Islam slipped into social and cultural stasis and political despotism.

In keeping with this interpretation of history, nineteenth-century European Orientalist scholarship tended to focus on what scholars saw as Islam's "classical" period, from its rise to the period in which it had supposedly reached its zenith and attained its purest form; everything thereafter was regarded as largely a story of decline and degeneration, or at least cultural and social rigidity and stasis. Moreover, a view of Islam as a coherent and distinctive civilization with an essentially unitary culture led many Orientalists to assume that the dominant ideas and institutions

of all Muslim societies, and the ways in which Muslims behaved and interacted in all places and times, were at bottom expressions of Islam's unchanging cultural essence, its core values and ideas, which could best be understood by studying texts from its classical period. As a result Orientalist scholars tended to be less interested in the ways in which the thinking and behavior of Muslim communities varied from place to place or changed over time – that is, in the persistent diversity and complexity of Muslim belief and practice – or in what contemporary Muslims actually did and thought and how they lived.

In other words, the implicit or explicit premise of much of nineteenth-century Orientalist scholarship was that there was indeed a *homo islamicus*, a distinctive "Islamic man" with a more or less fixed mindset that was fundamentally different from, indeed absolutely opposed to, the mindset of "Western man." The essential characteristics of the members of this subspecies could be identified by the use of philological methods to study certain key texts which were regarded as embodying the core principles of Islamic civilization. The Qur'an was naturally deemed to rank first among these, followed by a relatively limited set of religious, moral, philosophical and legal writings generated by the learned elite before Islam's decline set in. Through the study of these key texts scholars believed that they could deduce the characteristics of "the Muslim mind," on the assumption that all Muslims, from the rise of Islam until the present, were constrained to think and believe and act within the rigid limits set by the essential character of the civilization to which they belonged. The upshot of the prevalence of this paradigm, and of the philological methods which underpinned it, was that, despite the enormous erudition of the best of the nineteenth-century Orientalist scholars and the very important contributions they made to scholarship on Islam, over time the field would become rather isolated and introverted, unwilling or unable to change in order to make better sense of a changing world and of new intellectual perspectives.

Orientalism thus took shape within the context of a retreat from Enlightenment universalism on the part of many in Europe and a new (or renewed) insistence on the differences among peoples and civilizations, with the modern West set at the pinnacle of a new hierarchy of human evolution. By the end of the nineteenth century this perspective was supplemented by a much more pernicious notion of how humanity was divided up, mentioned briefly in Chapter 2. Influenced by certain (mis)interpretations of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution as the product of natural selection and by the triumphal march of European imperialism, some European and American thinkers began to argue that the cultural and political superiority of the West was the result not simply of

that civilization's superior values and institutions – which non-Western peoples might with proper tutelage eventually assimilate – but rather of the superior innate biological characteristics of the “white” race – often referred to as “Aryan” or “Caucasian.” In this view, which came to be widely accepted among respectable scientists and intellectuals and shaped much of academic scholarship, humanity was naturally divided into distinct biological groups, with a clear hierarchy of superior and inferior races.

Not surprisingly, most of the inhabitants of Africa and Asia were deemed to belong to biologically inferior races which were by nature less intelligent and less capable of achieving civilization than was the white race – a system of classification which of course made European colonial rule seem natural and inevitable. As the popular American journalist Lothrop Stoddard put it in his 1921 book *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy*:

Out of the prehistoric shadows the white races pressed to the front and proved in a myriad of ways their fitness for the hegemony of mankind. Gradually they forged a common civilization; then, when vouchsafed their unique opportunity of oceanic mastery four centuries ago, they spread over the earth, filling its empty spaces with their superior breeds and assuring to themselves an unparalleled paramouncy of numbers and dominion . . . [A]t last the planet was integrated under the hegemony of a single race with a common civilization.¹⁰

Though there were always many scholars and others who denounced biological racism as unscientific and pernicious, much of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Euro-American discourse about the world – including the Muslim Orient – was to varying degrees infected by racial ideology. And most of those who rejected an explicitly biological racism nonetheless accepted the widespread and extremely durable assumption that one could best characterize and categorize different ethnic groups, races, peoples and civilizations in terms of more or less fixed cultural essences, an assumption which remains influential down to the present days.

Ernest Renan and his interlocutors

For a better understanding of this assumption, which some have argued was central to nineteenth-century Orientalism, and for a sense of some of the ideas about Islam widespread in the West, we can turn to Ernest Renan (1823–92). In the latter part of the nineteenth century Renan was widely regarded as France's pre-eminent philologist and scholar of religion. Though he wrote mainly on Christianity and Judaism and was not

trained or regarded as an Orientalist, Renan's perspective on Islam and the contemporary Muslim world – expressed quite clearly and forcefully in a widely circulated 1883 Sorbonne lecture titled “Islam and Science” – can give us some insight into how many Orientalists (and other intellectuals but also government officials and the educated public) understood Islam and the contemporary Muslim world at this time.¹¹

Although Renan began his lecture by criticizing those who spoke of races and nations as if they were unchanging and monolithic categories, his discussion of what he called “the actual inferiority of Mohammedan countries, the decadence of states governed by Islam, and the intellectual nullity of the races that hold, from that religion alone, their culture and their education” was clearly essentialist, in the sense of relying on a vision of Islam as a monolithic, unitary entity with an unchanging essence or character that, furthermore, totally controlled the mental life and social behavior of all Muslims everywhere.

All those who have been in the East, or in Africa, are struck by the way in which the mind of a true believer is fatally limited, by the species of iron circle that surrounds his head, rendering it absolutely closed to knowledge, incapable of either learning anything, or of being open to any new idea. From his religious initiation at the age of ten or twelve years, the Mohammedan child, who occasionally may be, up to that time, of some intelligence, at a blow becomes a fanatic, full of a stupid pride in the possession of what he believes to be the absolute truth, happy as with a privilege, with what makes his inferiority . . . The [Muslim] has the most profound disdain for instruction, for science, for everything that constitutes the European spirit. This bent of mind inculcated by the Mohammedan faith is so strong, that all differences of race and nationality disappear by the fact of conversion to Islam.

