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NOTES

INTRODUCTION. THE LORD: GOD, KING, FATHER

O King, most high and wise Lord; How incomprehensible are thy judgments, and inscrutable thy ways!

- *Romans 11:24*

The history of western notions about Islam is of obvious interest today. Central among such notions is the idea that the Muslim East is the location of undemocratic theocracies: the classic term is “oriental despotism.” A number of excellent works have been written on oriental despotism,ⁱ but I believe that the full significance of this idea still needs to be uncovered, and uncovering it is my goal in this book. I see the political issue of despotic government as grounded in deep-reaching anxieties that characterize the intellectual and cultural history of the West: theological concerns about divine power and unconditional faith, and indeed existential concerns about the relationship between the human self and the universe.

All Abrahamic faiths – Christianity and Judaism as much as Islam – demand devotion to a sublime power broaching no opposition and needing no counselors. But they couple obedience to that power with the faith that it loves and cares for us. Submission to a good God is the Abrahamic way to express confidence that the universe has a special place for every human being. There is, of course, no real evidence that this is so. The conception of a sublime power ruling the universe (or the state) brings with it the anxiety that this power is, in fact, unloving and uncaring, and that its only goal is its own pleasure. Such a power is exactly what Freud identified as the “primal father.” Without necessarily any commitment to the scientific validity of psychoanalysis, I suggest that *as a trope* the primal father describes exactly the western image of the oriental despot: Allah in heaven, or the various sultans, emirs, and ayatollahs on earth. These despotic personalities of imagined

Muslim society function as a projection, from the West onto the Muslim Orient, of an existential anxiety about sublime power.

What if the King, but especially what if God, are not like the loving Father of religion, but like the “obscene” (to use Žižek’s term) primal Father of psychoanalysis, demanding total obedience from us not for our own good, but purely for his own unlimited enjoyment? Or, to put it less mystically and mystifyingly, what if the universe is there not for Man and Woman, but to serve some crushingly great, incomprehensibly selfish power that cares not a bit for you or me? Abrahamic religion, which introduces the idea of a good and improving world tending to a glorious finish, also produces this nightmare of humanity as a laughable, powerless plaything of an unfeeling transcendence. But Christians who vilify Muslims (which is most but not all Christians throughout most but not all of history) are afraid to recognize this monster as a common Abrahamic invention. My thesis is that they project it - have always projected it - onto only the Muslims (and may be the Jews).

This perverse process of projection, I argue, explains - more than the relevant facts - the persistent picture in the Christian West of Muslims as slaves, soldiers, and terrorists of Allah: fanatical devotees of a remote and terrifying sublime power. My book is about the formative centuries of this process. It starts from roughly the moment in the European Renaissance when the forces of the Ottoman Turks captured the ancient Christian capital, Constantinople, limiting the political power of Christianity to that religion’s European exile. It ends, more or less, in the Enlightenment, when the Ottomans no longer pose a realistic threat to western Christian power, and East and West begin to feel the impact of the rising North European imperialism. I call this period of my focus the “Period One” of orientalism, as opposed to the “imperialist” Phase Two. For the most part, I wait until the Epilogue with a discussion about how the two phases are related.

But to anticipate: The deep, three-part complex of sublime power that I label with the terms "God," "King," and "Father" retains its power over the transition. In trying to comprehend its historical formation I am, I believe, also making steps towards understanding its remarkable persistence.

We can think here of "God," "King," and "Father" as varieties of a more general concept of sublime power, to which I would like to give the more general label, "Lord" (this will make it possible to speak about the Lord with deliberate ambiguity, not specifying which of the three personae is meant specifically). "God, King, Father" as names of the Lord should not be taken literally. Not all real fathers have exercised the kind of sublime power over us that has occupied Freud and the later psychoanalysts. Not all or even most real kings have possessed sublime power: even the so called absolute kings were less so in practice than in theory. And God may not even exist. In this book God, King, and Father are of interest not necessarily as objectively existing entities but rather as tropes. What interests us is how an *imagined* God, how the *imagined* King, how the *imagined* Father relate to the "Islamic world" – also *imagined*. It is important to add, however, that "imagined" does not mean "imaginary:" I study God, King, Father, and the Islamic world in the western imagination, but I am not suggesting that they are mere figments of that imagination. The really interesting question is what realities these tropes reveal, transform, or hide. My specific interest is how they represent one pole of a feature that, in western Christian cultural history, has long been associated with alleged despotism in the Muslim world: the exercise of sublime – infinite and inscrutable – power. The other pole is unlimited and unquestioning submission.

