



ISLAM

IN

LIBERALISM

JOSEPH A MASSAD

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JOSEPH A. MASSAD is professor of modern Arab politics and intellectual history in the Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies at Columbia University. He is the author of *Desiring Arabs* (2007), *The Persistence of the Palestinian Question: Essays on Zionism and the Palestinian Question* (2006), and *Colonial Effects: The Making of National Identity in Jordan* (2001).

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Acknowledgments

I have been thinking about the modern intellectual and semantic history of the term “Islam” for a few years and began my work on the “Genealogies of Islam” in 2008, soon after my last book, *Desiring Arabs*, had come out. As soon as I began to research the book, however, I realized that I needed to explain my point of departure for this endeavor, namely the uses to which the term “Islam” has been put by European and Euro-American liberalism (and increasingly by Arab and Muslim liberals) since the eighteenth century. I initially decided to do so in a long introduction to the project but quickly realized that an introduction would not suffice as the issues multiplied and needed a more extensive scholarly treatment. This is when I decided that I had to write a book on the topic to contextualize my forthcoming project. This is how *Islam in Liberalism* was born.

The book was written over a protracted period of time. The first drafts of [chapters 3, 4, and 5](#) were written in the fall of 2008 and the spring of 2009 in Cairo, while I was on a research sabbatical, and were expanded in subsequent years in New York, Amman, and Cairo. I thank Tim Sullivan for facilitating my affiliation with the American University in Cairo during my sabbatical. Parts of [chapter 1](#) were also written in Cairo in the fall of 2010 during a one-semester sabbatical I had that year. The rest of [chapter 1](#) and [chapter 2](#) were written mostly in New York between 2011 and 2013, but redrafted in Cairo and Amman in the summers of 2012 and 2013. The introduction was written during the summer of 2013 in Amman when the book was finalized.

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The Choice of Liberalism

Islam is at the heart of liberalism, at the heart of Europe; it was there at the moment of the birth of liberalism and the birth of Europe. Islam is indeed one of the conditions of their emergence as the identities they claim to be. Islam, as I will show, resides inside liberalism, defining its identity and its very claims of difference. It is an internal constituent of liberalism, not merely an external other, though liberalism often projects it as the latter. The establishment of differing forms of liberalism as the reigning political, social, and/or economic system in parts of Western Europe and the United States since the late eighteenth century and its main deployment thenceforward as the ideological weapon of choice against the “internal” and “external” others of Europe, is what marks its current legitimation as a global ideological system.

Europe’s external others have historically been defined as Orientals and the Orient, Muslims and Islam, Africans and Africa, Native Americans and Aboriginal Australians and New Zealanders, Oriental despotisms of various kinds extending from East to West Asia and everything in between. Europe’s internal others, in contrast, have been identified as Orthodox and Catholic Christians (and Mormons in the case of Protestant Anglo-Americans) and their forms of Christianity, Jews and Judaism, socialism, fascism, anarchism and communism. Like Europe, liberalism’s external others turn out to be internal to it, though the ruse of externalizing them as outsiders intends to hide the operation of projecting them as an outside so that liberalism’s inside can be defined as their opposite as their superior. Edward Said understood this well. “The Orient,” he declared, “is an integral part of European *material* civilization and culture.”¹

The situation following the collapse of the Soviet Union as the last state-sponsored threat to liberalism within Europe is astutely described by Toula Nicolacopoulos in these terms: “Today Anglophone political philosophy is generally conducted in the light of the perceived triumph of liberalism. That is, it typically proceeds on the assumption that it is unreasonable, if not irrational or pathological, to resist liberalism, whether as a mode of thought or as a social order.”² This is hardly a condition confined to Anglophone political philosophy but encompasses the dominant political discourse across Western and Northern Europe and beyond. The hegemony of liberalism is such that “to resist” it “would be unreasonably to deny the moral and/or political superiority of (the values governing) liberal societies as compared with their historical and contemporary social alternatives.”³

Alasdair MacIntyre, writes Gerald Gauss, poses the question: “‘Nietzsche or Aristotle?’ If *I* am right, the question is ‘Nietzsche or Liberalism?’; and, unless one is a psychopath . . . the answer must be the latter.”⁴ In its constitution of an “Islam” that it names and wants to oppose, contemporary Western liberalism offers the more detrimental “choice”: Islam or liberalism, or variations therein, totalitarian Islamism or liberalism, Islamofascism or liberalism, Islamic despotism or liberalism, etc. The correlate to Gauss’s reply here would be that *unless one is a barbarian, a despot, an irrational psychopath, a neurotic, a totalitarian, an intolerant brute, a misogynist, a homophobe*, in short, a Muslim, *the answer must be the latter*.

In this vein, Paul Kahn paraphrases Americans’ view of themselves and the world at large as follows:

Our contemporary missionaries preach democracy, free markets, and the rule of law—all institutions founded on our belief in the equality and liberty of every person. This dogged commitment to a universal community is a product of both our Christian and Enlightenment traditions. We experience this commitment simultaneously as a kind of open-ended love and as a faith in the capacity of each individual to enter a rational debate that will result in mutual agreement. No one, we believe, is beyond conversion to our values. When we dream of a global order, we project our own values onto it. We do

We will see, throughout this book, how American and European missionaries of liberalism, that is, those who imagine that the global community of the future will be led by a *secular* cleric, will seek to proselytize their value system and model of social and political order to all Muslims whom they seek to *save and rescue* from their despotic system of rule, failing which, the missionaries would at least want to rescue Muslim women and increasingly male (and female, though less attention is paid to the latter) Muslim “homosexuals” from Islam’s misogyny, homophobia, and intolerance. This act of proselytization aims to convert *Muslims and Islam* to Western liberalism and its value system as the only just and sane system to which the entire planet must be converted. As Talal Asad put it, the liberal mission is to have the Islamic tradition “remade in the image of liberal Protestant Christianity.”⁶ Muslim resistance to this benevolent mission is represented as a rejection of modernity and the liberal values of freedom, liberty, equality, the right-bearing individual, democratic citizenship, women’s rights, sexual rights, freedom of belief, secularism, rationality, etc., in short as pathology and a form of neurosis that must not only be vanquished, but also, and as we will see, psychoanalyzed. Thus if Muslims refuse to convert willingly to liberalism or at least to forms of Islam that liberalism finds tolerable, then they must be forced to convert using military power, as their resistance threatens a core value of liberalism, namely its universality and the necessity of its universalization as globalization. Talal Asad understands this project thus: if the European Enlightenment’s “secular redemptive politics” condemns religious forms of violence, pain, and suffering as non-emancipatory of sinners, “there is a readiness [on its part] to cause pain to those who are to be saved by being humanized.”⁷