It is worth noting that here and throughout this essay, Renan spoke confidently of “the Mohammedan” in the singular, because for him all Muslims everywhere were essentially the same. Once someone became a Muslim, they apparently immediately lost whatever powers of reasoning they might have been born with (though for Renan Muslim children were only “occasionally” born with “some intelligence”) and became narrow-minded fanatics, robots who were entirely subservient to the prescriptions of their faith, which Renan believed could be deduced from Islam's key texts. Islam was, for Renan, inherently and eternally antirational and antiscientific; that was built into its very core, its essence, and could never change.

But how, Renan went on to ask, can we then explain the brilliance of Islamic science and philosophy in the Middle Ages, when Islamic civilization was “the mistress of the Christian West?” Renan dealt with this problem by asserting that Islam was initially a product of nomadic Arabs

who, like other "Semites," were utterly devoid of any interest in philosophy or science. Later, during the 'Abbasid period, ancient Persian civilization and the ancient Greek learning preserved by local Christians asserted themselves beneath an Islamic veneer and produced a flowering of philosophy, science and culture. The caliphs who patronized this cultural and intellectual efflorescence could, Renan argued, hardly be called Muslims, and though this civilization used the Arabic language it was not really Arab, it was essentially Greek and Persian – that is, "Aryan."

But then the "torch of humanity" which had for a moment blazed so brightly in the Orient expired and passed into other hands: "this West of ours was fully awakening out of its slumber . . . Europe had found her genius, and was commencing upon that extraordinary evolution, the last term of which will be the complete emancipation of the human mind." Soon the "Turkish race" came to dominate in most Muslim lands and "caused the universal prevalence of its total lack of philosophical and scientific spirit," plunging them into intellectual decadence. For Renan as for many other contemporary European social and historical thinkers, race thus played a key explanatory role: the Arab race was deemed to be inherently incapable of – even hostile to – philosophical or scientific thought; the Turks were similarly defective; but among the (Aryan) Persians intellectual curiosity and creativity continued to flourish even after they became Muslims. It therefore did not matter to Renan what the great medieval Muslim philosophers and scientists may have thought about who they were or about the relationship between their faith and the use of reason: Islam was by definition everywhere and always implacably opposed to the free use of human reason, and if these people contributed to human thought it must have been because their innate racial characteristics triumphed over the strictures of the faith they professed.

Today, Renan went on, Islam "oppresses vast portions of our globe, and in them maintains the idea most opposed to progress, – the state founded on a pseudo-Revelation, theology governing society. The liberals who defend Islam do not know its real nature. Islam is the close union of the spiritual and the temporal; it is the reign of a dogma, it is the heaviest chain that humanity has ever borne . . . What is, in fact, essentially distinctive of the Moslem is his hatred of science, his persuasion that research is useless, frivolous, almost impious . . ." Unlike the "liberals" he attacked, Renan claimed to understand Islam's true nature: it must everywhere and always be a hindrance to progress and an enemy to reason. Here Renan's characterization of Islam as a "pseudo-Revelation" echoes medieval Christian polemics, while the tone of his language hints at an animosity toward Islam that does not sit well with his claim to speak as a disinterested scholar.

Renan concluded with an endorsement of the use of European military might to contain or suppress anticolonial resistance. He praised science as the very soul of civilized society and expressed pleasure that "it gives force for the service of reason." "In Asia," Renan warned, "there are elements of barbarism analogous to those that formed the early Moslem armies, and the great cyclones of Attila and Genghis Khan. But science bars the way. If [the early Muslim caliph] Omar or Genghis Khan had found good artillery confronting them, they would never have passed the borders of their desert . . . What was not said at the beginning against fire-arms, which nevertheless have contributed much to the victory of civilisation?"

That Renan was as disparaging about Jews and Judaism as he was about Arabs, Turks, Muslims and Islam, and that his writings on Christianity scandalized devout Catholics, is no great consolation: he was in his day a very influential scholar and intellectual and his opinions were widely shared across Europe and beyond, helping to foster a derogatory attitude toward Islam and a sense of Western superiority which in turn legitimized European colonialism. Yet Renan's views were by no means universally shared, even among contemporary students of Islam. For example, Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921), a scholar of Hungarian Jewish extraction who was one of the pre-eminent founders of modern Arabic and Islamic studies, strongly criticized what he regarded as Renan's overblown and unsupported pronouncements on the moral, cultural and intellectual inferiority of the "Semitic" peoples (Jews as well as Arabs) and rejected his claim that every ethnic or racial group possessed a unique spirit and mindset to which its cultural achievements (or alleged lack thereof) could be attributed.¹² Instead, Goldziher argued that the origins and development of Islamic civilization should be studied by means of a close and historically contextualized reading of key sources. Those who adopted this approach, among them many Central European scholars but also others, would constitute an influential strand within European Orientalism into the twentieth century.

But Renan's views also faced criticism from other directions. When Renan derisively referred to naive "liberals who defend Islam" in his lecture at the Sorbonne, one of those he probably had in mind was Wilfred Scawen Blunt (1840–1922), an Englishman who became interested in Islam and vigorously opposed the British occupation of Egypt in 1882, as well as British colonialism in Ireland and India. Blunt argued that Islam was compatible with human reason and could be re-interpreted so as to serve the needs of modern Muslims.¹³ The ideas Blunt expressed were largely those of the Muslim intellectuals with whom he was in close contact, for by the late nineteenth century there were lively debates across

The Muslim world about how to resist European colonial encroachment and about what Muslims might utilize from Western science and technology, as well as from the Islamic tradition, to enable them to address the challenges faced by their societies.

Educated Muslims were also increasingly aware of what Europeans were saying about them and about Islam, and some were trying to have their own perspectives taken into account. In fact, Renan's pronouncements on Islam and science did not go unanswered. A few weeks after Renan's lecture at the Sorbonne a French newspaper published a letter from a leading Muslim activist who was then living in Paris and who had met Renan through a mutual acquaintance. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani (1838/9–97) was born and raised a Shi'i Muslim in Iran and was trained as a Shi'i man of religion, but because he wanted to have an impact in the wider Sunni Muslim world he concealed his origins and claimed instead to be of Afghan Sunni origin. Al-Afghani (whom Ignaz Goldziher also got to know during a stay in Egypt in the early 1870s) was a sort of professional agitator and propagandist: he traveled across the Muslim world, from India to Afghanistan to Iran to the Ottoman empire to Egypt, as well as through Europe, urging Muslims to work together to reform their societies and resist the imminent threat of colonial domination.