This conception of the One sublime Lord set over the (ideally) submissive multitude in his care defines the Abrahamic faith and the Abrahamic imagination, and sets it apart from other major or minor traditions, be they Hinduism or shamanism, voodoo or Zen, no matter how much

elements within those traditions might resemble it. So why then is there in both the Christian West and the Muslim East a deeply ingrained history of imagining one another as antipodal Other, a twain that shall never meet? The persistence of the notion of a radical opposition, of a fundamental difference, between East and West – read, in this context, between Islam and Christianity – in the face of obvious similarities might surprise a visitor from space, but it is explained by some very powerful earthly reasons. Christians and Muslims both utilized their respective proselytizing religions to support the expansion of their own states and empires. These functioned to some extent as political units with sovereignty over a territory, and over time also as economic units, with policies to protect and stimulate their own markets. Such a practical base does not exclude, but rather preserves and is preserved by, the superstructure of an abstract opposition that acquires cosmic qualities, going beyond even the lofty disputes of religious dogma.

In my view, the purported East-West contrast was constructed in specific historical and geopolitical circumstances as a solution to the existential anxiety that I mentioned, about the goodness or otherwise of the external power we depend on: God, King, Father. It functions at all three of the levels denoted by these tropes: the theological, the political, and the third (the Father's) dimension, which can be studied using psychoanalytical vocabulary, and which we may call phenomenological.

At the theological level, the contrast is expressed by the following, never quite uncontested, formula: 1) the western Christian God is a caring, loving God-the-Father (and for many, truly exists), while 2) Allah is a vengeful, selfish god (and for many in the West, an invention of manipulative mullahs). In *fact*, as anyone even slightly familiar with Islam knows, among the many names of God *ar-rahman*, the merciful, is uppermost. To describe him as a heartless purveyor of cruel punishment is simply false. The contrast between 1) and 2) is an invention,

creating an East-West difference where there is little if any. The function of the invention is to reassure the western Christian that his Lord loves him back, and it projects his unacknowledged fear that it might be otherwise, onto his fellow-monotheists in the Muslim Orient.

At the political level, things are a little more complicated, yet the exaggeration of the East-West difference does match to a large extent the theological. The ancient Greek notion of the oriental despot was revived from the seventeenth century on in the debates about political freedom and absolutism in the West. The “Sublime Porte” of the Ottoman Empire was built up, often quite falsely, as the seat of a sovereign with unlimited might. The Sultan would then be held out as the epitome of a selfish potentate. It was mostly the enemies of absolutism that used oriental despotism as the foil for their political philosophies. An observer like Paul Rycaut, the important seventeenth century traveler whom we will encounter frequently in the pages that follow, had much understanding for the sultan’s absolute powers, as long as he used them with discretion. He suggested that monarchs should follow the law of the land, and only “use the power of absolute dominion, which is to be applied like Physick, when the ordinary force of nature cannot remove the malignancy of some peccant humours.”ⁱⁱⁱ Rycaut was showing himself here a supporter of the restored monarchy in England, whose theoretical power was in practice well circumscribed by the parliamentary and legal system.ⁱⁱⁱ He condemned Ottoman absolutism only in its perceived excesses, but not necessarily in principle. More radical advocates of political freedoms were less understanding. They condemned tyranny as inherently an eastern style of government. They argued that unfreedom may be fine for the Turks, but does not become the West. Indeed they, from Montesquieu to Marx, appeared to have developed a blind spot for the tyrannical potential *within* what each might consider the guarantee of freedom - within the rule of law itself, within democracy, within socialism - while locating prototypical despotism outside the West, in the

Orient. We had to wait for a Nazi sympathizer of the twentieth century such as Carl Schmitt to reply that *all* sovereign political power was potentially unlimited: that the essence of sovereignty was not the daily practice of executing the laws, but the right of suspending them in exceptional circumstances – the very right ascribed to the King by Rycaut.^{iv}

At the phenomenological level, the trope that is the equivalent of God and King is the Father, and here too, the fearsome features of the character (which are, in this case, the subject matter among other things of psychoanalysis), are projected onto the Orient. When God or a King are called “father,” the reference is to the benevolent use of their power for the benefit of their charges. It is revealing that once European absolutism was, in the nineteenth century, more or less gone or in difficult yet inevitable decline, the queen of England liked to be called a (white) mother, while the czar’s soubriquet *batyushka* - dear father - as the Austrian emperor’s *Landesvater* - father of the land - stressed that each was a parent who cared for his subjects as for his own children. The oriental despot – Allah as much as sultan or shah - on the other hand, was as we shall see in the next chapter, often imagined in western cultural history as a perversion of the father figure: a terrifying, cruel force that abuses his unlimited power for his own enjoyment, and against us.