Naming Islam

The more robust recent campaign to identify Islam as the last holdout resisting Western liberalism is significant on a number of fronts, not least of which is the deployment of the referent “Islam.” The very naming of that which resists liberalism’s universalization as “Islam” has been fraught with political and definitional problems that are not easily surmountable. One of the difficulties in analyzing what Islam has come to *mean* and to refer to since the nineteenth century is the absence of agreement on what Islam actually *is*. Does *Islam* name a religion, a geographical site, a communal identity; is it a concept, a technical term, a sign, or taxonomy? The lack of clarity on whether it could be all these things at the same time is compounded by the fact that Islam has acquired referents and significations it did not formerly possess. European Orientalists and Muslim and Arab thinkers have begun to use “Islam” in numerous ways while seemingly convinced that it possesses an immediate intelligibility that requires no specification or definition. “Islam,” for these thinkers, is not only the *name* the Qur’an attributes to the *din*—often (mis)translated as “religion,” though there is some disagreement about this—that entails a faith (*iman*) in God disseminated by the Prophet Muhammad, but can also refer to the history of Muslim states and empires, the different bodies of philosophical, theological, jurisprudential, medical, literary, and scientific works, as well as to culinary, sexual, social, economic, religious, ritualistic, scholarly, agricultural, and urban practices engaged in by Muslims from the seventh to the nineteenth century and beyond, as well as much, much more.

Some of the new meanings and referents of Islam had a significant impact on political and social thought as well as on national and international politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and may have even more of an impact in the twenty-first. The implication of these meanings for politics and society results from their transformation of “Islam” into a “culture” and a “civilization” or a “cultural tradition,”⁸ a “system,”⁹ a “*manhaj*” (way of life, method),¹⁰ a “programme,”¹¹ an ethics, a

code of public conduct, a gendered sartorial code, a set of banking principles, a type of governance. Moreover, “Islam” has also come to be deployed as a metonym: *fiqh* (problematically rendered “jurisprudence”) and *kalam* (“theology,” again, problematically)—which were traditionally sciences established by Muslim thinkers—or *Shari‘a* (“sacred law,” also problematically)—a term loaded with different connotations and trajectories, often referring to a body of opinions and interpretations—come to be conceived as constituent parts of “Islam,” for which it can metonymically substitute.¹²

While the easiest transformation to identify is the one that makes Islam over into a “culture” and a “civilization,” given the centrality of this meaning among Orientalist thinkers and their Muslim and Arab counterparts since the nineteenth century, the production of Islam’s many other new meanings and referents may not be as clear. Yet a history of the multiplication of the meanings of Islam is necessary for understanding what Islam has become in today’s world, both in those parts of the world where peoples as well as political and social forces claim to uphold one kind of Islam or another, and in those parts of the world where peoples as well as political and social forces see “Islam” as “other,” whether or not they “oppose” it. Indeed, the current ongoing war among the many forces that claim to speak in the name of Islam and in the name of anti-Islam is itself not only part of the productive process of endowing Islam with new meanings and referents, but also part of the related process of controlling the slippage of the term toward specific and particular meanings and referents and away from others. In this way, “Islam” is being opposed to certain antonyms (“Christianity,” “the West,” “liberalism,” “individualism,” “democracy,” “freedom,” “citizenship,” “secularism,” “rationality,” “tolerance,” “human rights,” “women’s rights,” “sexual rights”) and decidedly not to others with which it is often identified (“oppression,” “repression,” “despotism,” “totalitarianism,” “subjection,” “injustice,” “intolerance,” “irrationalism,” “cruelty,” “misogyny,” or “homophobia”).

Two central religious and intellectual strands emerged in the nineteenth century among Arab, Muslim, and European Orientalist thinkers who argued for the compatibility or incompatibility of “Islam” with Western modernity and progress. The word—or, more precisely, the name—“Islam” itself began to conjure up immediate comprehension and significance in ways assumed to have always been the case. This project of thinking (about) “Islam” in new ways, while often passing itself off as a return to old or original ways of thinking, was situated in the political context of the rise of European imperial thought and territorial expansion as well as in the corresponding decline of Ottoman political and imperial power. Yet the “Islam” to which these European and non-European thinkers referred was a more expansive concept, encompassing phenomena that had hitherto been seen as extraneous to it. Indeed, “Islam” had never been the catchall term the eighteenth and especially the nineteenth century would make of it, but was, rather, something more specific, more particular.

Additionally, one of the more interesting aspects of post-nineteenth century uses of the term “Islam” is not just its accretion of referents, nor that the accreted meanings were deployed by different thinkers or different intellectual or political trends, but that they were employed differently by each thinker and each trend. European Orientalists, Arab secularists (Muslim and Christian), pious (and later Islamist) thinkers, postcolonial states defining themselves as “Muslim” or “Islamic,” and their “Western” and “secular” opponents—all seem to use the term “Islam” in a variety of ways to refer to a whole range of things. The productive multiplication of referents that Islam would begin to acquire would ultimately destabilize whatever meaning it had had before or even *after* this transformation, in that in modern writing about Islam it is not always clear which referent it has in a given text. Rather, it often seems that all of them are in play interchangeably *in the same text*, as well as across texts, thus rendering “Islam” a catachresis that always stands in for the *wrong* referent. In my next book, tentatively titled *Genealogies of Islam*, for which *Islam in Liberalism* is intended to serve as a prolegomenon, I will study the intellectual and semantic history of the multiplication of the meanings of Islam since the eighteenth century. In this book, I will investigate the role of Western liberalism in

producing these referents and meanings, as well as what Western liberalism produces as Islam's synonyms and antonyms. It is at the site of translation that this becomes significant for the Western liberal project.

Translating Islam

One often thinks of translation as opening up access to texts in other languages, a process by which one produces literal copies of an original text, albeit rendered through a different communicative medium. This optimistic, one would say vernacular, view of translation as linguistic equivalence has been complicated by myriad theories of language, linguistics, or even earlier on in philological approaches. Still, translation in the publishing industry remains mostly seen as opening doors for one language group to another, universalizing a particular language beyond its structural confines, the limitations of which were explored by Pascale Casanova in her discussion of what she calls "the World Republic of Letters."¹³

I understand translation as an epistemology, a way to apprehend what lies outside the confines of one's language, which, paradoxically, can only be apprehended through one's own language. But when translation as such is an epistemology, the act of translation itself is enmeshed in a web of linguistic, political, social, economic, "cultural," in short, *power* contexts that determine that act itself, its structures, its imperatives, its effects, and its publics. In a colonial world of unequal power, languages are not equal; indeed, as Talal Asad has shown, they are so "unequal" that some languages are "stronger" than others.¹⁴ This is not to say that Arabic is in any way more or less accessible, or more or less transparent, than English or other European, Asian, or African languages, but rather that it is equally accessible and inaccessible depending on epistemological considerations and the context of power dynamics within which the act of translation takes place.