In his letter al-Afghani praised Renan's erudition and insight but rejected his argument that the greatness of Islamic civilization owed nothing to the Arabs. Al-Afghani agreed that Islam had tried to stifle science; indeed, among Muslims as among Christians, "so long as humanity exists the struggle will not cease between dogma and free investigation, between religion and philosophy." But, al-Afghani went on, "I cannot keep from hoping that Muhammadan society will succeed someday in breaking its bonds and marching resolutely in the path of civilization after the manner of Western society, for which the Christian faith, despite its rigors and intolerance, was not at all an invincible obstacle."¹⁴

Renan began his response to Jamal al-Din al-Afghani's letter by situating him within a familiar system of racial categories. "The Sheik Gemmal Eddin is an Afghan," Renan explained, "entirely emancipated from the prejudices of Islam; he belongs to those energetic races of the Upper Iran bordering upon India, in which the Aryan spirit still flourishes so strongly, under the superficial garb of Islam. He is the best proof of that great axiom, which we have often proclaimed, that the worth of religions is to be determined by the worth of the races that profess them . . . The Sheik Gemmal Eddin is the finest case of racial protest against religious conquest that could be cited." Renan claimed that he had not asserted that all Muslims must always be sunk in ignorance; but he insisted that the regeneration of Muslim lands could not come about through the reform

of Islam but only through its enfeeblement, through the emancipation of the Muslim from his own religion, primarily by means of education, just as enlightened Europeans had abandoned orthodox Christianity and embraced reason and science instead.

We do not know what else Jamal al-Din al-Afghani might have had to say to Ernest Renan, who will therefore have the last word in this exchange. And indeed, despite sporadic criticism from Muslims and from dissident Europeans, views like those expressed by Renan remained very influential well into the twentieth century, among scholars but also among the European public at large, including those most directly concerned with governing European colonies with substantial Muslim populations.

Karl Marx and Oriental despotism

The image of the Orient as essentially different from the West, and the accompanying sense that Western rule was necessary to bring civilization and progress to the Orient, were pervasive in the broader intellectual arena, to the extent that we can find variants of them in what may initially seem surprising places. By way of illustration let us look at what one of the most radical social thinkers of the nineteenth century had to say about the character of Asian societies and about what differentiated them from the West.

Karl Marx (1818–83), the great critic and theorist of capitalism and the founder of what he termed "scientific socialism," devoted most of his life to analyzing the workings of capitalism, in order (as he saw it) to equip the working class with the understanding it needed to overthrow that oppressive and exploitative social order and create a more just and egalitarian mode of human social life. While he was well aware that colonial pillage, coercion and slavery in the Americas and elsewhere had helped jump-start capitalist development in Europe, he was primarily interested in how capitalism operated as a socioeconomic system in Europe itself, and particularly in Britain, which he saw as the world's most advanced capitalist society and thus a model for the rest of the world. But along the way he did briefly address the question of why capitalism had developed first in western Europe and not in the initially much richer and more populous lands of Asia. The answer he gave to this question illustrates how what we today might see as Eurocentric premises informed the work of even as vigorous a critic of capitalism and of the costs of European colonialism as Karl Marx.

In 1853 Marx published two short articles on British rule in India in the *New York Daily Tribune*, to which he contributed regularly for a while.¹⁵ As he saw it, Indian society, like other Asian societies, had been essentially

static and unchanging for thousands of years: "All the civil wars, invasions, revolutions, conquests, famines, strangely complex, rapid and destructive as the successive action in [India] may appear, did not go deeper than the surface." The real reason for this, Marx argued, had to do with climate, geography and social structure. Arid climatic conditions made artificial irrigation necessary across much of Asia, from Egypt to Mesopotamia to Persia to India, and this meant that a strong central government was needed to build and maintain the irrigation systems on which agriculture depended. This was, Marx suggested, the economic basis for the despotism so characteristic of Asian societies, where rapacious and all-powerful governments owned the land and collected taxes from the great bulk of the population living since time immemorial in their largely self-sufficient village communities.

Marx's sparse and scattered remarks on the character of Asian societies would later be developed into the concept of an "Asiatic mode of production," distinct from the other major modes of production delineated by Marx: the "primitive communism" of early human societies, slavery, feudalism and capitalism. The basic elements of this Asiatic mode of production stand out most starkly when contrasted with the feudal system which Marx saw as characteristic of medieval Europe. In European feudal societies the king was relatively weak and the land (and its revenues) were largely controlled by a hierarchy of hereditary nobles; the dispersion of power this created allowed for the emergence of an increasingly wealthy and ambitious city-based mercantile class, the bourgeoisie, the bearer of a new social order, capitalism, which eventually undermined, destroyed and replaced the old feudal order. In Asian societies, on the other hand, power was concentrated in the hands of the absolute ruler, the despot, who also controlled almost all land; there was no independent hereditary aristocracy, only a mass of peasants working the land and paying taxes to the state, i.e. the ruler. With no opportunity for a vigorous bourgeoisie to emerge, these societies were essentially stationary and capitalism could not develop in them until it was introduced from the outside by European traders, investors and colonists.

Marx fully recognized the disruption and suffering which British rule had brought to India, but he urged his readers to remember that Oriental despotism had imprisoned the human mind and condemned those who lived under it to an "undignified, stagnatory, and vegetative life." "Indian society has no history at all," Marx went on, "at least no known history. What we call its history, is but the history of the successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society." But unlike previous conquerors, who never dreamed of interfering with the existing social order, the British were

driven by rapacious greed and the capitalist drive for profit to undermine the village communities, the very basis of Indian society, and destroy native industry. This amounted, Marx argued, to the beginnings of a fundamental social revolution in India, one which was destroying the old order and laying "the material foundations of Western society in Asia." As Marx and his collaborator Friedrich Engels had written fifteen years earlier in the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*,

the bourgeoisie, by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all, even the most barbarian, nations into civilization. The cheap prices of its commodities are the heavy artillery with which it batters down all Chinese walls, with which it forces the barbarians' intensely obstinate hatred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e. to become bourgeois themselves. In a word, it creates a world after its own image.¹⁶

Thus the British had introduced private ownership of agricultural land in India, enriching a handful of Indian landowners while dispossessing and impoverishing many millions of peasants; British capitalists were building railways in India, not to benefit the Indian people but to increase their profits; factories would soon follow, bringing a working class into being; and so on. Though the human costs of these profound transformations would certainly be terrible, a capitalist society would emerge in India as it had emerged elsewhere. The people of India would, however, not reap the potential benefits of this disruptive and painful development unless there was social revolution in Britain or until the Indians succeeded in freeing themselves from British colonial rule.

