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"The West and Islam?' Rethinking Orientalism and Occidentalism"¹

"The West and Islam," as a pair of conjoined terms, confront each other as a dichotomy of opposition, creating through their juxtaposition a question that is full of tension. This may be illustrated by the following announcement by a spokesman for the Catholic Church:

Msgr. Georg Gänswein, Pope Benedict XVI's secretary and close adviser, warned of the Islamization of Europe and stressed the need for the Continent's Christian roots not to be ignored. In comments released in advance of an interview to be published today in the German weekly *Süddeutsche Magazin*, he said: "Attempts to Islamize the West cannot be denied. The danger for the identity of Europe that is connected with it should not be ignored out of a wrongly understood respectfulness." He also defended a speech Benedict gave last year linking Islam and violence, saying it was an attempt by the pope to "act against a certain naïveté." (*New York Times*, July 27, 2007).

The sharp note of conflict in this statement is striking. Not only has the papal representative described Islam as a danger to Europe, but also he has claimed Europe, in effect, as the rightful property of the Christian Church because of its historical roots in the region. It is my contention that this type of civilizational and religious conflict is built into the concept of "the West," particularly though not exclusively when it is put in opposition to Islam. This particular speech has been protested by Muslim leaders both in Europe and elsewhere as a provocation that encourages Islamophobia. Those who do not wish to support an endless series of colonial-style conflicts between Muslims, Christians, and others, need to find ways to reconceptualize the world without relying upon the notion of the timeless East and West. In other words, it is time to move beyond both Occidentalism and Orientalism.

¹ An earlier version of this paper was delivered as the 7th Tun Razak Lecture, 9 August 2007, at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur.

As I have argued in more detail elsewhere,² the concept of “the West” is to a certain extent fictive, in so far as it implies a unitary and homogeneous cultural identity that is vaguely ascribed to a number of countries in America and Europe and their would-be associates. Likewise, the notion of “the Islamic world” (interchangeable with Europe’s Orient or “the East”) can also be seriously misleading; it practically suggests that there is a separate planet that is somehow unconnected with Europe and America by political, economic, and military circumstances, and it glosses over as unimportant the many differences in history, ethnicity, language, and culture that characterize Muslim majority countries as well as the Muslim minorities elsewhere. From a historical point of view, the abstract notions of both “the West” and Islam leave out a great deal that is arguably significant. Both for Muslims and for European Christians, the historical roots of Abrahamic prophecy and Greek philosophy are a shared heritage, which neither can claim in an exclusive fashion. Muslims have been part of the fabric of European history for centuries, not only in al-Andalus but also in the Ottoman territories. And Muslims have also played a part in America over at least the past two centuries, as we must recognize if we note the existence of African Muslims, including scholars (like Omar ibn Sayyid) who were enslaved and sold in America. The dramatically increased Muslim populations of America and Europe are only the most recent examples of this phenomenon. Moreover, in addition to the long history of trade and contact between Europe and Asia through the ages, one cannot overlook the significance of the European expansion around the world since the time of Columbus, and particularly the high point of colonialism in the 19th century. The enormous economic and technical benefits that Europeans seized from their Oriental subjects, plus a fair amount of luck, undoubtedly played an enormous role in fashioning what we consider today the modern West, although there is an undeniable tendency for Europeans to claim superiority as result of their own intrinsic civilizational virtue. But recent historians have begun to question “the Eurocentric discourse” that “implies a kind of intellectual apartheid regime in which the superior West is quarantined off from the inferior East.”³ The fact is that, both historically and in contemporary times,

² Carl W. Ernst, *Following Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), chapter 1.

³ John M. Hobson, *The Eastern Origins of Western Civilization* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 283.

Muslims have played significant roles in relation to both America and Europe. In short, the opposition between “the West” and Islam is considerably overstated.