Beyond the publishing industry and the profit motive, one of the most interesting uses of translation is ideological. The US government and subsidiary nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and private foundations rushed to fund all kinds of translation projects from English to Arabic in the wake of September 11. This was not a new project, as US interest in translation projects in Muslim-majority countries goes back to the dawn of the Cold War. The idea is that translation would bring about a cultural transformation in Arab and Muslim countries, where al-Qa'ida-style cultures are said to prosper.

Nonetheless, these translational efforts acknowledge that there are certain conceptual limitations to the common understanding of translation as an automatic rendering of one language into another, including the dilemma presented by certain words that are judged as "untranslatable" and that must therefore be adopted in their original form in the new language to which they were intended to be translated. Examples between English and French include idioms with culturally specific conceptual histories like "joie de vivre," "weekend," "gourmet," "leader," "femme fatale," "chic," among others. In more recent years, one observes an insistence on not translating certain Arabic words to English and on rendering them in the original. These include secular words like "intifada," words that have secular and religious resonance like "sheik" as a rendering of "shaykh" (meaning old man, elder, elderly, learned man, religious and pious man, head of tribe) but also include words identified as "Islamic," most prominently "Allah" and "jihad," and sometimes "hijab" and "Shari'a." "Allah," an Arabic word meaning God that was used by Arab Christians and non-Christians before the Qur'anic revelation, is rendered in English and other European accounts as the proper name of the God of the Muslims, even though the Prophet Muhammad's father was named 'abd Allah, or worshipper of God long before his son was born or became a prophet.¹⁵ Jihad, a common name among Christian Arabs, including Lebanese Maronites, with the secular meaning of struggle, is used in the original in English

and juxtaposed to the translation “Holy War.” Anxiety about the meanings of words identified as “Islamic” was such that it became key to American investigators looking into the causes of the Egyptian Air flight 990 crash of 1999, off the US East Coast, as the Egyptian pilot’s use of the normative invocation “tawakkaltu ‘ala Allah” (often translated as “I put my trust in God”) became key to attributing suspicious motives to him. Moreover, the Western media and Western officialdom expended special time in order to understand the word “hudna” and its “Islamic” implications when Hamas offered a “ceasefire” to Israel a few years ago.¹⁶

It seems here that the problem may lie less with comparative translations than with comparative untranslatability. Is there an essential arbitrariness to why one word versus another would be left untranslated, or is there a way in which people “understand” the word’s resistance to translation—and if so, how? For something like “gourmet” or “chic” (and the latter should not be confused with “sheik”!), there is a general sense that it signifies “Frenchness” in such a way that its link to French carries over—i.e. French culture, fashion, and food—which makes it “make sense” not to be able to translate it. This is of course pure fiction. But if it were the case, then how would such a fantasy of cultural essence and linguistic rootedness compare in the case of say “intifada” or “jihad”? Again, if the more specific question is something to the effect of how to think about comparative untranslatability, then the larger question is how to think about the untranslated and the untranslatable? Is the untranslatable being acknowledged as respect for difference and as limit to narration, or is it an emphasis on othering and exoticization? What about words that have “religious” significance?

Isma‘il Raji al-Faruqi, a committed Muslim American who immigrated to the US from Palestine, suggests that many such words are in fact not translatable. He provides the example of how the Arabic Qur’anic word “salah,” (sometimes rendered “salat”) which refers to a set of rituals repeated five times a day by observant Muslims and includes a set of “recitations, genuflections, prostrations, standings and sittings with orientation towards the Ka‘bah, and should be entered into after ablutions and a solemn declaration of intention” is (mis)translated as “prayer” into English, when in fact the forms that varying Christian “prayers” take are more akin to what Muslims call *du‘a’* (or *ibtihal*) than to *salah*.¹⁷ Other examples al-Faruqi provides include “zakah” which is (mis)translated as charity or almsgiving. He concludes that as such a word has no equivalent in English, “it must therefore never be translated. Rather, it must be understood as it stands in its Arabic form.”¹⁸ For al-Faruqi, whose interest is that Muslims who are native speakers of English understand their religion *correctly* and *accurately* and learn the wide range of meanings Qur’anic words have in Arabic, giving such words English terms through translation is “to reduce, and often to ruin, those meanings.”¹⁹ In the academic realm, Wael Hallaq has argued in turn that the very (mis)translation of Shari‘a into “law” has been detrimental to the way Orientalists understood and judged it.²⁰ These are hardly new translational preoccupations. Orientalists themselves have dabbled in a variety of ethnographic translations whose difficulty they identified and whose etymological implications some of them fantasized, the most infamous perhaps is Bernard Lewis’s charlatanism in “excavating” the word “thawra,” meaning revolution, which he linked to the rising of camels.²¹

Edward Said put it thus in his 1981 book *Covering Islam*: “the term ‘Islam’ as it is used today seems to mean one simple thing but in fact is part fiction, part ideological label, part minimal designation of a religion called Islam. In no really significant way is there a direct correspondence between the ‘Islam’ in common Western usage and the enormously varied life that goes on within the world of Islam, with its more than 800,000,000 people, its millions of square miles of territory principally in Africa and Asia, its dozens of societies, states, histories, geographies, cultures.”²² What is it then about Islam, what is at stake in translating it and (what is identified as) its subsidiary

vocabulary to English and other European languages?

Some scholars argue that in the modern era, Islam, like the Orient, is another antonym for the West while others have argued that European secularism is its proper opposite. Yet, others speak of democracy, civilization, freedom, etc., as the opposites of this Islam. Indeed, a *Washington Post* veteran journalist went as far as positing the English language itself as the antonym of “Islam,” when she described the outcome of Qatari school curricular reform as “less Islam, more English.”²³ It seems, therefore, that as the referents of Islam have multiplied so have its antonyms. The question then becomes whether the production of Islam’s many new referents was part of the same translation process of producing its many new antonyms, from being a singular Christendom or Christianity to many more opposites. I should note here that the Western and Orientalist deployment of Christianity and Christendom themselves as singular is based on a retrospective deployment of a unitary community on what was historically disunited peoples, doctrines, and churches.