It is clear that Marx embraced an image of Asian societies which was in reality based on crude generalizations and a very faulty understanding of their (quite diverse) histories and social structures. Moreover, like many of his contemporaries, if for very different reasons, Marx saw colonialism as a necessary and progressive factor in human history: despite its brutalities, it enabled capitalism to realize its "historic mission" of transforming the entire globe, thus creating the conditions which would foster the eventual emergence of another, more equitable social order. As Engels put it in 1848, commenting on a particularly brutal episode of colonial expansion, "the [French] conquest of Algeria is an important and fortunate fact for the progress of civilization . . . All these nations of free barbarians look very proud, noble, and glorious at a distance, but only come near them and you will find that they, as well as the more civilized nations, are ruled by the lust of gain, and only employ ruder and more cruel means. And after all, the modern *bourgeois*, with civilization, industry, order, and

at least relative enlightenment following him, is preferable to the feudal lord or to the marauding robber, with the barbarian state of society to which they belong."¹⁷

However, it should also be kept in mind that unlike many of his contemporaries, Marx did not believe that Asians were racially inferior to Europeans or inherently incapable of achieving modern civilization. Nor did he downplay the horrendous price which Asian peoples would have to pay as a result of colonial rule and the development of capitalism. Moreover, Marx insisted that the static character of Asian societies had an essentially economic basis – the alleged absence of private property in land in these societies and thus the absence of class conflict – rather than being the result of defects in their psyches, cultures or religions, and he could envision the day when Asian peoples would overthrow their colonial masters.

Marx's portrayal of the character and historical trajectory of the non-Western world has engendered considerable debate down to the present day. Marx's analysis of precapitalist Asian societies and their history was obviously rooted in the Oriental despotism model. On the other hand, as I will discuss in Chapters 5 and 6, scholars using Marxian modes of social and historical analysis would from the 1960s onward play a leading role in criticizing that same model, the related portrayal of Islam as a stagnant civilization, and the broader claim that it was only the impact of the West which led to change in these essentially static societies, and in elaborating powerful alternatives. In effect, those scholars would use Marx's methods to challenge some of Marx's own pronouncements.

Max Weber and the sociology of Islam

The central (if often unacknowledged) role which the elaboration of a sharp distinction between the West and the rest of the world played in shaping modern European social thought can also be discerned in the work of Max Weber (1864–1920), widely regarded as one of the founders of modern historical sociology. Weber's influential (if often disputed) analysis of how the "Protestant ethic" had helped foster the "spirit of capitalism" in Europe has frequently been regarded as an attempt to refute Marx's insistence on the primacy of material forces, and the class conflict they produced, in driving social change. Yet as a British sociologist who studied what both men had to say about Islam put it, "the outline, assumptions and implications of their perspectives on Asian-European contrasts are very similar."¹⁸

For Weber – who drew on contemporary Orientalist scholarship, for which Germany had become a major center by the late nineteenth

century – as for Marx and for many other observers down to our own day, Muslim societies were weak and backward because they lacked many of the key institutions which enabled Western societies to become wealthy and powerful. In feudal Europe property rights were protected by law and autonomous cities could emerge, opening the way for the flourishing of a bourgeoisie and the development of capitalism. In Muslim lands, however, powerful "patrimonial" states dependent largely on the military and the bureaucracy dominated all of social and economic life and most of society's resources, including land. Weber used the term "sultanism" to characterize the political systems of these patrimonial states, whose rulers he saw as rapacious and arbitrary despots unencumbered by any effective limits on their power over their subjects. As a result Islamic societies failed to develop institutions and centers of power independent of the state, including a vigorous urban middle class, autonomous cities or a system of rational formal law (as opposed to the sacred law of Islam), leading to stagnation and social decay.

Weber's views on Islam, like those of Marx on Asian societies in general, drew on the powerful tradition in European thought I discussed in Chapter 2, from Renaissance political thinkers to Montesquieu to Hegel to James Mill and John Stuart Mill and beyond. In this tradition, which as we have seen also drew on contemporary Orientalist understandings of the essential characteristics of Islamic civilization, Muslim and other Asian societies were classified as Oriental despotisms, the very antithesis of modern Western political and social systems. Moreover, in much of nineteenth- and twentieth-century sociological thought those societies were judged deficient because they allegedly lacked many of the features and institutions which modern European societies seemed to possess and which had supposedly enabled Europeans to achieve progress, knowledge, wealth and power. This way of contrasting Islamic societies to an idealized model of European history and society provided a basis for depicting the former as culturally or racially defective and fatally mired in tradition and backwardness.

As I will discuss in more detail in subsequent chapters, the sharp dichotomies on which these contrasts are based – between Western freedom and Oriental servitude, between Western law and Oriental arbitrariness, between Western modernity and Oriental tradition, between private property in land in the West and its absence in the Orient, and so on – have been subjected to intense challenge in recent decades. Scholars of both Europe and the Middle East have argued that neither European nor Middle Eastern societies actually conformed to the patterns of historical development which the nineteenth-century model and its twentieth-century successors ascribed to them. On the European side it has become

increasingly obvious that these models generalize very crudely from a highly questionable interpretation of English and to a lesser extent French history; on the Middle Eastern side research has shown that it is based on a very faulty understanding of those societies and their histories. For example, it turns out that although Middle Eastern states like the Ottoman empire generally did claim formal legal ownership of most agricultural land, in many places peasants and local power-holders were nonetheless able to buy, sell and mortgage land well before the nineteenth century, thereby undermining one of the key pillars of the Oriental despotism model and its explanation of those societies' alleged stagnation. To criticize these dichotomies is not, of course, to suggest that there are no significant differences among societies and their patterns of historical development. It is simply to insist that we resist overarching generalizations based on unexamined premises and meager empirical data, and be wary of approaches to history and modes of social analysis that deem one society's path of development "normal" and then judge all others by how they measure up to that impossible and inevitably misleading standard.