Fundamentally, orientalism takes a deep-seated and universal existential question – the goodness or otherwise of the powers that control us – and tries to solve it by employing a religious and pseudo-geographical opposition between a Christian West and a Muslim East. One way to understand this metaphysical character of orientalism might be by comparison to the tradition of representing gender. The metaphysics of gender makes not only the physical but also the social world out to be essentially dependent on the difference between male and female. From Hindu mythology to psychoanalysis, a male or active (phallic) principle is opposed to a female or passive one.^v There are many parallels between this essentializing of the gender difference on one hand,

and orientalism's essentializing of the East-West difference on the other. Both distinctions project onto the actual physical world some of the chief problems of the experience of living in human society. The male-female difference is a projection of the difference between action and passivity, and the East-West difference is a projection of the tension between authority and obedience, Master and Slave. Moreover, representations of gender and of the East-West difference are closely related. In an obvious sense, the Master who commands is active and the Slave who follows orders is passive. Both distinctions are evidently "false" due to their constitutive exaggeration of a physical difference (sex differentiation, geographic location), which they invest with metaphysical significance.

Orientalism assigns no less a problem than the place of humanity in the cosmic order (or disorder), to a language and an imaginary designed to deal with a specific region of the earth. East and West are conceived of not simply as locations to which the compass points, but as concrete examples of two contrasting types of being human, in relation to other humans and to the universe. No greater tragedy could possibly have befallen the Orient ("the Middle East") than to have become, rather than an ordinary region like all others, a location of metaphysical fantasy mistaken for reality.

The metaphysical East-West distinction resembles the metaphysical gender distinction in one more important respect. In addition to the conviction that there is a fundamental male/female dichotomy, there is also the striving for bridging it. The union of male and female is invested, in western cultural history as elsewhere, with a sublime mystique that can be seen as one of the expressions of the Lacanian attraction to and repulsion by "the Real." All oppositions are haunted by what deconstructionists call a "trace," an unnamed or hard-to-name commonality. The trace defines the functioning of the opposition, but it also has the potential to undermine it.

Orientalism has produced East and West as the most distressing example of the imaginative geography of division and opposition. But I believe that it has been, also, able to provide the mental stage on which to rehearse the overcoming of that same division and opposition. As the title of one of the best books on the subject, by Zachary Lockman, suggests, orientalism is characterized not by a single vision, but by several "contending visions of the Middle East."^{vi} Orientalism has the capacity not only to divide and contrast, but also to dream of East-West unity. In this it is truly Abrahamic, expressing the particular strength of the monotheistic imagination. This is to valorize unity that is greater than all divisions: a unity that comes from the willing subjection of all, without distinction, to the sublime One. In the depths of the process of treating the East as a surrogate self lies the potential for recognition and reconnection: this is so even if the longing for union never manages to come free of the imperative to divide that has engendered its imaginative geography. Western Christian thought about the Muslim East is not entirely limited to the "othering," the projection of fears and weakness onto the nearby neighbor, and with it the exaggeration of difference to the point of metaphysics. A second pattern – I call it "soft orientalism" – stresses the East-West difference only to suggest overcoming it at some "higher" level. A profound admiration for the Orient as a continuing source of spiritual inspiration is particularly evident towards the end of Phase One. We will examine it in the writings of the so-called pre-romantics, especially in England, and their reading of the Bible as an oriental document. This soft-orientalist style of biblical scholarship was at the heart of the new biblical criticism of the nineteenth century, whose profound influence on western literature, philosophy, and anthropology remains sadly under-explored. The philo-orientalism of the biblical scholars was shared by a writer like Wolfgang Goethe, whom Edward Said held out as an example of someone who was able to bypass anti-oriental prejudice.^{vii} Later, some of the giants of the academic orientalism in the nineteenth and

twentieth century, such as Ignaz Goldziher, Louis Massignon, and Maxime Rodinson, saw it as their life work to counter anti-Muslim prejudice. A history of soft orientalism, which remains to be written would, of course, have to connect to the philo-Indianism explored by Raymond Schwab (who includes such characters as Tolstoy and Nietzsche).^{viii} It would also need to pay serious attention to popular imagery, from the early Freemasons' mystic identification with ancient Israel and Egypt, through the immense popularity in the West of the "desert romance" best exemplified by the 1921 blockbuster, *The Sheik*, starring Rudolf Valentino, to the more recent success of Sufi *qawwali* and "fusion" forms of Islam-based music.