At the risk of sounding banal, I am forced to refer to a couple of well-known publications that have relentlessly and tendentiously hammered the theme of the opposition between the West and Islam. As anyone can predict, these are the writings of Samuel Huntington on *The Clash of Civilizations* and the fulminations of Bernard Lewis on “the roots of Muslim rage” along with his pontifications on *What went wrong?* with Islamic civilization. Both these books have been sharply criticized by professional historians for the shortcomings of their explanations and for the bias that characterizes their treatment of Islamic civilization in particular.⁴ Yet an amazing popularity was guaranteed for their publications by the way in which these books capitalized upon fears and prejudices that have a long history in Europe and America. I would venture to say that Muslim readers around the world were shocked and horrified by the picture of Islam that was drawn by these supremely ideological writers. Yet it is striking that few of these readers have bothered to question the matching concepts that form the basis of the projects of Huntington and Lewis: i.e., the notion that there is something called “the West,” and that it can be clearly identified as a cultural unity. It is my feeling that implicit in the concept of “the West” is the colonial self image of a superior civilization that is destined to rule over the rest of the world, whether in overt political domination or through the more subtle forms of globalizing economies. As long as Muslims and non-Europeans in general continue to allow imperialist Europeans and Americans to set the terms of debate, in other words, as long as they accept that there is such a thing as the “the West,” they will have no way to win this argument; its outcome is implicit in the words themselves. As Mohammed Arkoun has observed regarding Bernard Lewis’s book *What Went Wrong*, “It will suffice to point out that both its title and its contents betray the intellectual impasse born of a frame of mind intent on thinking in terms of the polarity of an imaginary ‘Islam’ and its equally imaginary counterpart of the ‘West’. So long as this fictional dualism remains in place, the intellectual impasse which is thereby engendered

⁴ For a review of Lewis, see Juan Cole, *Global Dialogue*, 27 January 2003 <<http://www.juancole.com/essays/review.htm>>; see also “What Is Wrong with What Went Wrong?” by Adam Sabra, in *Middle East Report Online* <http://www.merip.org/mero/interventions/sabra_interv.html>.

is destined to remain irresolvable.”⁵ So I am hoping to convince people to stop using the phrase “the West,” and to employ instead more specific identifiers that have a less ambiguous and less ideological implication – to speak in terms of particular regions and countries, such as America and France, for example.⁶ In a similar fashion, I think it is important to abandon the phrase “the Muslim world” despite the idealistic concept of the Muslim *umma*. The conflictual implications of a unitary Muslim world in opposition to “the West” are simply too strong to avoid.

One can argue in this fashion against the dichotomy between “the West” and Islam on ethical grounds, but there are also important historical precedents in relatively recent times that question the current division. The Ottoman reformers of the Tanzimat period in the early 19th century (1839) identified with the universalist principles of the Enlightenment, which they believed was or could be detached from Christian religious identity, and they were not troubled by European racism, since the Ottomans considered themselves to be Caucasians rather than Asians. They did not anticipate how fiercely Europeans would resist any consideration of equality for the “Asiatic races” or for Muslims. Cemil Aydin has analyzed at length the repercussions of the extraordinary impact of the speech by Ernst Renan on “Islam and science” delivered in Paris in 1883. Renan rejected the notion that Muslims could form part of modern civilization, both for racial and religious reasons. Semites (including both Jews and Arabs) were in his view an inferior race incapable of the synthetic reasoning necessary for science and philosophy. The scientific achievements of premodern Islamic civilization, he argued, were due either to Iranians or to Arab Christians. This racist diatribe called forth refutations from leading Muslim intellectuals such as Jamal al-Din “al-Afghani” as well as other figures from Turkey.⁷ The disappointment of the Ottomans who found themselves rejected as candidates for

⁵ Mohammed Arkoun, *Islam: To Reform or to Subvert?* (London: Saqi Essentials, 2006), pp. 9-10.

⁶ It seems ironic that at least two geographical regions associated with Arabic culture are known as variations of “the West” in Arabic; I am thinking of Morocco (derived from *al-maghrib*), and the Portuguese region of the Algarve (from *al-gharb*), which was once an Arab-Andalusian dominion.

⁷ Cemil Aydin, *The Politics of Anti-Westernism in Asia: Visions of World Order in Pan-Islamic and Pan-Asian Thought*, Columbia Studies in International and Global History (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), chapter 3.

membership in Western civilization does not alter the fact that they initially considered themselves to be part of this formation.