Orientalist knowledge and colonial power

Most nineteenth-century Orientalist scholars saw themselves as simply and wholly devoted to the disinterested pursuit of objective knowledge and had no direct or indirect involvement in policy-making; and in fact many of them produced scholarly work of lasting value, laying the foundations of modern Arabic and Islamic studies on which future generations of scholars would build. Moreover, not all European scholars of Islam and the Orient shared the same views: some expressed admiration for Islam while others disparaged it, some enthusiastically supported colonial expansion while others opposed it. Nonetheless, as we will see in more detail later, scholars in the 1970s and beyond would argue forcefully that Orientalism as an intellectual enterprise was in significant ways linked to contemporary European colonialism and that the kind of knowledge Orientalism as a discipline tended to produce was often used to justify and further the exertion of European power over the Muslim world.

At the most general level, if one assumed that the West and Islam were fundamentally different civilizations which operated on essentially incompatible principles, it was only natural to accept that there was indeed a distinct *homo islamicus* who in his beliefs, attitudes toward life and social habits was the polar opposite of modern Western man. Given the decline into which Islam had seemingly fallen and the assumed superiority of Western civilization, it seemed reasonable to conclude that to achieve

progress the Orient must emulate the West. Western influence could therefore easily be seen as a wholly positive force which would bring the blessings of modern civilization to an exhausted, stagnant and defective Muslim world unable to revive itself by its own efforts. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the zenith of European colonialism, Western influence increasingly meant Western rule. It was thus no great leap to endorse the exercise of Western tutelage over non-Westerners – in a word, colonialism – or at least to take for granted the reality and morality of Western hegemony.

At the same time, a substantial number of individual Orientalists and the institutions with which they were connected were ready and willing to put their expertise at the service of their 'countries' colonial ambitions. Silvestre de Sacy, the foremost Orientalist scholar of his generation, advised the French government on Islam and the Orient and among many other services translated into Arabic the proclamation which that government issued when it invaded Algeria in 1830. Later in the century, the prominent Dutch Orientalist scholar Snouck Hurgronje (1857–1936), who studied mystical tendencies in Islam, helped the Dutch government formulate and implement policy toward the Muslim population of its colonies in Indonesia. Russian Orientalists helped the Tsarist government formulate policies designed to pacify, control and assimilate the empire's Muslim subjects, and if possible even convert them to Christianity.¹⁹

Scholarly institutions were also often deeply involved in the colonial enterprise. The Société Asiatique which Sacy had helped found, and the other new learned societies and academic disciplines which sprang up in France and elsewhere in Europe around the same time to foster the study of non-Western peoples and cultures, generally took colonialism for granted. Western rule over non-Western lands was the reality that to a large extent shaped their intellectual horizons and framed the questions in which they took an interest. And Islam was often seen as a threat or a challenge to European colonial power, or at least a real or potential problem for it.

Even German scholars of Islam, citizens of a country which had relatively few Muslim subjects and which toward the end of the nineteenth century established an alliance with the Ottoman empire and portrayed itself as Islam's protector against British and French encroachment, were sometimes engaged with colonial questions. The eminent German Orientalist Carl Becker (1876–1933), founding editor of *Der Islam*, Germany's first journal devoted to the contemporary Muslim world, is a case in point. In 1910, the same year in which *Der Islam* began publication, Becker addressed the National Colonial Conference in Berlin to oppose the demands of Christian missionaries that the

colonial authorities support their work in German-ruled Tanganyika. "The [German] Government," Becker argued, "in its policy should not be led by religious, but by national points of view . . . [Islam] must be regarded – at least in East Africa – though hostile to Christianity, as thoroughly capable of development in the direction of modern civilisation, if it be brought under the strong influence of European culture."²⁰

It should come as no great surprise that many Orientalists took for granted the superiority of Western civilization and the right of Europeans to rule over Asians and Africans: these assumptions were pervasive in nineteenth-century European culture. Though there were always those who rejected them and opposed colonialism and imperialism, most Europeans (and later Americans) sincerely embraced the notion of the "white man's burden" – the idea that the civilized white Europeans had a duty to exercise a firm but beneficent tutelage over what they regarded as the less advanced, child-like, dark-skinned races and guide them toward civilization. The French often spoke of their country's unique *mission civilisatrice*, its "civilizing mission" through which the blessings of French culture and the Enlightenment would be instilled in the inhabitants of the colonies. As one French colonial official put, "Our natives need to be governed. They are big children, incapable of going alone. We should guide them firmly, stand no nonsense from them, and crush intriguers and agents of sedition. At the same time we should protect them, direct them paternally, and especially obtain influence over them by the constant example of our moral superiority. Above all: no vain humanitarian illusions, both in the interest of France and of the natives themselves."²¹

We can see an example of the sometimes close relationship between "knowledge" about the Orient and colonial power over the Orient – as well as the growing influence of racial theories – in the way many French scholars and colonial officials categorized the inhabitants of Algeria in the nineteenth century and on into the twentieth. Just a few years before the launching of the French conquest of Algeria in 1830, a French scholar had advanced the theory that the inhabitants of that country's Kabyle region, who like a substantial portion of Algeria's population spoke a dialect of the Berber language rather than Arabic, were not only linguistically but also racially distinct from Arab Algerians. Unlike the "Semitic" Arabs, the Kabyles were, he claimed, a "Nordic people, descending directly from the [Germanic] Vandals, handsome with their blue eyes and blond hair." And whereas the Arabs were by nature servile, authoritarian and fanatical, the Kabyle Berbers were said to be egalitarian, free-spirited and rational. In subsequent decades some (though not all) French military men and colonial officials in Algeria embraced this view, which had no basis in reality, and went on to claim (just as fancifully) that the Kabyles were actually

descendants of the Christians who had lived in North Africa before the Muslim conquest and had retained their distinctive characteristics.