In most of this book, with its focus on the pre-imperialist period of orientalism, we rarely see as yet the direct and explicit acknowledgment of a desire for East-West union that we observe in the nineteenth and twentieth-century West. Even Kipling's infamous "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" would be followed by "Till the Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat," preserving the Abrahamic vision of the end of days when all are judged as equals by the majestic King. Such feverish passion was rare in Period One, yet towards the end of the period from the Reformation to the Enlightenment it did become possible, already, to imagine the "higher" union of East and West. In 1731, Henri Boulainvilliers declared unreservedly that "All that Mahomet has said is true in terms of the essential dogmas of religion."^{ix} There are even much earlier examples of a guarded understanding for eastern ways – even Islam! – in the works of a Renaissance theologian like Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464),^x or a visitor to the Orient like Paul Rycaut (1629-1700), who will reappear in these pages often.

Nevertheless, during the centuries between the successful Ottoman campaign to conquer Constantinople in 1453 and the unsuccessful one to capture Vienna in 1683, Christian unity in face of the Muslim threat, exaggerating the East-West difference seemed to demand hard orientalism as

in the motivational rhetoric that was essential to the Christian West's military tactics. While the Muslim Ottoman Empire posed a realistic threat of expanding further west, the thought of union between East and West did far more to frighten than to inspire. It is nevertheless important to point out that union was, even at this time, unimaginable. Understandably so, because I believe that it is a demonstrable fact that the alleged radical opposition between the Christian West and the Muslim East is a superficial historical construct, conjured out of a fundamental unity.

In his way, I believe that my book enters current debates about the alleged clash between Islam and the West and the discredited but still powerful emphasis on the radical divide between them. I show that not only does one find no such divide when studying the facts of religion, politics, and culture in general, but there was also not *always* such a divide even in western Christian *thought*. Nevertheless I leave any explicit connection to the present time until the Epilogue.

To recap, my specific purpose is to show how from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment the imagined Muslim East came to embody the downside of obedience to a supreme Power: the frightening possibility that such power is exercised not for the benefit of those who obey, but for the selfish enjoyment of that Power itself. Anxiously, in various periods and in various ways, the western Christian imagination tried to rid itself of the possibility that an uncaring Lord (God, King, Father) rules not only out there in the Orient, but in the universe at large, including home.

As for the structure of the book: In the next four chapters, I continue laying the general conceptual foundations for the more specific discussion of orientalism and sublime power that then follows: this part of the book may be considered as an extended introduction. In Chapter One, I make some generalizations regarding the figure of the Lord as I have just outlined it, considering the relationships that obtain among its theological, political, and phenomenological aspects. In

Chapter Two, I situate this book in the context of contemporary notions of orientalism based on Edward W. Said's now canonical work, noting the most important similarities and differences: a necessary exercise as often my assumptions and terminology may differ from Said's. In Chapters Three and Four, I give an overview of the historical phases through which orientalism has passed, identifying the beginning with the Ottoman ascendancy in Europe, become visible when the sultan's armies conquered Constantinople in 1452.

Chapters Five to Seven are meant to characterize the view of the Orient and sublime power in various periods and locations in the West, and the case examples are, in turn, the anonymous decorators of a famous astronomical clock in Prague, the biblical canvases of Rembrandt, and a treatise on the sublime by the eighteenth century orientalist and Bishop of London, Robert Lowth.

In Chapter Eight, we see that what had been a vague and informal characterization of the despotic Orient and its slavishly obedient denizens was given unprecedented clarity and internal consistency in Hegel's philosophical system. But Hegel goes well beyond summing up the orientalism that preceded him, and establishes some of the parameters for discussing the Orient that have lasted into the modern time and our own age.

