

## THE ORIENT WITHOUT ORIENTALISM?

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**Abstract:** *Since Edward Said's seminal study the term Orientalism has connoted patronizing and essentializing patterns in the works of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century academic students of Asian cultures and religions. The term Orient itself has suffered from its association with such patterns so as to become excluded, in academic discourse, from referring to Asian societies and civilizations. We would like to suggest that, in spite of their historical and ideological load, the terms Orient and Oriental have been used by a number of Western scholars to refer to phenomena, ideas and principles that are largely, if not totally, independent from the aforementioned patterns. We will focus on the works of Louis Massignon, René Guénon and Henry Corbin as representative of a study of, and indeed intellectual and existential identification with, Eastern cultural realities that can be deemed exempt from Orientalism. We will particularly show how their use of the term Orient presupposes, and refers to, a scale of values that can in no way be reduced to that of Orientalism in the Saidian sense.*

**Keywords:** Orientalism, Orient, Asian religions, Islam, Epistemology, Philosophy, Comparative Religion

**Introduction:** The Orientalist consideration and construction of the “Orient” in Europe has been, beginning in the 18th century, a dual process. On the one hand, Orientalist scholarship focused on the objective otherness of Middle-Eastern and Asian cultures as a means of scientific knowledge and, most often correlatively, socio-political domination and exploitation. The post-Enlightenment project of universal knowledge related to this in at least two ways. First, it included Eastern languages, cultures and civilizations as elements of a comprehensive review of world cultures, one in which the objective field of inquiry provided a domain of manifestation for a new concept of knowledge hailed as objective and analytic, that is empirical in its source and rationalistic in its horizon. In this respect, so-called Oriental cultures were no different *a priori* from any other natural or cultural object of scientific study. Secondly, the ideological underpinnings of this project consisted in an implicit or explicit evolutionist view of universal history, and the scholarly enterprise itself was deemed to be the culmination of an ascending arch of epistemological progress. Thus, the way to know the Orient was also the ultimate way to know; in other words, knowing the Orient was a way to better understand the evolutionary development of mankind, and thereby gain also a stronger sense of what knowing means. This knowledge was characterized by its claim of objectivity, in the sense of a focus on the objective realm and an exclusion of subjective interferences. Thus, reading the Orient meant reading the limitations of subjective, mostly magical and religious, imagination, as well as highlighting the virtues and powers of Western knowledge, but also the faint instances of prefiguration of its advent in the East.

**Body of the paper:** It is in such a context that the term Orient acquired specific connotations that accounted for the suspicion it was to be held in post-colonial theory, or further its utter dismissal as a colonial misnomer. Since Edward Said's seminal study, the term Orientalism has connoted patronizing and essentializing patterns in the works of 19th and 20th century academic students of Asian cultures and religions. The term Orient itself has suffered from its association with such patterns so as to become excluded, in academic discourse, from referring to Asian societies and civilizations. We would like to suggest that, in spite of their historical and ideological load, the terms Orient and Oriental have been used by some eminent 20th century Western scholars to refer to phenomena, ideas and principles that are largely, if not totally, independent from Orientalist patterns. We will focus on the works of Louis Massignon, Henry Corbin and René Guénon as representative of a study of, and indeed intellectual and existential identification with, Eastern cultural realities that can be deemed to be largely exempt from Orientalism. We will particularly show how their use of the term Orient presupposes, and refers to, a scale of values that cannot be reduced to that of Orientalism in the Saidian sense.

The first notion of the Orient that we would like to analyze is that of the foremost French scholar of Islam Louis Massignon, who was born in the late 19th century and died in 1962. He was certainly an Orientalist if by the latter is meant a lifelong student of Middle Eastern languages and cultures who was not immune from affirming, at least in his early years, the historical destiny of France in the East. Notwithstanding his early involvement, as a scholar and French attaché, in the colonial enterprise of his country in the Middle East, as testified by his participation in the negotiation of the Sykes-Picot Franco-British political agreements on the Middle East, he is