The propagation of what one scholar has called the "Kabyle myth," with its insistence on drawing a sharp distinction between Arabs and Kabyles (or Berbers in general), was not an idle exercise in ethnic or racial classification: it had concrete consequences. In keeping with the classic colonial strategy of divide and rule, some French officials sought to make the inhabitants of the Kabyle region into allies of French colonialism in Algeria and therefore implemented policies which favored the Kabyles in employment, education, taxation and representation. Moreover, the French tried to insist that the Kabyles be judged in accordance with their customary law instead of Islamic law while fostering Berber and suppressing Arabic in Kabyle schools. These policies, based on a highly tendentious and obviously racialized classification of Algeria's population, helped transform what had long been fluid and contingent forms of identity into fixed, officially sanctioned and officially enforced categories. French officials in Morocco implemented similar policies after the establishment of French rule there in 1912, hoping to separate that country's large Berber-speaking minority from its Arabic-speaking majority and thereby weaken Moroccan opposition to colonial domination.²²

Colonialism and Islam

The linkage between Orientalist knowledge and colonial policy-making is clearly manifested in an inquiry which a leading French journal devoted to colonial and foreign policy – *Questions diplomatiques et coloniales* – conducted in 1901. Asserting that France had become "a great Muslim power," the editors of the journal asked leading Orientalists to offer their views on the evolution of Islam in the twentieth century just begun.²³ Behind this inquiry lay a widespread European anxiety about "pan-Islam," the term (literally meaning "encompassing all Muslims," on the model of "pan-German" or "pan-American") which European colonial officials and experts on Islam used to denote the persistent feelings of solidarity among Muslims across national boundaries which, they feared, might be mobilized against colonial rule. At the very zenith of European global hegemony, Europeans conjured up vague but threatening notions of secretive cabals of cruel and fanatical Muslims plotting to overthrow colonial rule everywhere across the Muslim world in an orgy of bloodshed. At the beginning of the twentieth century, fear of the threat which pan-Islam allegedly posed to colonial domination was as widespread (and as exaggerated) as was Americans' fear of an "international communist conspiracy" run from the Kremlin during the 1950s.

One of those who contributed a response, a French specialist on the medieval Muslim philosopher Ibn Sina' (mentioned in Chapter 2), asserted that though Islam as a religion was basically finished, the colonial powers still faced a serious threat from pan-Islam, which might foster anticolonial revolts in a number of Muslim lands at the same time. Therefore the goal must be "to weaken Islam . . . to render it forever incapable of great awakenings." "I believe," this scholar wrote, "that we should endeavour to split the Muslim world, to break its moral unity, using to this effect the ethnic and political divisions . . . In one word, let us *segment Islam*, and make use, moreover, of Muslim heresies and the Sufi orders." Other participants argued that the spread of Western ideas and institutions would lead to the emergence of new educated Muslim elites which in the lands under European colonial rule would accept Western tutelage as beneficial to their societies and elsewhere would promote gradual reform and modernization.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the two Muslims whose views appeared in this forum approached the question from a very different angle. One, an Algerian named Muhammad Ben Rahal, insisted that Islam promulgated positive and progressive moral and social values and castigated what he saw as Europe's hostility to Islam: "if the Muslim defends his home, religion, or nation, he is not seen as a patriot but as a savage; if he displays courage or heroism, he is called a fanatic; if after defeat he shows resignation, he is called a fatalist." In short, he argued, Islam is "ostracized, systematically denigrated, and ridiculed without ever being known." He went on to denounce colonialism: "Dreaming to annex half a continent and to reduce the native – even by legal means – to misery is no policy, charging him with all kinds of crimes is no justification and no solution."

Ben Rahal's response was echoed by that of Edward Browne, a prominent British scholar in the field of Persian studies. "To my mind," Browne wrote, "Asia is right to be wary of Western civilization, of the rapacity and materialism, which are direct and necessary consequences of the blind attachment to the natural sciences . . . It is more the future of Europe than that of Asia which preoccupies me, which provokes my anxiety. How can one construct a pure and disinterested ethic on the basis of a theory which clearly declares that it is the strongest and the most rapacious that have the right to survive; a theory that lacks compassion for the weak. Such a theory can only lead to unending war between nations." A few years later Browne would express sympathy for Iran's constitutional revolution and criticize his own government's efforts to dominate that country.

From the attempts by Ben Rahal, Browne, Jamal al-Din al-Aghani, Goldziher, Wilfred Blunt and others to offer alternative perspectives, we can see that the mainstream view of Islam was never entirely hegemonic,

that it was never impossible for dissident voices to make themselves heard when Europeans discussed Islam and European rule over Muslims. But it is also true that those dissenting voices usually remained marginal: it was the current represented by Renan which was accepted as common sense not only among the public at large but also among those most directly involved in colonial policy-making and administration, and even by many scholars of Islam. We can find further evidence of this in the writings of one of the leading colonial administrators of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the man who for a quarter of a century ruled Egypt on Britain's behalf.

Evelyn Baring (1841–1917) was born into a wealthy and prominent English banking family. While still in his thirties he served as private secretary to the British viceroy of India; then, in 1877, he was posted to Egypt to help straighten out that bankrupt country's finances and make sure that the European banks and investors who held Egyptian bonds got their money back. After a few years he was back in India, in charge of that colony's finances, but in 1883, shortly after British troops occupied Egypt, he returned to Cairo, where he would remain until 1907. Baring (who was created Earl of Cromer in 1892) was officially just Britain's "consul-general and agent" in Egypt; but Egypt was now a British protectorate and it was Cromer who really ran the country. In 1908, a year after leaving Egypt and retiring from government service, Cromer published *Modern Egypt*, in whose two large volumes he offered a detailed narrative of events in Egypt over the previous three decades as well as his evaluation of the results of the British occupation.²⁴ Though Cromer never learned Arabic (he did know some Turkish), he was by that time widely regarded as a leading authority on Egypt and the Orient in general, and his views can fairly be taken as representative of much of British (and European) elite and popular opinion.

Cromer began by establishing what he saw as the unbridgeable gap between the "logical" West and the "illogical and picturesque" East, between the European mind and the Oriental mind, and this theme was central to the entire book.

