

Critical Notes

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Although we are already celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of its first publication, Edward W. Said's book *Orientalism* and its provocative thesis still remain important subjects of scholarly discussion. Said's work dealt only with the Near East, but in the course of time more and more "orientalist" disciplines felt compelled to respond to his thesis by undertaking a critical look into the past and present of their own scholarship and asking: to what extent were the approaches of their own nineteenth century predecessors euro-centric? Did those scholars — consciously or unconsciously — contribute to a picture of "the Orient" as an entity that differs in principle from "the West?" How was this construction interwoven with colonial power-relations in the respective countries? And particularly, how do the approaches of the present academia differ from those of their predecessors? The answers to these questions are manifold in their respective disciplines, and the ongoing debate, moreover, has revealed some weaknesses in Said's argument. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the debate on *Orientalism* and its complex discourse on power remains very important —

particularly in light of the terror attacks of September 11, 2001 and the reemergence of those voices once again advocating a very simple bipolar analysis of the world's cultures.

Since religion is a crucial aspect of the Orientalist discourse, an exploration of religion that considers the whole of Asia should be particularly promising. In February 2002, the "Workgroup on the History of Asian Religions" (AKAR) of the German branch of the International Association for the History of Religions (IAHR) held an international conference on this topic in Weikersheim (Germany), supplemented by a follow-up conference in Uppsala (Sweden) in June 2002. It was the purpose of these conferences to bring together scholars from different fields — different in terms of area and discipline (History of Religions, Asian History, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Central Asian and Indian Studies, Anthropology, Theology), method (historical-philological, anthropological, and so on), and time period (historical and contemporary interests) — in order to discuss the specific case studies each participant would present from his or her own field of interest. It was hoped (and expected) by the organizers that by examining and discussing these cases in a comparative perspective, with regard to Orientalist discourse, new and surprising aspects might come to the fore, and they did. The following remarks will summarize some of the issues and arguments that came up in this discussion. The proceedings of the conference (which contains contributions in German and in English) will be published in Spring 2003, entitled *Religion im Spiegelkabinett*.

Asiatische Religionsgeschichte im Spannungsfeld zwischen Orientalismus und Okzidentalismus, ed. Peter Schalk, Max Deeg, Oliver Freiberger, and Christoph Kleine. Uppsala: University of Uppsala; [Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis. Historia Religionum](http://tango.its.uu.se/acta/ACTA.taf?function=titlar&_UserReference=487EFBF0ABBCAF253DFEE053&NYA=NEJ&SERIE_uid1=0439-2132), 22.

(http://tango.its.uu.se/acta/ACTA.taf?function=titlar&_UserReference=487EFBF0ABBCAF253DFEE053&NYA=NEJ&SERIE_uid1=0439-2132)

After twenty-five years of debating Said's work, it appears obvious that the discourse Said described as a construction of "the Orient" by Western scholars and writers, closely connected with colonial power, is extremely complex. As Max Deeg points out in his paper, it must be understood that parallel to this "Orientalism," there was a very similar process going on in Asia, a construction of "the Occident" that may be labeled "Occidentalism." In both regions, and at the same time, a self-image was being constructed by the separation of one's own culture from "the other," operations Deeg labels as "Auto-Occidentalism" and "Auto-Orientalism," respectively. The application of these terms might run the risk of reducing the complex Orientalist discourse to mutual strategies of perception belonging to two monolithic blocks. As a heuristic tool, however, this differentiation helps to deal with the complexity by illustrating the processes of mutual perception involved, and their impact — as long as we are aware of the number of specific aspects not covered by them. Deeg demonstrates the applicability of the model by presenting modes of intercultural perception in Chinese history — from the Jesuit missionaries to the case of Falungong. It becomes obvious, from Deeg's observations, that as a heuristic tool, this expanded model of Orientalism is not only applicable to the colonial past but can also be helpful for examining contemporary phenomena as well.

