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Dietrich Jung begins his genealogy of essentialism with a simple observation: ‘No scholarly erudition is required to see the enormous variety in both the political institutions and the walks of life in the Muslim world.’ (p. 1) Despite this diversity, the notion persists in both popular and academic circles that Islam is ultimately a violent, anti-modern religion, totally wedded to the political and social life of citizens in many countries and utterly opposed to the West and its social and intellectual liberties1. Jung sets out to uncover how this notion took hold.

This question was of course most famously posed by Edward Said in his classic Orientalism, from which Jung’s own essay departs. Jung details Said’s polemical vitriol and the critiques which followed. Chief among these are Said’s reductive fusion of colonial policies and academic scholarship, and his facile continuity from medieval constructions of Muslims through to the modern. Jung highlights the critiques of Sadik al-Azm, describing how Said ignores ‘orientalism in reverse’ in which some Muslims essentialise ‘the West’ and adopt the orientalist perspective in their own self-definition2.

If Jung’s project were just to revamp Orientalism in light of the criticism it has sustained, it would not warrant a book-length treatment. However, he views Orientalism not as the definitive word on the subject – to be accepted or rejected – but as the start of a long conversation to be continued by critics. Jung’s contribution is an attempt to show the development of this image, not as a unidirectional force imposed on Muslims by orientalist scholars in the West, but rather as a dialectical development to which Muslims and non-Muslims alike contributed.

The claims Jung makes are modest: he admits that his roster of exemplary figures through which to tell the history of orientalism is partial and selective. His chapters on German founders of Islamic studies and the influence of historical biblical criticism are helpful and sound, and they fill in areas Said neglected, thus disturbing the straight line drawn between scholarship and colonialism.

Jung’s theoretical model, however, is elaborate. He invokes the tools of world society and the global public sphere to decentre this essentialist image, frequently deploying the term ‘interconnectedness’ to describe the various personalities and perspectives. This model warrants further consideration as a way to explore sensibly the global development of ideas. However, in this instance his evidence is not convincing. While modernist Muslim intellectuals such as Jamal ad-Din al-Afghani and Sayyid Qutb are clearly influenced by Western orientalist conceptions of their

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1 This is perhaps most clearly seen in the article and then book by Samuel Huntington on the ‘clash of civilizations’ and the writings of Princeton orientalist Bernard Lewis.

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religion and their compatriots, there is little sense of feedback which in turn enriches or corrects those conceptions. The genealogy Jung fabricates is more sequential, less interconnected.

Jung is correct to observe that ‘like European intellectuals, non-Europeans developed their own semantics to grasp and debate the modern condition related to different historical trajectories, popular narratives and religious traditions’ (p. 115, emphasis mine). He thus effectively portrays the agency indigenous thinkers had in creating Islamic modernities. However, Jung also conceives ‘the modern condition’ as somehow external to Europeans themselves. This is unfortunately ahistorical and does not adequately reflect how scholars such as Ernest Renan, William Robertson Smith, or Christiaan Snouck Hurgronje would have imagined their position within the transformations taking place around them. Occasionally, Jung must insert a footnote or restate his thesis so as to cover a troublesome drift in his analysis: ‘Given my theoretical perspective of an emerging modernity, this core [i.e. the West] is defined by means of power rather than of evolutionary origin.’ (p. 155, fn 49)

Yet he cannot escape the fact of origin: these technological and social changes began in Europe and spread globally, inflicted on other nations rather than spontaneously growing from within. The global public sphere he invokes is therefore asymmetrical, as Jung himself observes. In his conclusion, he agrees with Said that we can only explain the ‘global dominance’ of this essentialist image ‘by taking into account the impact of power on the generation and dissemination of knowledge.’ (p. 271) He has softened Orientalism’s polemical edge and nuanced the stark villainy of Western colonials and the innocent victimhood of Muslims. But he has not shared the burden of responsibility for creating and perpetuating this stereotype, likely because the blame is itself asymmetrical.