mostly credited with having been one of the very few Western scholars to develop an intellectually and ethically empathetic relationship with the world of Islam. No less significantly, he became involved, especially at the end of his life, as an activist in support of the rights and dignity of North African Muslims under The French rule, and he strongly criticized some of the French government's policies in North Africa, to the point of being personally engaged in public protests. Besides his socio-political action, Massignon has been considered one of the earliest inspirers of inter-religious dialogue, as well as an advocate of what could be called a "re-Easternification" of Christianity. It is in these two capacities that a clear divergence from the Saidian concept of Orientalism is to be observed. Inspired by the substitutive Christian ideal, that is the idea that one can offer one's suffering for others and therefore in a sense substitute oneself to them spiritually, Massignon developed a spiritual technique that consists in relating to representatives of other faiths through a kind of de-centering; moving from one's own religious and cultural centeredness to enter the other's own world of representations and motivations. Hence his two suggestive formulae "one comes closer to something not in ourselves, but in it" ("*on se rapproche d'une chose non en nous, mais en elle*") and "to understand another one must not annex it to ourselves but become his host" ("*pour comprendre l'autre il ne faut pas se l'annexer mais devenir son hôte.*") This implies, therefore, two complementary motions, one of going out of oneself and one of receiving the other in oneself. Through these two motions, one becomes, in an apparent paradox, closer to the other and also more oneself. This is directly relevant to the conventional dialectics of East and West: it could be said that for Massignon the de-centering encounter of the East is, for the West, the best opportunity to realize its more authentic reality as the West by reconnecting to the best of its Christian heritage. Moreover, for Massignon, this experience lies at the very center of any authentic contact between civilizations in general: "the first contact between two primitive and hostile civilizations is the principle of hospitality. Hospitality means one supposes that the foreigner, the enemy, has still something good to give to us. Among all colonized people the white man appeared first as this divine guest who should give them something excellent."<sup>1</sup> And it is also in this, conversely, that lied the fundamental flaw of the Western approach of the other that underlies the colonialist enterprise: "the whole revolt of Asia against Europe flows from our ignorance of the sacred right of asylum and hospitality."<sup>2</sup>(67) Even though Massignon does not put it explicitly in these terms it would follow from the logic of his thinking that colonialism is basically a violation of these sacred rights of hospitality. Massignon's recognition of the centrality of this principle for what he called the "primacy of a cultural solution" between East and West was not merely an academic thesis or an intellectual formula, but the result of an existential and spiritual experience. Having distanced himself from the Roman Catholic identity of his origins Massignon was able to realize their meaning by becoming both a host and a guest of Islam. In Latin the *hospes* is the stranger, who is both the host and the guest. For Massignon sacred hospitality is the welcoming of the other that responds to being welcome by the other. In 1916, during an acute existential crisis that bordered on death Massignon was hosted and saved by a Muslim family of Baghdad. He lived this as a debt that he strove to repay throughout his life by receiving Islam and Muslims within him. It is through this reciprocity between Christianity and Islam that Massignon sees the opportunity of bringing Christianity back to its roots through a sort of re-Easternification or, to use a term used by Massignon, inviting Christians to become once again "spiritually Semites" by contact with Muslims. For him, the essence of Semitic spirituality is embodied by Abraham, the Patriarch of monotheistic religion, who welcomed the angel, the foreigner, before his tent in the heat of the day, in Mamre. This means the peak of inner receptivity to the Divine, and also, as we have seen, hospitality vis-à-vis others as messengers of the Divine. First among several means of expression of this Semitic spirituality Massignon saw the Arabic language, and Semitic languages in general, as fostering a kind of religious recollection and a sense of the Divine Transcendence. The re-Easternification of the West would mean a return to this spirit by contrast with what Massignon deemed to be a worldification of Western Christianity and its gradual confusion with and corruption by a triumphalist concept of Western civilization.

Massignon's Orient is fundamentally equated with Islam as a response to Christianity, or more specifically Westernized Christianity and the Christianized West. His spiritual world is largely, if not exclusively, biblical, and its rare incursions in the Indic and Sinic worlds do not have a central bearing on the core principles of his thought. For him the East represents the cradle of the world of Abraham, the desert like and patriarchal setting of Semitic monotheism. The West, by contrast, is epitomized by the materialistic, technical and industrial cynicism of modern civilization. Massignon stigmatizes the conversion of European Christianity to Western civilization, and he highlights the biblical Orient as the source of religious genuineness, not so much historically and geographically as spiritually.