The European is a close reasoner; his statements of facts are devoid of ambiguity; he is a natural logician, albeit he may not have studied logic; he loves symmetry in all things; he is by nature sceptical and requires proof before he can accept the truth of any proposition; his trained intelligence works like a piece of mechanism. The mind of the Oriental, on the other hand, like his picturesque streets, is eminently wanting in symmetry. His reasoning is of the most slipshod description. Although the ancient Arabs acquired in somewhat high degree the science of dialectics, their descendants are singularly deficient in the logical faculty . . . The Egyptian is also eminently unsceptical.

... Look, again, to the high powers of organisation displayed by the European, to his constant endeavour to bend circumstances, to suit his will, and to his tendency to question the acts of his superiors unless he happens to agree with them, a tendency which is only kept in subjection by the trained and intelligent discipline resulting from education. Compare these attributes with the feeble organising powers of the Oriental, with his fatalism which accepts the inevitable, and with his submissiveness to all constituted authority.

... A European would think that, where a road and a paved side-walk existed, it required no great effort of the reasoning faculty to perceive that human beings were intended to pass along the side-walk, and animals along the road. The point is not always so clear to the Egyptian. He will not unfrequently walk in the middle of the road, and will send his donkey along the side-path. Instances of this sort might be multiplied. Compare the habits of thought which can lead to actions of this nature with the promptitude with which the European seizes on an idea when it is presented to him, and acts as occasion may demand.

Cromer's depiction of "Orientals" as fundamentally irrational was widely accepted. As Rudyard Kipling, the bard of British imperialism, put it at around the same time:

You'll never plumb the Oriental mind
And even if you do, it won't be worth the toil.

As for Islam, Cromer quoted the English Orientalist Stanley Lane-Pool: "As a religion, Islam is great; it has taught men to worship one God with a pure worship who formerly worshipped many gods impurely. As a social system, it is a complete failure." Islam, Cromer declared, keeps women subjugated, it subordinates all of social life to an inflexible religious law, it tolerates slavery, it is intolerant toward non-believers. "Islam cannot be reformed," Cromer wrote, echoing Renan; "that is to say, reformed Islam is Islam no longer; it is something else."

Given the mental and social defects of Orientals, and particularly of Muslim Orientals who were especially burdened by their retrograde and oppressive religion, it was only fitting that they be subjected to the tutelage of Europeans – if possible, of Anglo-Saxons, an "imperial race" whose "sterling national qualities" and selfless Christian morality made it particularly well suited to assume responsibility for raising the dark-skinned races from their abject state and guiding them toward civilization. Such tutelage, in the form of direct or indirect colonial rule, was all the more necessary since, Cromer argued, the "subject races" generally did not constitute distinct nations. Egyptian nationalists and their European sympathizers like Wilfred Blunt might demand "Egypt for the Egyptians," but in reality the inhabitants of Egypt were a hodge-podge of races who were utterly incapable of governing themselves in a civilized manner.²⁵ Cromer's views were not at all untypical; on the contrary, while there were

always people in Europe who condemned what we today term racism and opposed the more brutal aspects of colonialism, most people regarded the cultural and moral superiority of Western civilization as simple common sense and saw European rule over non-Westerners as both necessary and right.

It is certainly true that in the nineteenth century many Europeans also perceived other Europeans who belonged to different nationalities, ethnic groups or religions as very different from themselves, and sometimes as almost as alien and uncivilized as the inhabitants of India or China or Africa. As one noted British historian of colonialism put it,

Europeans of superior countries thought of inferior Europeans and non-Europeans in not very different terms. Travelers described their journeys through Spain, before the railways, as if Madrid were somewhere near Timbuctoo. Stereotypes such as the Englishman's image of Paddy the Irishman, a feckless nimble-tongued fellow at whom one felt a mixture of amusement and impatience – or of the Italian as an organ-grinder with a monkey – provided ready-made categories for Burmese or Malays to be fitted into. And if the "native" on occasion reminded the Englishman of his familiar Paddy, Paddy might sometimes remind him of the native. Lord Salisbury, the Conservative leader, supporting coercion in Ireland, said that Irishmen were as unfit for self-government as Hottentots. Ireland was subject politically and economically to England, Italy through much of the nineteenth century to Austria. Down to 1918 a large proportion of Europeans occupied a more or less colonial status, differing only in degree from that of the Asian or African countries that were being annexed . . . Treatment of these subject minorities was not always gentler than in colonies outside, and must have been roughened by the habits formed by Europe's ruling classes in dictating to the other continents.²⁶

It is also the case, one might add, that eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European elites often regarded the lower classes of their own countries, peasants and urban working people, as ignorant, benighted semi-savages and responded to popular demands for social justice and democracy with brutal repression.

Nonetheless, for a very long time colonial subjects in Asia and Africa were deemed to be in a rather different category than subordinated Europeans. European ruling classes were ultimately compelled to grant concessions to their own lower classes and accept them as fellow citizens and at least nominal equals. Moreover, Italians, Poles, Czechs, Slovaks, Hungarians, and other disunited or subordinated European peoples often advanced their claims to independence from Habsburg or Russian or German rule, or from domination by other European states, on the ground that they were in fact *not* like those uncivilized dark-skinned natives in the colonies (those "Hottentots") but rather Europeans, white people, who were therefore entitled to equality, self-rule and a free

national life. In the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries most of these claims would be recognized, leading to the creation of new nation-states that won acceptance as legitimate members of the European "family." Even Europe's Jewish minority, subjected in the middle of the twentieth century to a systematic (and largely successful) campaign of extermination by what had been regarded as one of the most culturally advanced countries in Europe, would subsequently come (despite persistent antisemitism) to be widely accepted as authentically European, as part of Western civilization, now frequently rebranded as "Judeo-Christian civilization."

It took much longer for Europeans to accept the notion that Asian, African and American subjects of the British, French, Dutch, Portuguese and other European empires were entitled to the same human rights as Europeans, including the right of self-determination and self-government. The elaboration of the idea of Western civilization in the nineteenth century involved the drawing of sharp lines between what was deemed Western and what was deemed non-Western. So the same process of categorization which enabled Europeans to demand liberty and equality as the birthright of all Westerners also defined non-Westerners as not inherently entitled to those things, or at least not yet ready for them. The subjugation of most Asian and African peoples to colonial rule thus persisted long after the right of European peoples to independence was widely recognized, and in many lands European colonial domination was brought to an end only after protracted and often violent struggles. And even after formal independence was largely won in the two decades following the end of the Second World War, the categories of West and non-West continued to exercise a powerful influence on how people all over the globe perceived who and what they were – as well as who and what they were not.