In more recent times, the influential Egyptian writer Taha Husayn wrote in *The Future of Culture in Egypt* (1938) that Egypt had far more contact with Greece than with Persia or other eastern countries, so therefore Egyptian culture “should thus be regarded as Western or Mediterranean, rather than Eastern.”⁸ This position was reflected in other Arab thinkers like the Egyptian-Lebanese writer and philosopher René Habachi, who identified the deepest traditions of Arabic thought with Mediterranean culture.⁹ While these pronouncements in favor of a Western or Mediterranean identity for Egypt and Arabs might be contested, both in Europe and in the Middle East, nevertheless, as exceptions to stereotyped generalities they offer an important corrective. Since these counter-intuitive examples cannot be predicted or accounted for by essentialist notions of East and West, they point us towards locality and history as correctives to the distortions inherent in the binary model. I will accordingly give a number of specific examples from particular countries and time periods to demonstrate the problems in the East-West dichotomy.

The broader ideologies of Orientalism and Occidentalism certainly draw upon the basic concepts of East and West, since Orient and Occident are simply the Latin forms of these geographic markers. But their broader and more pervasive implications need to be drawn out analytically. The intellectual debate about Orientalism and its relation to colonial power is well known and has played out extensively in the past 30 years. Literary critic Edward Said in his 1979 essay *Orientalism* drew in broad strokes a portrait of European scholarship in the service of empire, based on the study of the languages and texts of Oriental peoples. Said pointed out the consistent way in which Orientalist scholarship reified and essentialized an imaginary and unchanging Orient as the polar opposite of Europe; where the West was scientific, rational, and powerful, the East was superstitious, tyrannical, and effeminate. Racial theory was deployed to demonstrate the superiority of Europeans over Asians and Africans. The results of this dichotomy were the projection of opposing

⁸ Cited in Majid Fakhry, “The search for cultural identity in Islam: fundamentalism and Occidentalism,” *Cultures* 4 (1977), pp. 97-107, quoting page 103.

⁹ Fakhry, p. 105.

essentialized identities onto Europe and its Orient, generally identified with the area we now call the Middle East. “This identification with a unified Islamic essence also led to an enduring interpretation of the region through dichotomous notions of East and West.”¹⁰ Subsequent commentators have pointed out the extent to which Said himself oversimplified and indeed essentialized Orientalism, as if it were itself an unchanging characteristic. He left out of his argument any serious discussion of Orientalism in countries such as Germany that did not have colonies in the Middle East or Asia. He also glossed over the presence of prominent Orientalist scholars who were vigorous opponents of imperialist policies, such as the British scholar of Persian literature, E. G. Browne, or the leading American Islamic studies specialist of the 20th century, Marshall Hodgson. While it is true that many Europeans believe that Orientals were naturally disposed toward despotism, there were critics of these positions even in the 18th century, such as Anquetil-Duperron, who pointed out the importance of legal systems in the East.¹¹ Postcolonial critiques have gone on to describe the history of the changing features of Orientalist scholarship in different regions and time periods, which have been characterized by differential ratios in the relationship between knowledge and power. Ashis Nandy has explored the psychological effects of the colonial mentality on the Europeans themselves, including the accentuation of aggression and hyper-masculine postures. Thus the entire project of Orientalism is not only vast and complex, but also extremely ambiguous; only a very superficial reading of Said would permit the conclusion that all Orientalist scholars have acted in bad faith in a sort of conspiracy.¹² One cannot deny that some of the scholarly achievements of 19th-century Orientalist scholars, such as the dictionaries and grammars of Middle Eastern and Asian languages, are still indispensable tools for research today. And while some Oriental scholarship (e.g., the work of Snouck Hurgronje for the Dutch in Indonesia) may have had a strong link to the support of colonial power, at the same time the colonial experience and its

¹⁰ S. Shami, “Middle East and North Africa: Socio-Cultural Aspects,” IESBS 14:9793.

¹¹ Lucette Valensi, *The birth of the despot: Venice and the Sublime Porte* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993); M. Anquetil-Duperron, *Législation orientale: ouvrage dans lequel, en montrant quels sont en Turquie, en Perse et dans l'Indoustan, les principes fondamentaux du gouvernement* (Amsterdam: Chez Marc-Michel Rey, 1778).