A number of scholars of religion agree that the development of the multiple significations of Islam after the colonial encounter was greatly conditioned by it. Leonard Binder sketches Western imperial liberalism’s efforts at the conversion of Islam into a form the former can accept. He asserts that “from the time of the Napoleonic invasion, from the time of the Janissaries, from the time of the Sepoy mutiny, at least, the West has been trying to tell Islam what must be the price of progress in the coin of tradition which is to be surrendered. And from those times, despite the increasing numbers of responsive Muslims, there remains a substantial number that steadfastly argue that it is possible to progress without paying such a heavy cultural price.”²⁴ In response, Talal Asad maintains that it is

no incidental detail that each of the “tellings” [Binder] cited—when traditional authority was successfully attacked in the name of rationalism and progress—was at the same time an act of violence. In each of them, Western political, economic, and ideological power increased its hold over non-European peoples. That power, unleashed in Enlightenment Europe, continues to restructure the lives of non-European peoples, often through the agency of non-Europeans themselves. And if “Islamic fundamentalism” is a response to that power, then certainly so, even more thoroughly, are the intellectual currents called “modernist Islam” (which is concerned to adapt theology to the models of Christian modernism) and “Muslim secularism” (which are preoccupied less with theology than with separating religion from politics in national life). And so, too, are the progressivist movements in literature and the arts, in politics and law, that have arisen in Muslim societies.²⁵

Islam in Liberalism

Islam in Liberalism seeks to understand how Islam became so central to liberalism as ideology and an identity, indeed how liberalism as the antithesis of Islam became one of the key components of the very discourse through which Europe as a modern identity was conjured up. This book will analyze how in the process of identification, the emergence of “Europe” was predicated on a series of projections, disavowals, displacements, and expulsions in order to produce a coherent self cleansed of others to which this self was opposed in its very constitution. That the Orient and Orientals, Semitism and Semites, and specifically Islam and Muslims would constitute a primary other that was internal to this Europe and which had to be expelled from its emergent formation is now uniformly accepted in scholarship. Still, however, some scholars continue to resist the links between liberalism and its derivatives and the internal and external others of Europe. While in his magisterial study of liberalism, Domenico Losurdo has comprehensively shown the links of liberalism as ideology and as a political regime to slavery, colonialism, and class oppression, inside and outside Europe, Charles Taylor’s monumental study of secularism presents the latter as a development internal to Europe and its Christian populations.²⁶ It is in this vein that Wendy Brown insists that

absent from Taylor’s account is every stripe of outsider to Latin Christendom, from Jews and Muslims in Europe to colonized natives and other outsiders, as well as dissident voices, reversals and disruptions to what he calls his “story.” The missing elements make it more provincially European, monolithic, colonial, than it needs to be. Above all, they make the

emergence of EuroAtlantic secularism a product of tensions within Christendom rather than, in part, a feature of Christendom's encounter with others and especially with its constitutive outside. More than a problem of historiography or comprehensiveness, this omission has consequential politics; today, Western secularism is so relentlessly defined through its imagined opposite in Islamic theocracy that to render secularism as generated exclusively through Western Christian European history is to literally eschew the production of ourselves as secular through and against our imagined opposite. It is to be locked into Thomas Friedman's conceit about "our" secular modernity and "their" need for it.²⁷

What I seek to understand in this book is the intellectual and political histories within which Islam operated as a category of Western liberalism, indeed, how the anxieties about what this Europe constituted and constitutes—despotism, intolerance, misogyny, homophobia—were projected onto Islam and that only through this projection could Europe emerge as democratic, tolerant, philogynist and homophilic, in short Islam-free. My project is not one that seeks to investigate the whole range of concerns that constitute liberalism, but specifically how Islam figures in it as ideology and the policies that liberal regimes in Europe and the United States pursued and pursue vis-à-vis this Islam. I also do not intend to explore how "Islam," whatever that is, constitutes itself, but emphatically how liberalism constitutes Islam in constituting itself.

Once Europe is produced as this paradisiacal place, it becomes incumbent on Christian and liberal Europeans not only to proselytize their "culture" and mode of living, but also to save and rescue non-European Muslims from their anti- and un-European cultures and modes of life. *Islam in Liberalism* documents this Christian and liberal zealotry of missionizing democracy, women's rights, sexual rights, tolerance, and equality, indeed even of therapeutic methods, specifically psychoanalysis, to cure Muslims and Islam of their un-European, un-Christian, and illiberal ways.

The first chapter of the book will discuss the history of the production of Europe as "democratic" and of Islam as "despotic," while the second will focus on the production of European women as the "luckiest in the world" and Muslim women as the "most oppressed in the world." The third chapter addresses how US and Europe-based academics and activists and a few of their colleagues in Muslim majority countries link Islam, liberalism, and sexuality in such a way as to produce the West as a paradise of equality and tolerance for homosexuals and the "Muslim world" as a veritable hell from which Muslim homosexuals must be saved through transforming Muslim-majority countries and nationals into copies of a fantasized West. The fourth chapter focuses on psychoanalytic approaches to Islam and/in liberalism, and how European-based psychoanalytic thinkers (many among whom are Muslim immigrants who live in Europe) summon the power of liberalism to substitute for psychoanalytic analysis in their pathologization of Islam. The fifth and last chapter situates Islam within the scholarship of Semitics and the liberal (and eirenic) idea of equalizing Islam with Judaism and Christianity as "Abrahamic" religions, and with Jewish and Christian fundamentalisms, as another form of messianism—an equalization that will be shown to be a part of the liberal ruse of inclusion that yet again sidesteps the question of imperial power.