As we saw at the beginning of this chapter, in the nineteenth century many Europeans (and Americans) had come to regard "the Orient" as too broad a category and began to break it down into a "Near East" and a "Far East." In the early twentieth century a new term for the lands of southwestern Asia emerged in the United States which would first complement and then largely supplant "Near East." The term "Middle East" was coined in 1902 by the noted American military historian, Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840–1914). Mahan's insistence on the crucial importance of sea power influenced strategic thinking in the United States and Europe at the turn of the century and helped induce the United States to build up its ocean-going naval forces, which soon enabled it to take control of Hawaii, Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines and effectively dominate the Caribbean and Central America. In his writings and lectures

on global strategy Mahan demarcated a Middle East which he regarded as stretching from Arabia all the way across Persia and Afghanistan to the borders of today's Pakistan; by contrast, he defined the Near East as encompassing the Balkans (parts of which were then still within the Ottoman empire), western Anatolia, which at the time still had a large Greek-speaking population, and the lands of the eastern Mediterranean.

Valentine Chirol (1852–1929), then the Tehran correspondent of the *Times* of London, picked up Mahan's new term and used it in his 1903 book *The Middle Eastern Question; or, Some Political Problems of Indian Defence* to denote "those regions of Asia which extend to the borders of India or command the approaches to India."²⁷ The new term spread quickly and was initially used more or less as Mahan had defined it, so that to cover the whole region between the eastern Mediterranean and British-ruled India observers now spoke of "the Near and Middle East." But in the longer run the distinction Mahan drew between the Near East and the Middle East did not really catch on. The Balkans, which western Europeans had long regarded as rather uncivilized or even "oriental" in character, were eventually incorporated (though not without some ambivalence) into a reformulated and expanded conception of Europe, while in the 1920s Anatolia lost nearly all of its Greek population and became part of the new, almost entirely Muslim Turkish Republic. Over time, Near East and Middle East came to be used more or less interchangeably to refer to the same geographical space, usually encompassing the present-day states of Turkey, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian territories it occupies, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Oman, the smaller Arab principalities along the Persian Gulf, and Egypt, though the vast majority of that country is actually located on the continent of Africa. Sometimes the predominantly Arab countries of North Africa west of Egypt, and even the Sudan to its south, are also loosely included in the Middle East. Afghanistan, which Mahan had included within his Middle East, was often relegated to a sort of geographical limbo (see Map 6).

After the Second World War the term "Middle East" came to predominate (in the United States the journalese term "Mideast" is also used); it now has a more contemporary ring to it, while "Near East" has come to sound a bit old-fashioned, just as "the Levant" and "the Orient" had become antiquated somewhat earlier. Of course, denominating this portion of the earth's surface as the Middle East is just as arbitrary as depicting it as part of the Orient. It encompasses a vast area of great ecological diversity, from snowbound mountains to barren deserts to fertile river valleys and rain-watered coastal plains, includes huge cities as well as myriad towns and villages, and is inhabited by many different peoples

with their own distinct languages, cultures and ways of life. The majority of its population is Muslim (though of different kinds), but it includes many non-Muslims as well, and the majority of the world's Muslims live elsewhere, in non-Middle Eastern lands like Indonesia, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, so religion does not work as the key criterion for defining this region. At the same time, calling this region the Middle East obviously manifests a Eurocentric perspective: it is "middle" and "eastern" only in relation to western Europe.

Yet the term Middle East has caught on, not only in the West but even in the languages of the region itself, where it is widely used. Other ways of defining all or parts of the same territory persist as well, however. In journalism and official parlance, for example, Arabs often use "the Arab world" or "the Arab homeland" to denote the predominantly Arabic-speaking lands of the Middle East and North Africa, from Iraq to Morocco. Arab geographers traditionally divided those lands into two parts, *al-mashriq* ("the east") to denote the eastern half of the Arab world and *al-maghrib* ("the west") to denote the western half, and Arabic speakers continue to use these terms. The Maghreb is also used in French (and to a lesser extent in English) to refer to Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya. In an effort to avoid Eurocentrism, the United Nations and other international bodies sometimes officially refer to the region as "South-western Asia and North Africa," but this more neutral designation has not really caught on. It would seem that the Middle East as a designation for this region will be with us for the foreseeable future, however recent its origins, however arbitrary its definition and however arguable its utility.

4 The American century

In the summer of 1914 the First World War broke out, pitting Germany, Austria-Hungary and (a few months later) the Ottoman empire against Britain, France and Russia, joined the following year by Italy and in 1917 by the United States. The war, which cost some ten million lives, resulted in the defeat and dismemberment of the Ottoman empire. After the war the victorious Allies, particularly Britain and France, proceeded to redraw the map of the Middle East and carve a number of new states – Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Transjordan (later renamed Jordan) and Palestine – out of what had been the predominantly Arab provinces of the defunct Ottoman empire. Most of Palestine would become part of the new State of Israel in 1948, with the remainder falling under Jordanian or Egyptian control. But otherwise the states which Britain and France established in 1920–21 remain in existence today, their borders little changed. The war also helped set the stage for the conquest by the Sa'ud family and its allies of much of the Arabian peninsula and the creation in 1932 of the new Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which a decade or so later would begin to develop strong ties with the United States (see Maps 4 and 5).

In Europe, the Allies largely fulfilled their wartime commitment to the right of subject peoples to national self-determination, and a number of newly independent nation-states – including Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia – came into being on territory that had previously been ruled by the Austro-Hungarian, Russian or German empires. But the British reneged on their wartime promise to support Arab independence. Instead, Britain retained control of the new states of Iraq, Palestine and Jordan which it had just helped create, while France became master of Syria and Lebanon. And although Britain and France were formally "mandatory powers" – trustees of a sort, responsible for guiding these new states toward eventual self-rule and supposedly subject to League of Nations supervision – the mandate system was in essence a new form of colonial rule. Anatolia, the predominantly Turkish heartland of the defunct Ottoman empire, was initially slated for dismemberment, but there Allied plans were thwarted by nationalist resistance