This is particularly true when it comes to the issue of globalization. In my own paper I present several ways that Religious Studies may deal with globalization: either by examining the religious responses to global developments in transnational economics, communication, transport, and so on; or by exploring the globalization of religion itself. In the latter case, the "globalization of religious traditions" can be distinguished from a "globalization of religious orientations" (that is, for example, caring for "the earth" as a whole). By applying the heuristic terms "Orientalism," "Occidentalism," "Auto-Occidentalism," and

"Auto-Orientalism" to ways of perceiving "the other" and oneself in the current debate on globalization, the religious and ideological foundations of the respective factions can be analyzed and exposed. This is illustrated primarily by examples from so-called "Engaged Buddhism," which can be regarded as an instance of the "globalization of religious orientations" *par excellence*. Another example of this type of religious globalization is the Advaitavedanta movement of Swami Dayananda Saraswati. In her paper, Annette Wilke demonstrates how in this movement, the (rather conventional) offering of Vedanta retreats became more and more supplemented by other activities, aimed at, "the preservation of religious diversity," for example. In their "Vedic Heritage Program," a model of (religious) education for Indian schools was developed, based on a multicultural approach and the ideal of the "universal citizen." Wilke points out that on a theoretical level, these activities are examples of the dialectic process of local traditions and global perspectives.

Excavating the presuppositions of Orientalism, Michael Pye points out the fact that both Orientalism and Occidentalism descend from a common ancestor: "Westernism," the powerful and persistent belief in the dominance of the West. This is particularly true with regard to the idea that a modern, independent study of religion could only emerge from within the European intellectual tradition. Pye refutes this thesis by presenting the work of the eighteenth century Japanese scholar Tominaga Nakamoto, which is based on the same principles of scholarship as the European Enlightenment (criticism, rationality, and empiricism), but was not influenced by it.

Viewing Japan from a completely different perspective, Kerstin-Katja Sindemann examines the records and letters of sixteenth century Jesuit missionaries in Japan. She argues that since they had no colonial

interests and merely wanted to make converts, there was no need for them to project certain Orientalist ideas onto the people. The obvious misrepresentations in their records are mostly due to other factors. Only the subsequent European reception of their letters has been determined by strong Orientalist constructions. Regarding their historical value, early European records on Thailand/Siam seem to be comparable to the Jesuit letters. Although these reports seem to differ immensely from what we would usually regard as Thai Buddhism, in his paper Sven Trakulhun presents little known texts from Thailand which reveal that the Europeans came remarkably close to reporting the popular Thai beliefs of their time. Although these descriptions of Thai religion are systematized in a European, Christian manner — and are therefore at times misleading — Trakulhun's and Sindemann's examinations remind us that European records may be ambivalent, but they are not without value for historical approaches. Furthermore, the comparison of European and Thai texts demonstrates clearly that Western depictions of the time are not necessarily merely constructions of an imagined foreign culture, but may, to a certain extent, be based on actual cultural differences.

Nevertheless, just like the authors of these reports on religion in Thailand, the Jesuit missionaries judged Japanese religions on the basis of their own cultural and religious framework. It is not surprising that they condemned Amida Buddhism as an alleged form of Lutheran theology. It is just as unsurprising that Protestant theologians and scholars sympathized with this allegedly, "anti-magical, anti-ritualistic, anti-syncretistic *sola-fide* and *sola-gratia* monotheism." Christoph Kleine explores this "Protestant view" on Amida Buddhism, which was also prevalent in the works of Buddhist scholars who considered this form of religion "non-buddhistic." In turn, however, these Orientalist constructions molded the self-understanding of Buddhist scholars in

Japan, who presented Japanese Buddhism to the West by constructing the superior "spirituality of the East." Again, this evoked a self-critical attitude among Westerners interested in Buddhism. Another aspect of this transferred "Protestant view" was the reception of Max Weber's Protestant ethic thesis in Japan. Japanese scholars have used the "Protestant" features of Amida Buddhism to demonstrate Japan's maturity in matters of modern economics — an attitude that has recently been transformed into the notion of the superior "third way" of Japanese economics. The reception and creative transformation of Western Orientalist constructions is also examined by Inken Prohl, who in her paper illustrates the views of so-called "spiritual intellectuals" in Japan. Having internalized the Orientalist clichés, they reinterpret them, and in turn use this as an argument against the West. They claim, for instance, that global problems such as the ecological destruction were caused by the West and can be solved only by an "Eastern" attitude of harmony and unity. This self-confidence once again causes Westerners to believe that they could learn a lot from the "Asian way."