Footnotes

- 1 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 2.
- 2 Toula Nicolacopoulos, *The Radical Critique of Liberalism: In Memory of a Vision* (Melbourne: re.press, 2008), 3.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 4 Gerald Gauss, *Value and Justifications: The Foundations of Liberal Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 457n, cited in *ibid.*, 3.
- 5 Paul W. Kahn, *Putting Liberalism in Its Place* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 6–7.
- 6 Talal Asad, “Europe against Islam: Islam in Europe,” *Muslim World* 87, no. 2 (April 1997): 189.
- 7 Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 61–62.
- 8 See G. E. von Grunebaum, *Islam: Essays in the Nature and Growth of a Cultural Tradition* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1955).
- 9 D. S. Margoliouth referred to Islam as a “system,” in his *Mohammedanism* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1896), 42.
- 10 Sayyid Qutb uses the term “manhaj” throughout his writings, especially in *Al-Islam wa Mushkilat al-Hadarah* (Islam and the Problems of Civilization) (Cairo: Dar al-Shuruq, 2005), as does Mahmud Muhammad Shakir in his *Risalah fi al-Tariq ila Thaqqafatina* (A Message on the Path to Our Culture) (Cairo: Mu’assasat al-Risalah, 1992).
- 11 On the use of “programme,” see Muhammad Asad, *Islam at the Crossroads* (Lahore: Arafat Publications, 1947), 5, 14, 152, *inter alia*. The book was first published in 1934.
- 12 Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori have written perceptively about the “systematization” of Islam and its “objectification” and how the latter “reconfigures the symbolic production of Muslim politics.” For them, however, Islam denotes a “religion” and not multiple referents. See Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori, *Muslim Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 38.
- 13 See Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).
- 14 Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 189–93. On “strong” languages, see also Talal Asad, “Ethnographic Representation, Statistics, and Modern Power,” *Social Research* 61, no. 1 (Spring 1994): 78.
- 15 Recently, in October 2013, and in an ironic twist, the second highest Malaysian court, in line with European and American Orientalist and anti-Muslim polemicists, has banned the use of the term “Allah” by non-Muslims, decreeing that it is the exclusive property of Muslims! See “UN Official Says Malaysia Should Reverse Allah Ban,” *Reuters*, 26 November 2013, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/11/25/us-un-malaysia-allah-idUSBRE9AO0BJ20131125> (accessed 12 February 2014).
- 16 See for example Katin Laub, “ Hamas Hard-Liners Edge Toward Cease-Fire,” *Associated Press*, 22 June 2003, which asserts that “the success of peacemaking may well hang on a legal concept dating to the birth of Islam: a ‘hudna,’ or a truce of a fixed duration, usually between Muslims and non-Muslims.”
- 17 On translation of religious terminology from Arabic to English, see Isma‘il Raji al Faruqi, *Toward Islamic English* (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1986), 11. On the debate among Muslims who are native-speakers of English on the question of Islam and English, see Mucahit Bilici, *Finding Mecca in America: How Islam is Becoming an American Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 64–89.
- 18 Al Faruqi, 12.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 Wael B. Hallaq, *Shari‘a: Theory, Practice, Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1–6.
- 21 See Edward Said’s response to him on this count in “Orientalism: An Exchange,” *New York Review of Books*, 12 August 1983.
- 22 Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the World*, rev. ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 1.
- 23 Susan Glasser, “Qatar Reshapes its Schools, Putting English over Islam,” *Washington Post*, 2 February 2003.
- 24 Leonard Binder, *Islamic Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 293.
- 25 Asad, *Genealogies of Religion*, 228–29.
- 26 See Domenico Losurdo, *Liberalism: A Counter-History*, translated by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2011), and Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).
- 27 Wendy Brown, “Idealism, materialism, secularism,” 22 October 2007, blog post, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2007/10/22/idealism-materialism-secularism> (accessed 12 February 2014). For another critique of Taylor along similar lines, see Luca Mavelli, *Europe’s Encounter with Islam: The Secular and the Postsecular* (London: Routledge, 2012), 68–74.

The Democracy Offensive and the Defenses of “Islam”

This chapter assembles a range of writing around the question of democracy and Islam in an attempt to understand the deep intellectual genealogy of Western liberal claims that Islam is “culturally” un- or antidemocratic and that the major cultural achievement of Christianity (in the form of Protestantism) and the West has been their commitment to democratic governance. I will look at the liberal context in which these arguments emerged and the impact of their culturalist bent on politics and the ongoing efforts by the United States, and Britain (and France) before it, to produce an Islamic theology, if not a whole new “Islam,” compatible with the colonial and imperial order they seek to impose on Muslim-majority countries under the sign of “spreading democracy and freedom.” In contrast to (Protestant) Christianity, capitalism, or modernity, which are often claimed by liberal thinkers as enablers of “democracy,” Islam has been said to be either fully fortified or “defenseless” against this “Western” political order. US president George W. Bush was clear on the Christian origins of freedom when he declared in 2004: “Freedom is the Almighty’s gift to every man and woman in this world. And as the greatest power on the face of the earth we have an obligation to help the spread of freedom.”¹ Clearly the offensive capability of democracy is organized by both secular and divine power simultaneously. Indeed, as will become clear in this chapter, democracy has in certain ways become the new name of Christianity and has been missionized to the heathens in ways that are no less deadly.

The emergence of the Eastern Question in eighteenth-century Western Europe was part and parcel of the attempt, ongoing since the Renaissance, to create “Europe” as a transcendental idea, composed of a set of Enlightened ideals differentiated from a prior historical moment that this nascent Europe would call “the dark ages,” and as a unified and separate geography differentiated from “dark” lands and continents lying outside it. Indeed, as Roberto Dainotto pithily put it, “a theory of Europe, from its very outset, is a theory of Orientalism,” one that differentiates Europe from the Orient, and from Islam, and sets it up as their opposite.² This geographic demarcation would become essential for the European project that would in the nineteenth century be called “civilization” and “culture.”

Even those who would posit the origins of the European idea in the era of Charlemagne cannot ignore the role of Islam. In this regard, Henri Pirenne had declared: “The conquest of Spain and Africa by Islam had made the king of the Franks the master of the Christian Occident. . . . It is therefore strictly correct to say that without Mohammed Charlemagne would have been inconceivable.”³ This also applies to those who attribute the origins of Europe to the unifying quest of Christendom, which developed through the Crusades, and which ultimately failed to dislodge the Muslims from the “Holy Land.”⁴ It applies as well to those who view 1492, the year of the Conquest of the Americas and the coeval Reconquista over the remaining presence of Muslims and “Islam” in Spain, as the inaugural moment of the invention of Europe.⁵ Whatever point of origin is chosen for the story of Europe to begin, “Islam” seems to have a foundational role at every turn. Indeed, the question of European origins is even more complicated when we take into consideration that, through the end of the eighteenth century, the understanding that much of “European” literature, inaugurated by Provençal poetry, was based on and derived from Arabic poetry from Muslim Spain (so much so that the very word troubadour comes from the Arabic *taraba*, meaning to sing), or what is referred to as “the Arabist theory,” was a major, if controversial, claim put forth by Juan Andrés in his 1782–1822 eight-volume history of European literature titled *Dell’ origine, progressi, e stato attuale d’ogni letteratura*. The anxiety that such findings would cause were such that

In the middle of the nineteenth century it would have been inconceivable or very difficult for most Europeans to imagine, let alone explore or defend, a view of the “European” as being culturally subservient to the “Arab.” To imagine that France’s first literary flower, one that had been cultivated and idolized for so long as the first in Europe was not only not the first, but that it might be in any way derivative of the culture of people who were now politically colonized and culturally and materially “backwards” vis-à-vis Europeans was just too much.⁶

Andrés did not only posit Arabic literature as the origin of what would become “European” literature but would also insist:

Paper, numerals, gunpowder, the compass came to us from the Arabs. Maybe also the pendulum and the law of gravity, and other recent discoveries . . . were known by them long before they came to our philosophers. Universities, astronomical observatories, academics, literary institutions do not think they have an Arab origin, and perhaps they will not be very grateful to me for having refreshed their memory with remembrance of such an old event.⁷

Andrés’s views would not prevail in Enlightenment “Europe.” The invention of Europe’s Greek origins and the suppression of its Arabo-Islamic origins would proceed to the present, as it was and remains crucial to its invented Islam-free identity.⁸

Thus, *the Eastern Question, against which this nascent Europe measured itself, was always the Western Question*, the question of constituting the West as the West and repudiating the East, which feared was the point of origin of this West, as its antithesis. This much we have already learned from Edward Said’s *Orientalism*.⁹ That the Eastern Question would also become the Question of Islam and therefore the Question of (Protestant) Christianity would be germane to the European liberal project, which emerged from the Enlightenment, of presenting the West as a place with important characteristics that are always lacking in its Eastern and Islamic antitheses.