¹² R. G. Fox, “Orientalism,” *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences*, ed. Neil J. Smelser and Paul B. Baltes (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2001; hereafter cited as IESBS), 16:10976-8.

intellectual articulation is now an unavoidable and integral part of modern global history. In many cases we do not have access to much that is precious in non-European culture independently of the Orientalist scholarship that catalogued all that was Asian in its museum. Therefore, as Alijah Gordon has remarked in connection with the study of the Islamization of Southeast Asia, “To understand the dynamics of what is happening today, we must look to yesterday when the Western colonial powers – Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands and Great Britain – laid the framework for the splits we inherited. Our task is to recognize these fractured realities and to work towards a devolution of power where each of our peoples can live their lives in their own way.”¹³

A comparable level of ambiguity is also present in the concept of Occidentalism.¹⁴ This can stand for on the one hand a triumphal sense of inevitable European hegemony, which has indeed been linked with Christianity during various phases of colonialism. In this sense, Occidentalism would be a belief in the superiority of the West. It should be acknowledged that over a century ago there were many Muslim intellectuals who implicitly accepted this postulate of European superiority, in the movements we call modernist. Thus the Persian liberal thinker Taqizadeh could speak positively and even enthusiastically of “surrender to Western civilization.”¹⁵

On the other hand, this symbolism of East and West can be easily inverted, so that Occidentalism can also be a critique of the West as negative in every sense. Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit have traced this type of negative Occidentalism to Japan in 1940s, after which it became fairly widespread throughout the Third World during the period of the Cold War.¹⁶ In some formulations, the West is so essentialized that one can speak of “ethno-Occidentalism,” a kind of reverse racism that attributes unwavering qualities of

¹³ Alijah Gordon, “Editor’s Note,” in *The Propagation of Islam in the Indonesian-Malay Archipelago* (Kuala Lumpur: Malaysian Sociological Research Institute, 2001), p. xviii-xix.

¹⁴ F. Coronil, “Occidentalism,” IESBS 16:10822-6.

¹⁵ Mehrzad Boroujerdi, “‘The West’ in the Eyes of the Iranian Intellectuals of the Interwar Years (1919-1939),” in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 26/3 (2006), p. 194 (this journal is here cited as CSSAAME).

¹⁶ Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of Its Enemies* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).

negativity as almost a genetic identity for the West. A notable example is Egyptian thinker Hasan Hanafi, who has articulated his position in a book entitled *Introduction to the Science of Occidentalism (Muqaddima fi `ilm al-istighrab)*. Hanafi begins from the assumption that Arabs need to make a critical study of Orientalism rather than using it as a factual source of self-knowledge. But from this promising critical beginning, he moves on to more ambitious attempts to rescue the Oriental self from its alienation by “reinforcing its own positive self image.” This is largely to be attempted by simply reversing negative Orientalist stereotypes and projecting the negativity onto the West, a proposal that has been severely criticized by other Arab thinkers who have accused him of racism. Hanafi’s ahistorical concept of Arab Islamic identity is remarkably similar to the approach of Samuel Huntington, as he “reduces the reading of both Islamic and Western awareness to religious and cultural perspectives.”¹⁷ Hanafi’s project appears to be a sort of mirror image of Orientalism, and it is hard to see how he can avoid dehumanizing forms of alienation by adopting the methods of his opponent. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that Orientalism and Occidentalism do not exist on the same level. There is a hierarchical and asymmetrical power relation between the two. Occidentalists do not have colonies in Europe and America. “Thus while European Orientalism was the result of buoyancy of spirits, prowess and offensiveness, Islamist Occidentalist modes of discourse are the product of flagging spirits, weakness and defensiveness.”¹⁸

One of the most interesting aspects about negative Occidentalism is the extent to which it draws upon a long tradition of counter-Enlightenment critiques of “the West” by European thinkers. While these critics certainly existed in the 19th century (de Maistre, Herder, Nietzsche), some of the most important found their pessimistic expression at the time of the catastrophe of the first world war, particularly Oswald Spengler in his monumental *Decline of the West*. One of the most trenchant Occidentalist and anti-colonial manifestoes to emerge from Iran is of course the classic work of Jalal Al-e Ahmad (d. 1969), *Westoxication (Gharbzadegi)*. This book posed the dilemma of modern Iranian intellectuals as a choice between cultural authenticity or a

¹⁷ Yudian Wahyudi, “Arab Responses to Hasan Hanafi’s *Muqaddima fi `ilm al-istighrab*,” *Muslim World* 93, no. 2 (2003), pp. 233-248, quoting pp. 236, 238.