The lifeless automatism of oriental obedience to both Allah and the worldly despot, which Hegel characterized as a result of the Lord's majestic isolation from a world that he rules without excess compassion, is traced in the next two chapters (Nine and Ten) to what I suggest are its biblical sources in the "obedience to the letter" as opposed to the spirit as distinguished by Paul. In Chapter Eleven, the experience of utter submission to a sublime power of this sort is briefly examined through the symbolism of a well-known symbol, particularly popular in the late eighteenth century: the All-Seeing-Eye.

The concluding part of the book at last confronts quite directly the fear that underlies the projection/abjection of the Orient as arises from the recesses of the western soul: the anxiety that the universe is governed not by a pastoral, fatherly Power but its opposite: an oppressive and selfish one. Chapter Twelve discusses the issue partly in terms of Foucault's conception of "government" as a pastoral power, whose development Foucault located in much the same period that we are focusing on. Finally, Chapter Thirteen examines the unlimited submission of the despot's subjects in terms of its ultimate active expression: suicide by the command of the despot.

Clearly, such a conclusion will be read with reference to terrorism as one of the prime "issues" in the public perception of Islam today. Indeed, it is more generally true, I am sure, that the image of sublime power in early orientalism cannot be contemplated without implicit reference to our own time. Yet I have tried to leave such reference implicit, wherever I could, for three reasons. First, though we know full well today that no one can write history uninfluenced by the present, I do believe that it is our obligation to at least try to control the temptation for anachronism. Second, the different phases of orientalism have been so different in character that any generalization over time is problematic even if not all comparison is invalid. Third, I believe that any explicit discussion of contemporary relevance is liable, given the emotional character of debates about Islam today, to hijack the reader's attention to history. For all these reasons, I have mostly resisted, though with great difficulty, and not without the occasional lapse, the temptation to foray into the present.

At the end of the book, I have permitted myself a modest epilogue that serves as a moral conclusion, and which does take a contemporary view. I express there a certain nostalgia after the romantic sort of orientalism, which has today all but disappeared in favor of the hard orientalism of uncompromising Islamophobia. Whatever their limitations and unacknowledged foundations in

western imperialism, romantic soft orientalists used to admire the Muslim Orient, and they admired it in part for Islam's lessons of humility and submission to the sublime power of providence. It is not pure prejudice, I suggest, that such values exist in Islam, and it remains as true as ever that there is something we can learn from them here in the West. The facts and analyses of the book, however, do not depend on the validity or otherwise of this purely personal conclusion.

ⁱ A very impressive example is Michael Curtis, *Orientalism and Islam : European thinkers on Oriental despotism in the Middle East and India*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009) It is rich in fact and erudite interpretation, even if one may disagree with some of Curtis' positions.

ⁱⁱ Paul Rycaut, *The present state of the Ottoman Empire, containing the maxims of the Turkish politie, the most material points of the Mahometan religion, their sects and heresies, their convents and religious votaries, their military discipline with an exact computation of their forces, both by land and sea.: Illustrated with divers pieces of sculpture, representing the variety of habits amongst the Turks. London, J. Starkey and H. Brome, 1668*, (Westmead, Eng.: Gregg International Publishers, 1972), 6.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sonia P. Anderson, *An English consul in Turkey : Paul Rycaut at Smyrna, 1667-1678*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989)

^{iv} Carl Schmitt, *Political theology : four chapters on the concept of sovereignty*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), 5.

^v Whether such readings are purely metaphorical and so do or do not apply to living men and women is a controversial issue that I do not believe needs to detain us here.

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- ^{vi} Zachary Lockman, *Contending visions of the Middle East : the history and politics of Orientalism*, 2ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 316. This is a very sober, clearly-written guide to the facts, with a long historical perspective but an emphasis on the same period as was covered by Said.
- ^{vii} Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), 29.
- ^{viii} Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental renaissance : Europe's rediscovery of India and the East, 1680-1880*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984), xxiv, 542 p.
- ^{ix} *Tout ce que Mahomet a dit est vrai par rapport aux dogmes essentiels de la religion*. Henri Boulainvilliers, *La Vie de Mahomed, avec des réflexions sur la religion mahométane et les coutumes des musulmans*, 2ed. (Amsterdam: F. Changuion, 1731), 267.
- ^x Nicholas of Cusa, *Nicholas of Cusa's De pace fidei and Cribratio Alkorani : translation and analysis*, (Minneapolis: A.J. Banning Press, 1990), 252.