Like the emerging “West,” “Muslim” countries were recognized by Orientalism as sharing a common culture. Oxford and later Harvard Orientalist Sir Harold Gibb explained in the 1960s how knowledge of all aspects of the Islamic world was organized around the recognition that it formed a cultural unity with a cultural “central core.”¹⁰ My goal in this chapter is to understand how the question of a geographically and religiously mapped notion of culture has come to be related to political arrangements of governance, how *Oriental* cultures seem to have produced “Oriental despotism” while a unitary *Occidental culture* produced “Western democracy” in a context in which religion (specifically Islam and Christianity), as a subset or often a synonym of culture, is foregrounded as that which essentializes the “East” and the “West.”

It bears noting here that democracy and despotism are, despite their Greek origins, reinvented modern concepts that emerged in eighteenth-century Europe as conceptual and practical opposites. While Enlightenment figures acknowledged the Aristotelian origins of the term “despot,” the word, which had fallen out of use (it was often translated from the Greek as “tyrant”), would not make an appearance until the seventeenth century and would have to wait for another century to enter common parlance.¹¹ Indeed, “despotism” emerged before “democracy,” making an inaugural appearance in a French dictionary in 1720, while its conceptual meaning would be formed and refined as the century proceeded. Montesquieu’s *The Spirit of the Laws* (published in 1748)¹² would make the term a permanent fixture in the European political vocabulary, as would its modification by the adjective “Oriental,” rendering “Oriental despotism,” which defined the Ottoman Empire in this literature, substantially different from other forms of despotism, including “enlightened” European forms.¹³ This European incitement to discourse on despotism since the eighteenth century is identified by Michel Foucault as “an ambiguous phobia about despotism,”¹⁴ which this chapter seeks to explain.

As for “democracy,” while its Greek origins were noted as the word was often associated with negative political valences, the modern meaning of “democracy” and its common usage in English

would not emerge until the time of the American and French Revolutions and would be especially linked to America's self-understanding and self-representation.¹⁵ That despotism would be linked to Islam and the Ottomans (because Ottomans were the closest identifiable "Muslim" state to Europe) since its modern (re)birth, and democracy to a Europeanized Greek origin carried into modernity by revolutionary Europeans at home and in the North American colonies is, as we will see, more than incidentally related to contemporary representations.

The history I will review is one of continuity and rupture, dislocation and relocation within the shifts from mostly British, and sometimes French, colonialism—though Orientalism is almost pan-European—through the Cold War to the US New World Order imperialism. The uncomfortable shifts within Euro-American and European conceptions of "the Muslim world," especially in connection with the long view of the invented "West," often reflect, as Edward Said has shown, attempts by the self-constituting West to understand itself in relation to others.¹⁶ It is also the history of the production of a despotic and antidemocratic Islam as a self-consolidating other for a "West" that like to imagine its trajectory, if not its origins, as democratic. To do so, I will be dealing with a heterogeneous material: intellectual history and its shifting institutional locations, unevenly overlapping world historiographical periodizations (colonialism, Cold War, globalization), and the history of the culture concept and its political and colonial deployments. This varied material shares the same ontology and epistemology as well as the same empirical data about the "West" and "Islam." I will chart the connections between epistemic genealogy and politics (especially as many academics and scholars would serve British, French, German, and US political power as consultants, officers, and advisors over the decades) in the production of a relationship that, many Western liberals insist, connects both Islam and democracy as well as democracy and the Christian West. This chapter principally argues that the assumption of democratic identity by the "West" and of despotic identity by the West's other, represented by the figure of "Islam," is both an act of self-constitution and projection *as well as* an imperial strategy that uses cultural assimilation and othering as tactics of economic and political domination. In this regard, I will not concern myself with the rich intellectual production in Muslim-majority societies since the eighteenth century, which was not always *directly* related to this European and Euro-American liberal imperial history (something I study in a forthcoming book), but will rather focus on the relationship between European and Euro-American liberalism and European and American policies and the emergence of specific forms of theological and intellectual effects and political transformations in the "Muslim world" that issue from them.

This is then a discourse about the West as a modern category, its despotism, its undemocracy, and its conjuring up of an "Ottoman despotism" and of "Islamic" undemocracy that did not exist as such before their European marking, itself a ruse for the production of "European democracy." The discourse on democracy, as we will see, is also largely a Christian religious discourse, which posits *democracy* as the *highest stage of (Protestant) Christianity*. This discourse is in short not less than what Foucault calls a coupling of a set of practices (which in our case would be local and imperial governance) and a regime of truth (which in our case would be Orientalism) from an apparatus of knowledge-power (liberalism *tout court*) "that effectively marks out in reality that which does not exist and legitimately submits it to the division between true and false," the truth of "European democracy" and of "Islamic" un-democracy.¹⁷

I attend mainly to the intellectual history of the liberal linkage of Christian Europe, Islam, and democracy in the first half of the chapter, while in the second half I attend mainly to the history of colonial and neocolonial policies that proceeded from this liberal linkage to clarify the intersections between the intellectual history of liberalism and the diplomatic history of the US and European liberal regimes on the one hand and their induction of the category of Islam into the heart of their

varied modernist projects on the other. The intellectual, the political, and the diplomatic, as readers will note, are so intricately intertwined that I make no attempt to disentangle them from one another but rather work to expose their complex and not-so-complex linkages throughout.