The significance of Orientalist and Occidentalist constructions for the development of cultural identities is particularly obvious in the case of Korean "shamanism." Dieter Eikemeier investigates the history of the term *mu*, which was turned into an umbrella term by the public administration in order to consolidate the multifarious facets of Korean popular religion. In search for the "essence" of this constructed entity, the term "shamanism" in its Eliadean coinage was adopted, and thenceforth "shamanism" has been regarded as the epitome of Korean religion and culture, right up to the present time. This is expressed in an increasing personal affinity to "shamans," even by the urban population, as well as in public ceremonies, and political demonstrations. This adoption and application of a Western conception of shamanism goes far beyond the scope of perception — it changes the culture in question very

concretely.

Another area that has been completely neglected in the debate on Orientalism is the area of Mongolian culture and religion. In her paper, Karénina Kollmar-Paulenz outlines Western images of the Mongols as a wild and barbaric people, and demonstrates how the acknowledgment of Buddhism as a Mongolian religion has led to two different opinions: that Buddhism has "tamed" this wild people, or that the Mongolians were rendered effeminate by its impact. Here the gendered aspects of Orientalism come into play. Kollmar-Paulenz illustrates how, by attaching female attributes to Mongolians, Orientalists presented them as effeminate — in contrast to the superior, male self-understanding of Western Orientalists. Kollmar-Paulenz also stresses the complexity of the Orientalist discourse by pointing out that in addition to Western colonial interests, power-relations and mutual perceptions have existed and were highly effective within Asia itself.

In Orientalist discourse the role of Western scholarship is crucial, and two papers focus particularly on this issue. Christoph Emmrich illustrates the interaction of Western Indologists and certain "theological" circles of Jains in India. The former were interested almost exclusively in classical texts of the Shvetambara Jains, and thus "recanonicalized" the Jain canon by neglecting ongoing "theological" debates as well as a large number of other texts. The latter used Western research to strengthen their own position within the tradition and also to defend Jainism's status as a religion in the Indian courts. Once more, the "Protestant" approach of Western scholars becomes obvious in their narrow textual focus: the examination of cult practices in Jainism and the role of texts within ritual have been neglected in scholarship up to the present time. On the other hand, contemporary reformers are finding new approaches, by presenting Jainism as a universal world religion —

an effort that, as an effect of the interaction between Orientalism and Occidentalism, resembles very much the globalizing tendencies of modern Buddhism and Hinduism. Such an effort is observable also among the Vāḍḍo, an ethnic group in Sri Lanka, who are presented on the World Wide Web as an indigenous people, the members of which represent the true "*homo ecologicus*." This self-confidence, however, is not very old. In the Ceylonese Buddhist chronicles the Vāḍḍo are apparently said to descend from an incestuous relationship between two children of a female demon. Peter Schalk has traced the history of this mythological connection and discovered that the identification of the Vāḍḍo with the descendants mentioned in the text took place only within the nineteenth century. Again, Western philologists were deeply involved in creating this link. Furthermore, Western anthropologists created the idea of the Vāḍḍo as the original (but inferior) inhabitants of Sri Lanka. The Vāḍḍo themselves, surprisingly, internalized these views in the first half of the twentieth century, until certain reformers reinterpreted the mythological story and shaped an integrative myth of origin which presented the Vāḍḍo as an emancipated and independent people. As in the case of Korean "shamanism," Western scholarship was once again involved in the construction of an ethnic/national identity.

These studies, which, considering their richness, were far too briefly summarized, will certainly prove to be important contributions in their respective historical fields of scholarship. In a more general scope, however, they also reveal highly significant aspects of the Orientalist discourse, issues that have often been ignored in the past. These issues include: the insight that the construction of an "Orient" is embedded in a complex interaction of mutual perception and impact, which is in turn linked to an underlying supposition of the dominance of the West; the role of Western scholarship in the construction and development of certain ethnic and religious identities in Asia; the Protestant character of

this impact and its transformation and backlash against the West; the gendered language of Western depictions of "the Orient;" the realization that mutual perceptions and colonial power-relations have also existed among Asian countries and are similar to what we label "Orientalism;" the astonishing historical value of old Western records of Asia, which remind us that such records are not inevitably mere Orientalist constructions; finally, the observation that the Orientalist discourse continues — even in contemporary phenomena, such as religious responses to globalization. Thus it appears more than obvious that examination of the Orientalist discourse needs to keep a prominent position on the agenda of scholarship on Asian religions and cultures.