The Orientalist orientations that we sketched in our introduction were only half of the story as it were. For

<sup>1</sup> "The West Before the East", *Ecrits Mémorables I*, p.63.

<sup>2</sup> "The West Before the East", *Ecrits Mémorables I*, p.67.

besides the objective claims of scientific Orientalism, the Orient was also to be approached, or constructed, in the Western context of an exotic imagination in which the subjective, imaginative, and poetical played a major role. The creative stimulation connected to a sense of the mysterious Other was in a sense antithetic to the scientific assimilation of the Orient, at least inasmuch as it prospered on a sort of mysterious and irreducible otherness that was more phantasmatic than anthropologically founded. In this connection, the East not rarely represented the primitive origin, the irreducible otherness, or the shadow of Western realities, while functioning, in all cases, as the revealing mirror of the Western self. There was some ambivalence in this, between the fascination for what was at times felt as a lost dimension of being and consciousness, and an irrepressible sense of superiority based on Western identity as wedded to positive rationality. It could be said, metaphorically, that the Orient connoted the mysterious darkness of pre-scientific mentalities, a darkness both attractive in terms of its creative potential and objectified as a lower mode of consciousness.

One of the main contributions of Henry Corbin's Oriental philosophy was precisely to reverse the terms of this symbolic tale of enlightenment. For him, the very term enlightenment must be understood in a way that is radically different from the 18<sup>th</sup> century's. Thus, Henry Corbin's main contribution lied most probably in his concept of prophetology, and the ways it brings together prophetic experience and gnostic philosophy. Against the conventional Western vision of Islamic philosophy as being dominated by the rationalist and Aristotelian figure of Averroes, Corbin shows that the philosophy of illumination, *ishraq*, must be considered as a central current of Islamic philosophy. In contrast to the exclusively rational, if not rationalistic, understanding of philosophy in the West, Corbin defends the idea of a prophetic and spiritual destiny of philosophy in the East. Corbin proposes the expression *cognitio matutina* to refer to this *Ishraqi*, or Eastern, way of knowing. The concept of Occidental exile constitutes the counterpart of this philosophy of light and awakening. The Occidental exile is both an epistemological situation and an eschatological reality. The Occident is symbolically associated with the setting of the sun and the disappearance into darkness, therefore with the destiny of knowledge and the realities of a historical decline. Here, the illumination is connected to the origin, in the sense of the metaphysical source of being. It also refers, henceforth, to the pre-existential pact of the soul. Corbin highlights this ontological covenant, which is more than moral and even more than merely existential, by his reoccurring mention of the Quranic expression "Am I not your Lord?" Eastern knowledge is therefore characterized by its primordality and its consubstantiality with our very being. This is not without analogy with what one of the greatest Western mystics, Meister Eckhart, calls "morning knowledge", a knowledge of things in relation to and as it were within the aura of their Divine Origin, by contrast with "evening knowledge" characterized by its analytic and distinctive features, and therefore its focus on multiplicity as such. Thus, Oriental knowledge symbolizes a certain kind of spiritual, unitive and synthetic knowledge, which is neither from the East nor from the West, but also secondarily, and by contrast, a certain historical destiny of knowledge the increasingly analytic, empirical and phenomenal character of which is symbolized by the theme of the Occidental exile, an exile that the cultural supremacy of the modern West both emblemizes and fosters.

In a way that is not without analogy with Corbin's, but much more comprehensively and critically articulated, René Guénon approaches the question of the Orient on the basis of a diagnostic and a contrast. The diagnostic is that of the "crisis of the modern world." By these words is meant that a particular kind of civilization, that which is typified by the term "modern", has entered a phase of development that is critical in the etymological sense of the word. As Guénon put it, a crisis is a moment at which a fundamental tension is brought out that cannot but be resolved one way or another. The terms of this critical alternative are encapsulated by the two adjectives "modern" and "traditional." In other words what is at stake in the modern world, and particularly so in the final stages of its unfolding, is nothing less than the need for a discrimination between the modern and the traditional: either the modern world will continue to be modern, and will thereby be no longer, or it will return to tradition, and will thereby no longer be modern. When using the term traditional, Guénon refers to a type of civilization founded on the recognition of metaphysical principles of a transcendent order, and a hierarchical set of applications of these principles to all areas of human existence. By modern is simply meant the negation, or the ignorance, of such principles and their applications. It bears stressing, moreover, that Guénon does not so much define the modern and the traditional in terms of structures and institutions as in reference to what he calls "mentalities." Irrespective of the forms in which these may be situated or not the modern and traditional mentalities correspond to fundamentally divergent ways of apprehending and representing the world.