American Democracy

One of the cornerstones of United States nationalism has been the assertion in official discourse, media representations, and in its educational system that the United States is the “oldest democracy” in the world, an assertion that always raises eyebrows outside the United States and among many Americans at home, though the latter rarely challenge this assertion directly in any organized fashion. National wisdom has it that US democracy “evolved” to include segments of the population that were denied inclusion in citizenship. What does it mean for a country whose two-century history is divided between a century of racialized slavery and another century of racial apartheid to broadcast itself internally and externally as the oldest democracy? And what does it mean for a country where women were not allowed to vote for the first century and a half of its existence to consider itself the oldest democracy? Could white South Africans get away with describing their country, since it was founded in 1910, or at least since 1948 when Apartheid became its ruling ideology, as a “democracy” which “evolved” to include Indians and coloreds halfheartedly in 1983 with the tricameral parliament, and Blacks after 1994?

These are not just polemical questions but also conceptual ones that are central to our understanding of how the United States, presenting itself as an extension of Europe, as well as “Europe” itself, which remains an amorphous political, historical, and geographic category,¹⁸ set themselves up as the home and originary space of democracy, something not only based on the development of a governing system that they name “democracy” but also on the claim that such development reflected the commitments of Euro-American and European *culture* and *religion*, which are compatible with democracy, and encourage and make it possible. The association of Christianity with rationalism, science, and reason, of Protestantism with the capitalist economy and political democracy (and Catholicism and Orthodox Christianity with feudalism and dictatorship) had clearly become codified in liberal ideology long before Weber’s famous intervention. While John Locke excluded Islam, Judaism, Confucianism, among others, from reasonableness which seemed to be the exclusive property of Christianity and to which he dedicated his book *The Reasonableness of Christianity* in 1695,¹⁹ Protestant doubts about Catholic and Jewish dicta would largely disappear (though not doubt about Orthodox Christianity let alone Islam), however, in the mid twentieth century, on the eve of World War II, under the rubric of the “Judeo-Christian” tradition inaugurated in the late 1930s in the United States, which would allow Protestantism, Catholicism, and Judaism to be formalized in that country as the “religions of democracy.” Here one could perhaps turn Marx’s question of “why does the history of the East *appear* as a history of religions?”²⁰ on its head: why does the history of Western democracy *appear* as a history of Christianity?

European liberal thought, which articulated notions of political freedom and democracy since the Enlightenment, was linked to the rise of European empires that subjugated much of the globe to Europe’s control. The link between European liberal thought and the rise of empire, as Uday Mehta argues, has often been denied despite its imbrication in it, an argument also advanced by Edward Said with regards to the imbrication of modern European culture more generally with imperialism.²¹ Britain’s view of itself as a democracy in the nineteenth century (not unlike the view the United States has always had of itself whether under slavery, Jim Crow, or in the current moment of racial criminalization and imperialism) was not weakened as far as its liberal political thinkers were concerned by its undemocratic and despotic rule over millions of natives in the Empire, and which

was rationalized by many of them as just and in keeping with the natives' own traditions.²²

John Stuart Mill expresses this aptly in *On Liberty*, understanding himself to be a democrat at home and a despot abroad.²³ Indeed, he is clear that "despotism is a legitimate mode of government in dealing with barbarians, provided the end is their improvement, and the means justified by actually effecting that end."²⁴ Similarly, Alexis de Tocqueville was unrelenting in his commitment to what Domenico Losurdo refers to as "master race democracy" and to despotism for the barbarians, especially the Algerians: "It is possible and necessary that there be two sets of laws in Africa, because we are faced with two clearly separate societies. When one is dealing with Europeans, *absolutely* nothing prevents us from treating them as if they were alone; the laws enacted for them must be applied exclusively to them."²⁵

It was in such a context that the notion of liberal democratic citizenship, already articulated as a cornerstone of liberal Enlightenment thinking, would be deployed in contrast to despotic subjects. Like democracy and despotism, citizenship (though of Latin etymological origins) is also of Greek conceptual provenance, resuscitated for the Enlightenment liberal project. That citizenship should be restricted to the non-laboring classes for thinkers like Locke, Mandeville, Constant, and Sieyès and would be expanded to some of them in the form of "passive citizenship" after the French Revolution much related not only to the Athenian distinction between citizens and women, children, resident aliens, and slaves, but also as a contrast with the status of Oriental despotic subjects. This restriction of who is and is not a citizen and who is or is not an active or passive citizen is constitutive of the very notion of European liberal citizenship as a graduated system. It was enshrined in the 1792 constitution of Revolutionary France, which while eliminating the duality of active and passive citizenship and including wage-earners as citizens, still excluded vagabonds, criminals, and servants. Women of course continued to lack in full citizenship and did not obtain suffrage till 1946.²⁶

In contrast with Rousseau's support for direct nonrepresentative democracy (which liberalism never took up in practice anywhere in the Western "democracies"), for Montesquieu, this would be nothing less than "popular despotism," which he, like all liberal democratic orders after him, vehemently opposed.²⁷ But the question of citizenship would be increasingly linked to the notion of civil society, whose presence or absence was seen as essential to the nature of democratic and despotic governance. It was in this vein that, as Bryan Turner demonstrates, European liberal thought argued that "despotism presupposes a society in which 'civil society' is either absent or underdeveloped," and that "the notion of 'civil society' is not only fundamental to the definition of political life in European societies, but also a point of contrast between Occident and Orient."²⁸ Turner explains that although this was the problem of Asia as a whole according to Orientalism, "it has played an important role in the analysis of Islamic societies."²⁹ Since the 1980s and through the present, Western NGOs as well as government agencies would begin to set the building of "civil society" in Arab and Muslim countries as a primary goal of Western and NGO aid as part of their mission to spread democracy.

In his study of how citizenship itself is related to Orientalism, Engin Isin shows how the European invented tradition of democracy and citizenship is deployed:

An occidental tradition where the origins of "city," "democracy" and "citizenship" are etymologically traced to the "Greek," "Roman" and "medieval" cities and affinities between "their" and "our" practices are established not only [to] orient toward but also assemble and reproduce such practices. An entire tradition reminds us that polis, politics and polity, civitas, citizenship and civility, and demos and democracy have "common roots."³⁰

Isin quotes Weber's exceptionalization of Europe in contrast with its others, specifically the Orient: "The modern state is the first to have the concept of the citizen of the state' according to which 'the individual, for once, is not, as he is everywhere else, considered in terms of the particular profession

and family position he occupies, not in relation to differences of material and social situation, but purely and simply as a citizen.”³¹ Isin then summarizes the European imaginary rendering itself a superior exception compared to an inferior Orient: “For the occidental imagination some images are now such ways of seeing: that democracy was invented in the Greek polis; that Roman republican tradition bequeathed its legacy to Europe and that Europe Christianized and civilized these traditions . . . Many representations of orientalism either rely upon or reproduce this one essential difference between the Occident and the Orient.”³² Weber, Isin argues persuasively, is the canonical figure that remains the referent of such comparisons until today.