¹⁸ Sadiki, p. 116.

rootless and alienated subservience to the West. Al-e Ahmad diagnosed Westoxication as “the aggregate of events in the life, culture, civilization and mode of thought of the people having no supporting tradition, no historical continuity, no gradient of transformation.”¹⁹ Yet what is most striking about this formulation is the extent to which it depends upon a reading of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger as interpreted by Iranian scholar Ahmad Fardid, who essentially recast the colonially-inspired opposition between East and West around Heidegger’s notion of historical truth. By shifting the critique of the European Enlightenment and German culture into an idealization of Islam and the Orient, Fardid and later Al-e Ahmad proposed a new path to authenticity. “In this construction of West and orient as bearing opposing essences, with the Orient harboring the ontologically legitimate truth capable of overcoming the technological nihilism engendered by the West, Fardid’s *Gharbzadegi* (Westoxification) is the interlude between the self and being on the path to renewed Islamic self-realization.”²⁰ It seems highly ironic that projects of redemption from alienation that focus on Islamic and Asian identity employ conceptual strategies and arguments derived from the heart of European culture (although admittedly deriving from its internal critics). But similar observations might be made of other Iranian thinkers, such as Ali Shari`ati, whose concept of revolutionary Shi`ism admittedly depended on Marxist categories while simply redefining them as Islamic.²¹ It is also striking to see the extent to which Egyptian Islamist thinker Sayyid Qutb also drew upon European and American authors in the very negative diagnosis of the West proposed in his *Islam and the Problems of Civilization* (1962); the tragic situation of modernity, in his view, had to be solved by Islam rather than liberal democracy or Marxism.²² In the case of these Muslim Occidentalists drawing upon European thinkers, the true lesson we should draw is the extent to which it is impossible to separate Islam from “the West” in the modern era.

¹⁹ Ali Mirsepassi, “Religious Intellectuals and Western Critiques of Secular Modernity,” *CSSAAME* 26/3 (2006), page 418.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, page 420.

²¹ *Ibid.*, page 427.

²² Fakhry, p. 100.

While noting these intellectual linkages between anti-western ideas and their Western origins, it is also important for us not to over-read this as a case of derivative thinking. Cemil Aydin has observed in a critique of Buruma and Margalit that it is nevertheless important to recognize “the distinction between the ‘dehumanizing’ Occidental discourse on the west and the otherwise authentic Muslim critiques of modernity, international order, and colonialism. Should Muslims, whether Islamists or secular, not criticize the West at all? In the absence of a distinction between dehumanizing and progressive critiques, the Occidentalism paradigm can reduce all critiques of the West by Muslims either to an ‘underdeveloped’ copy of German romanticism or to a contagious Eurocentric disease of critique without any humanistic irredeemable content.”²³ Aydin has shown how Islamist thinkers in Republican Turkey used Occidental rhetoric “about the decadent, materialist, positivist, soulless, immoral, communists, individualistic, and ‘Masonic’ West” to attack the secular regime of Mustafa Kemal in Turkey.²⁴ It is of course striking to see that in recent years Islamist parties in Turkey have become pragmatic advocates of Turkish accession to the European Union, so evidently modifications can be made in the previously negative forms of Occidentalism.

At this point I would like to focus in more closely on the category of religion in the representation of East and West. This plays out in the dialectic of struggle between secular regimes and Islamist movements, for instance in Arab countries where “The Orientalists here are not Westerners but rather Westernizers.... French *laïcisme* informs political behavior in the Tunisian and Algerian centers of power.”²⁵ Just as European-style secularism informs governmental concepts of Islamists as anti-democratic and extremist, so too do Islamists have their own vocabulary for describing their opponents. Interviews with Islamists in a variety of countries have indicated that the vocabulary of Islamic ethics (*akhlak*) forms the basis for the most important

²³ Cemil Aydin, “Between Occidentalism and the Global Left: Islamist Critiques of the West in Turkey,” *CSSAAME* 26/3 (2006), p. 447.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 453.

²⁵ Larbi Sadiki, “Occidentalism: The ‘West’ and ‘Democracy’ as Islamist constructs,” *Orient* 39/1 (1998), pp. 103-120, quoting pp. 108-9.

critiques of the West and its democracy, in terms of sexual perversity, imperialism, and materialism.²⁶ Despite the intrinsic interest of these observations, however, the stark difference between these opposing secularist and Islamist positions furnishes the opportunity for taking up an analysis that does not necessarily echo either formulation.