Now Guénon identifies the modern mentality with the West, although he does so contingently and not essentially. In other words, it is clear that for him the sources of the modern world and the origins of the modern mentality is to be found in Europe, or more exactly in post-medieval Europe. By contrast traditional mentalities are associated to the East, as well as to pre-modern Europe. Paradoxically, therefore, the notion of the West is about as much historical as it is geographical, and the same holds true, *mutatis mutandis*, of the notion of the

East. The Orient means the type of civilization, either geographically Asian or not, that is characterized by the primacy of metaphysical principles and a traditional worldview, which means that much if not most of the contemporary East would be considered by him, if he were still alive, as Western. During the first half of the 20th century Guénon's hope was that what he called a restoration of genuine metaphysical intellectuality and traditional spirituality would take place in the West through contacts with traditional representatives of the East. This was in a sense the very reverse of what was to go on in places like Japan, China and Turkey where young intellectuals would undergo a process of intellectual transformation and cultural modification through contact with modern Western concepts and practices of philosophy, politics and sciences. Guénon never advocated a sort of Easternification of the West nor a conversion of Westerners to Eastern religions, he thought rather that a possibility of renewal lied only in a revivification of what remained of traditional values in the West, particularly in the Catholic Church, through a sort of assimilation of the elements of wisdom still present in Eastern traditions. He saw this transmutation and subsequent influence on the West as the work of what he considered to be an intellectual and spiritual elite that would have its own the principles of Eastern traditions without rejecting its Western heritage. By the end of his life in the fifties it seems that Guénon had abandoned any illusion as to the possibility of this taking place through the mediation of the Catholic Church, and perhaps even in any other way since no other existing institution seemed to be able to provide the means to do so.

**Conclusion:** In conclusion, we would like to note that Massignon, Corbin and Guénon provide us with concepts of the Orient that tend to dismiss the dichotomies inherent to the Orientalist discourse of otherness. On the other hand, much of the critique of Orientalism and the very notion of the Orient that has taken place in the last decades rests on a firm rejection of any essentialization of the East. Now with respect to our three authors one can say that their views are both essentialist and non-essentialist from different points of view. They tend to give to the East an essentialized meaning from the point of view of symbolism. This essentialist sense has to do with a focus on the correspondence between the macrocosm and the human microcosm, or between the cosmic meaning of Orient as the place where the sun rises and the various anthropological and civilizational implications of this symbolism. For them the Orient, in Latin *Oriens*, means origin both metaphysically, spiritually and eschatologically. Metaphysically the essence of the Orient is the sense of Unity, or the proximity to it. Spiritually it means emphasizing the intuitive and unitive, or participative, dimension of knowledge. Eschatologically it refers to a certain vision of history as a rising and gradual setting of the sun of spiritual knowledge. However, these transcendent and symbolic referents of the Orient do not imply an essentialization of the Orient and the Oriental as cultural or civilizational categories. This is best epitomized by the fact that Guénon makes it clear that Oriental metaphysics is in fact universal and can only be called provisionally Oriental within a given historical, contemporary, context.

**Brief biography:** Professor Laude has been teaching at Georgetown University since 1991. A former fellow in philosophy at the Ecole Normale Supérieure in Paris, he earned a Master's degree in comparative philosophy from the University of Paris IV Sorbonne in 1982, and a doctorate in French literature from Indiana University in 1985. Professor Laude's scholarly interests and output lie in comparative mysticism, poetry and mysticism, and Western representations and interpretations of Islamic and Asian spiritual and wisdom traditions. He has authored over ten books and monographs and many articles in refereed academic journals.

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