The European liberal division between citizen and subject and between active and passive citizens would become operative in the colonies as well. In his classic study of colonial and postcolonial Africa, Mahmood Mamdani asserts that colonial “indirect rule” survived the end of European colonial rule, if in deracialized form: “What we have before us is a bifurcated world, no longer simply racially organized, but a world in which the dividing line between those human and the rest less human is a line between those who labor on the land and those who do not. This divided world is inhabited by subjects on one side and citizens on the other.”³³ But if one were to go back to Enlightenment understandings of citizenship, the difference Mamdani discerns in postcolonial Africa is one *not* external to liberal citizenship, but *internal* to it, between active and passive citizenship—urban colonially educated Africans as active citizens who could in theory access liberal institutions and rural and peasant Africans without colonial education and middle class privilege as passive citizens who are relegated to the realm of “customary” institutions; this is a difference that is constitutive and foundational to European liberal citizenship, as we saw, even if posited as an antonym to the fantasized Oriental despotic subject and adapted to the racialized colonies through appeal to the “customary” which always remains subordinated to the civil institutions of the colonial and postcolonial state. Whereas Africans were transformed into passive and active citizens, they became subjects not of despotism as such but rather of European liberalism and its institutions, which first distinguished between European Enlightened despotism and Oriental despotism and then reordered and recoded European forms of despotism as democracy.

The question of the laboring and non-laboring classes is of course the question of private property. How central private property is to theories of democracy is illustrated by de Tocqueville’s assertion that it is the absence of feudalism and landed property and the presence of private and personal property (which fosters trade and commerce) that led to development of “democracy” in the United States and not in France.³⁴ He also linked the strength of religion in American public life to its “separation” from the sphere of governance, which was lacking in France: “Religion in America takes no direct part in the government of society, but it must nevertheless be regarded as the foremost of the political institutions of that country; for if it does not impart a taste for freedom, it facilitates the use of free institutions.”³⁵ As for societies that do not govern based on this separation, like the “Turks”: “In the present age they are in rapid decay, because their religion is departing, and despotism only remains.”³⁶ The later Weberian connection drawn between Protestant Christianity and capitalism completes the circle. It is thus that the trajectory of Protestant Christianity to capitalism to democracy gets codified in liberal thought.

The Orientalist insistence that Islam’s hostility to capitalism would augur badly for economic development and for democracy would be taken up by most Orientalists (those who are sympathetic and those who are hostile to “Islam”) and late nineteenth and early twentieth century Muslim intellectuals (Muhammad ‘Abduh, Rashid Rida, *inter alia*) alike. Hostile Orientalists would argue after World War II that this would doom Islam and Muslim societies “to a satanic alliance with Communism,” while more sympathetic Orientalists, Louis Massignon in particular, would argue that

it would predispose Islam to a more politically equitable society than Western capitalism.³⁷ Others like Maxime Rodinson set out to investigate precisely the relationship between capitalism and Islam and to challenge the Weberian link that Protestantism was a necessary precondition for the development of capitalism.³⁸

It should be stressed here that the liberal and Orientalist notion of “Oriental despotism” would act as a precursor to justify European colonial despotism in Asia and Africa. As Wael Hallaq has forcefully argued:

The concept of “Oriental despotism” . . . was given added weight by the spurious Prophetic report proclaiming that “sixty years of tyranny are better than one day of civil strife.” This was taken to be evidence that “Orientals” are inherently submissive and therefore possess a natural capacity to endure tyranny and oppression (needless to say, a doctrine necessary to justify colonialism, past and present). While the Prophetic report does reflect an accurate understanding by Muslims of their own political-legal systems and practices, the Orientalist interpretation of it is entirely erroneous. The key terms here are “tyranny” and “civil strife.” If “tyranny” is defined by pre-nineteenth century European standards, the period in which the concept of [Oriental despotism] was fashioned, then it becomes clear that we are dealing here with the projection of the European concept of monarch—who was absolutist and an arbitrary legislator and executor—onto the Islamic scene. But this projection is unjustified because “Oriental tyranny,” at its worst, could not accomplish two goals that the European monarch successfully and easily achieved, namely, (1) sultans and kings could never penetrate the societies they came to rule, but could only govern from the “outside,” and, more importantly, (2) these rulers were severely constrained by a law that they did not create and that was largely out of their control. Thus, whatever tyranny they practiced could not, as a rule, have affected the integrity of the communities they ruled, communities that were the basis and defining parameters of life. In the Orientalist definition, the meaning and range of “tyranny” has been wildly amplified, whereas the paramount significance of “civil strife,” where the all-important Community is split asunder, has been dramatically de-emphasized. On the other hand, and given the nature of Islamic constitutional organization, the Muslim conception privileges the community as the cradle of life and the locus of meaningful living, deeming tyranny and its political sultanistic source as comparatively far less pernicious than its European counterpart.³⁹

French historian Henry Laurens echoes this irony: “while Enlightenment thought had defined the Muslim states as instances of military despotism, the [British] East India Company became in fact its most perfect incarnation.”⁴⁰ The despotism expelled to and projected by European liberalism onto the Orient, while being replaced by liberal notions of democracy, would not only be posited by European colonial liberals as “Oriental” in character but would also be extended to Africa through the colonial appeal to “African customary traditions.” Liberal forms of citizenship would be deployed in the colonies for white settler populations in contrast with the natives who became imperial “subjects” in keeping with “local” tradition. But the notion of “subjects” that colonial liberalism imposed, as we saw, was internal to its ideological framework. Mamdani argues that while the natives could have a “modicum of civil rights,” they could not access “political” rights: “Citizenship would be the privilege of the civilized; the uncivilized would be subject to an all-around tutelage . . . an unmediated—centralized—despotism.”⁴¹ Indeed, the “division between the citizen and the subject, the nonnative and the native, was characteristic of all colonial situations.”⁴² Yet, as Mamdani explains, following George Padmore, in much of Africa the British followed an indirect form of rule of granting “local” and “native” traditions and “laws” authority alongside British colonial oversight that resulted in what Mamdani calls “decentralized despotism.” The bifurcation was most clearly manifest in the law, wherein criminal law was mostly colonial, civil law “customary.” This legacy would inform the experiences of postcolonial Africa, whether in countries ruled by “conservative” or “radical” regimes which organized power despotically, leading Mamdani to conclude that “the most important legacy of colonial rule . . . may lie in the inherited impediments to democratization.”⁴³

One could argue, however, that introducing the notion of a bifurcated citizenship to Africa and the “Muslim world” was *itself* the introduction of a specific European opposition to “democracy,” in the form of active and passive citizenship, of dividing the people into classes with differential access to

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