In a similar fashion, it is worth examining the term secular and its derivatives, which are the subject of much debate not only in the countries which enshrine secularism as a national principle (France, Indonesia, Turkey), but in other places as well. The early articulation of Orientalism postulated Europe as the abode of science and progressive thinking, with the official Enlightenment doctrine of secularism as a close corollary. This entailed as its opposite the projection of the Orient as the realm of retrograde superstition, with religion as the chief obstacle to progress. Occidentalists reversals were not slow to appear. Tagore, to give one example, argued that India was a civilization that enshrined spirituality while the West had abandoned its religion for a crass materialism. The problem with this assertion is its lack of historical evidence. It may certainly be a satisfying assertion to claim that the West is a soulless land where people watch music videos endlessly in a corrupt abandonment of spirituality. But this hardly corresponds with the picture that emerges from any sociological study of religion and its current role in American and European societies.

Some commentators have argued the issue of secularism in a more serious fashion. Malaysian thinker Syed Muhamad Naquib al-Attas argued, two decades ago, that secularization was a critical problem for the West, which would ultimately prove its downfall.²⁷ As a protective gesture against this danger, he was one of the proponents of “the Islamization of knowledge,” conceived as a way to ensure Islamic authenticity without any taint of Western secularism. The ideological character of this argument is apparent from the way in which it enshrines a particular alleged characteristic of “the West” as a timeless defining feature. Some Muslims argue from a position of scriptural essentialism that the American doctrine of separation of church and state is inherent in the teachings of the New Testament as we know it, but that this privatized notion of religion is

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Syed Muhamad Naquib al-Attas, *Islam, Secularism and the Philosophy of the Future*, Islamic Futures and Policy Studies (London: Mansell Publishing Ltd., 1985).

foreign to Islam. This is interesting as a critique of the modern Euro-American concept of religion, although it frequently glosses over the way in which Islam formed one feature of premodern societies alongside of empire, local custom, and administrative decree without being the defining or overriding characteristic. To be sure, it is noteworthy that al-Attas did a close reading of a number of modern Christian theologians and European philosophers who addressed the issue of secularism during the 1960s and 1970s. Unfortunately, this limited sample is not actually definitive either of the past or future of Europe and America. This is one example where the collapse of Europe and America into an entity known as “the West” is clearly mistaken. Predictions of the disappearance of religion and the dominance of a secular mentality proved to be far off the mark after the Iranian revolution of 1978-79 and the rise of the religious right in America. Just to give one example, public opinion surveys in America indicate that the one issue that would cause the most voters to reject a presidential candidate would be a lack of belief in God. There are numerous indices that indicate that America is a country where religion is extraordinarily important. A number of commentators argue that the religious factor is so strong that America is in danger of becoming a theocracy.²⁸ Reputedly only a third of Americans acknowledge their confidence in the Darwinian theory of biological evolution, the rest presumably favoring a creationist approach or some other alternative. A series of apocalyptic novels entitled *Left Behind*, describing the events of the Day of Judgment and the resurrection according to the Book of Revelation, has sold over 65 million copies in America. Abundant information on these and other issues touching the extraordinary role of religion in American life are available from the Pew Forum on Religion in Public Life (<http://pewforum.org/>). It is evidently necessary to do some more up-to-date investigation of the concept of secularization in Europe and America to understand the fortunes of this concept today.

Contemporary scholars like José Casanova, in conversation with anthropologist Talal Asad, have pointed out how the European critique of religion in the Enlightenment became a kind of self-fulfilling

²⁸ Kevin Phillips, *American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the 21st Century* (New York: Penguin, 2007).

