

BERNARD LEWIS, JOHN ESPOSITO AND GILLES KEPEL,
A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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Edward Said in his masterpiece, *Orientalism*, deeply and comprehensively researched the historical construction of the West-and-Islam dualism in Western literature on Islam.¹ Published for the first time in 1978, *Orientalism* traced the various phases of relationship between the West and Islam, from the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt, through the colonial period and the rise of modern Orientalist scholarship in Britain and France during the nineteenth century. It continued up to the end of European imperial hegemony in the Orient after World War II and then the emergence of American dominance. In Said's view, the discipline of Western Islamology was but a crystallisation of the West-and-Islam dualism in Western scholarship.

In this paper dualism is used to denote a way of thinking that promotes duality between 'the self' and 'the other' in order to justify and naturalise some structured patterns of domination and exploitation. By portraying 'them' as lesser in humanity or lower in the great chain of being, dualism is employed to legitimise some implications of hierarchical power and to show who gets what, when and how. The critical part of dualistic thought is not that there is merely a difference which can be found between each pair of men, but a dramatic difference, a 'difference by nature', i.e., an essential otherness which makes a specific group of men less human and hence subject to domination by another complete human being. In the social and political realms the main intention behind promoting dualistic thought is usually to justify the way 'we' treat 'them', even if we, as human beings, do not want to be treated in a similar way. The core of a dualistic argument, thus, is that 'they' are essentially different, totally dismissing their commonalities with us as members of the human race.

¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 1978-2003).

The main thesis of Said in *Orientalism* is not to suggest that there is such a thing as a real or true Orient; nor is it to make an assertion about the necessary privilege of an 'insider' perspective over an 'outsider one'. On the contrary, he argues that 'the Orient' is itself a constituted entity, and that the notion that there are geographical spaces with indigenous, radically 'different' inhabitants who can be defined on the basis of some essence proper to that space is equally a highly debatable idea.² Without such dualistic and ideological categorisation, there would be scholars, critics, intellectuals, human beings, to whom the racial, ethnic, and religious distinctions seem less important than the common enterprise of promoting human community. He further emphasizes the fact that he never suggests a dualistic approach not because it is against the East, but because this approach to the world is a flawed ideology in itself, stating: "the answer to Orientalism is not Occidentalism".³

What I want to argue here is that since its publication in 1978 the position of Islam has changed dramatically and moved ever closer to the centre of world politics. The Islamic Revolution of Iran in 1979, then the hostage crisis of US diplomats in Tehran; the unresolved Palestinian question and using Islam as a main force of resistance in the course of *intifadas*; the victorious resistance of Arab Afghan Mujahedin over the former super power's occupation; the Rushdie affair; and an increasing Islamic resurgence worldwide; all put both the West and Islam in new positions. Additionally, some political and social factors have greatly influenced interrelations between the West and Islam, among them are: the collapse of the Soviet Union and a threat vacuum for the West; the growing presence of Muslims with the full right of citizenship in the West, both in academia and in the marketplace; and the emergence of global mass media, diverse satellite channels and the internet. Likewise, some events of this new era have challenged the traditional Western perception of Islam, such as: the *de facto* democratic participation, and sometimes victories, of Islamic political movements; the growing voices of Islamic modernism; the rise of a democratic government led by Hamas as

² Said, *Orientalism*, p. 322.

³ *Ibid*, p. 328.