prophecy, a teleological theory of secularization that sufficed as its own proof.²⁹ The data alleged in support of this thesis as it applied to Europe included the increased differentiation of society, the reduction of the public role of religion in the state, science, and economy, plus a decreased percentage of active religious participation (despite the persistence of high religious belief). The secularization thesis was probably overstated, however, for 19th century Europe, which like the modern Middle East “in fact, saw a return to militant, literal, old-fashioned religion as processes of economic expansion began to threaten traditional structures.”³⁰ In contrast, the American situation was seen as a reversal, based on the postulate that official disestablishment of religion correlated with a high degree of individual religiosity, as observed by Tocqueville and Marx. This classic divergence between Europe and America in the expectation of secularization has also been paralleled by different results in effects of secularization upon Catholic and Protestant communities. For Catholics, the conflict with modernity eventually led to a progressive secularism including social activism (e.g., liberation theology); Protestants saw instead the development of a collusion between the religious and the secular. An interesting case study is the example of human rights and religious dissent. The Catholic Church was slow to warm to this issue during the 19th century, but there have been notable recent examples of Catholic Bishops demanding that the secular sphere be connected to public morality, in issues ranging from economics to birth control. Secularization theory according to Harvey Cox and others presupposed that modernity would inevitably mean a gradual abandonment of institutional religion, but this has proven to be spectacularly wrong for the late 20th century and the emerging 21st century. There are also significant differences between concepts of secularism in different countries such as France, America, Turkey, and Indonesia. The inability of the secularization theories of the 1960s and 1970s to account for recent events or different countries indicates their unsuitability as an index of timeless features of Western civilization.

²⁹ José Casanova, “A Reply to Talal Asad,” in *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad And His Interlocutors*, ed. David Scott and Charles Hirschkind, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), pp. 12-30.

³⁰ Sandra Halperin, “Europe in the Mirror of the Contemporary Middle East: Aspects of Modern European History Reconsidered,” in *Islam and the West: Critical Perspectives on Modernity*, ed. Michael J. Thompson (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), pp. 75-105, quoting p. 98.

What, then, are the alternatives to continuing with the familiar opposition of “the West” and Islam? This article is certainly one such alternative: a presentation in English originally delivered in Malaysia with key members of the audience being graduates of a distinguished American university. How can the division between “the West” and Islam describe this kind of conversation? More substantively, I would suggest a number of directions they can be pursued so as to avoid what I have described as the inherently conflictual basis of the concept of “the West”. One such agenda would be to encourage the equivalent of area studies in Malaysian universities and in other academic institutions in Southeast Asia and related regions for the study of the societies of North America and Europe. Rather than an ideological Occidentalism, this would be a kind of academic study that would concentrate on expertise in the culture, history, institutions, and practices of particular countries and regions such as America, Britain, France, etc. While area studies have their limitations, their virtue is to encourage multi-disciplinary approaches to a particular region, which enables specialists from different fields of study to communicate and to broaden their own expertise with a view to creating more holistic and comprehensive analyses. Another prospect is to identify ethical communities that go beyond national and religious boundaries, as philosopher Alisdair McIntyre has put it, though there will admittedly have to be negotiations about multiple historical traditions. Tariq Ramadan has proposed in a similar fashion that Muslims should seek united fronts of interests between countries of the global South, regardless of their religious background. His point is that “an authentic dialogue between Jews, Christians, humanists and Muslims cannot but lead to a formidable common action of resistance to human folly, injustice and exploitation.”³¹ It is noteworthy that Ramadan’s use of the economic language of industrialized North and developing South, while it remains contrastive, still avoids the ideological model inherent in the concepts of East and West. And my colleague at the University of North Carolina, Omid Safi, building on the Progressive Muslim project, argues the following: “It is mandatory to visit, challenge, critique, and deconstruct the powerful and seductive paradigm of ‘Islam versus the West’ (and the twin ‘clash of civilizations’) before we can offer a more holistic alternative. To do so, we will first deal with Muslim

³¹ Tariq Ramadan, *Islam, the West and the Challenges of Modernity* (Markfield, Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 2001), p. 185.

Westernophobes and then with Western Islamophobes.”³² In short, the language of “the West” and Islam shackles us to a past that is defined by colonial expansion and its contrary, anti-colonial resistance. If we are to forge a world where we can see beyond limited identities and seriously think about our shared humanity, it is time to move beyond these limited conceptions.

³² Omid Safi, “I and Thou in a Fluid World: Beyond ‘Islam Versus the West,’” in *Voices of Islam*, ed. Vincent J. Cornell, volume 5, *Voices of Change*, ed. Omid Safi (Westport, CT: Prager, 2007), pp. 199-222, quoting p. 199.