

# Answering Edward Said

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Ibn Warraq. *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism*. Prometheus Books. 556 Pages. \$29.95.

In the spring of 2003, a few months before his death at age 67, Edward W. Said, world-famous Palestinian intellectual and activist and University Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University, brought out a twenty-fifth anniversary edition of his immensely influential *Orientalism*, a book that turned Middle East studies upside-down, reshaping the field for two generations now. This edition featured a new preface by the Jerusalem-born, Egyptian-raised and, for most of his adult life, New York-dwelling author.

Like the book it introduces, the preface exhibits a master propagandist at work, as he weaves together moderate and reasonable pronouncements with obscurantist rhetoric and sophisticated invective. But Said puts even his moderate and reasonable pronouncements in the service of immoderate and unreasonable conclusions. For instance, he couples an elegant defense of humane studies with a vehement condemnation of the Bush administration and Ariel Sharon's government. It is one thing to condemn Bush and Sharon. But he insists that the condemnation is intimately connected to the defense of serious scholarship in the humanities. Indeed, in the guise of presenting to a new generation his critique of the decisive contribution that the West's scholarly study of the East allegedly made to the West's subjugation of the East, Said insinuates that literary cultivation itself issues in an implacable opposition to American and Israeli Middle East foreign policy.

I say "insinuates" because such arguments for the link as Said puts forward in the preface crumble upon inspection. Said begins by contending that since its first publication, *Orientalism* has been subject to "increasing misrepresentation and misinterpretation." But he never bothers to identify the misrepresentations and misinterpretations — or, for that matter, to acknowledge a single flaw that might have been brought to his attention in the 25 years since his book's publication, wide dissemination and discussion in the West, and translation into 36 languages including Hebrew and Vietnamese. Said leaves it to the reader to conjecture where his critics might have gone astray. Perhaps he had in mind those who charge that *Orientalism* exploits the ignorance, panders to the passions, and plays to the prejudices of credulous American intellectuals only too ready to believe the worst about their intellectual forbears and their nation. Such critics contend that the book seduced a generation of historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and political theorists into believing falsely that for two centuries Western scholarship devoted to understanding the languages, history, art, and ideas of the Arab and Muslim Middle East distorted and degraded the

peoples under examination and provided inspiration and justification for their intellectual and political conquest. If Said had such critics in mind, his preface does nothing to allay their charges and, in the space of 16 pages, much to prove their point.

On the one hand, Said stresses the importance of “continuing to have faith in the ongoing and literally unending process of emancipation and enlightenment that, in my opinion, frames and gives direction to the intellectual vocation.” He emphasizes that while he has “never taught anything about the Middle East” (his emphasis), his “training and practice” as “a teacher of the mainly European humanities” fits him for “the kind of deliberately meditated and analyzed study that this book contains, which for all its urgent worldly references is still a book about culture, ideas, history, and power, rather than Middle East politics tout court.” He deplores that “Reflection, debate, rational argument, moral principle based on a secular notion that human beings must create their own history have been replaced by abstract ideas that celebrate American or Western exceptionalism, denigrate the relevance of context, and regard other cultures with derisive contempt.”

On the other hand, Said descends into incoherent theorizing and rank vilification to deride the history of U.S. and Israeli conduct in the Middle East. To illustrate the trendy notion that “neither the term Orient nor the concept of the West has any ontological stability,” he declares, without a shred of supporting evidence or the slightest effort to make explicit the connection, that following the outbreak of the Second Intifada in September 2000, “Israeli f-16s and Apache helicopters [were] used routinely on defenseless civilians as part of their collective punishment.” Along the same lines, to demonstrate that the Orient and the West are “supreme fictions,” Said cavalierly effaces the vital distinction between terrorist attacks on civilians and wars by liberal democracies against terrorist organizations and ruthless dictators: “The suicide bombing phenomenon has appeared with all its hideous damage, none more lurid and apocalyptic of course than the events of September 11 and their aftermath in the wars against Afghanistan and Iraq.” Furthermore, notwithstanding his call for intellectual civility, he accuses the Bush administration of coming under the influence of “intellectual lackeys,” chief among them Princeton University professor emeritus Bernard Lewis and Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies scholar Fouad Ajami. Despite their diverse and worldly backgrounds — Lewis is a British-born Jew and Ajami is of Lebanese Shiite origins — both these eminent scholars are, in Said’s judgment, hopelessly naïve and incurably racist. What they “seem incapable of understanding,” he declares, “is that history cannot be swept clean like a blackboard, clean so that ‘we’ might inscribe our own future there and impose our own forms of life for these lesser people to follow.” Of course, contrary to Said, the premise that informs Lewis’s and Ajami’s writings on American foreign policy and undergirds Bush administration democracy promotion efforts is that Arabs and Muslims are not lesser peoples but full members of the human family, equal in rights and as deserving as any other people of living in freedom and dignity. In the preface’s closing lines, Said contrives an obscene moral equivalence by

declaring that “the human, and humanistic, desire or enlightenment and emancipation” are menaced by “the incredible strength of the opposition to it that comes from the Rumsfelds, Bin Ladens, Sharons, and Bushes of this world.”

Said’s brand of propaganda is particularly insidious. Although he presents himself as a heroic defender of liberal learning and systematic scholarship, he conjures egregious misrepresentations and promulgates toxic misunderstandings, thereby undermining the separation between scholarly vocation and partisan pleading in defense of which he purports to write.

Nor is such an outcome incidental to Orientalism’s larger project. Said aims to persuade that for hundreds of years Western scholars of the East, like U.S. and Israeli political leaders today, have been blinded to the realities of Arab life and the wider Muslim world by the very principles that lie at the heart of the West. Furthermore, he wants readers to believe that these principles compel the West to vanquish and oppress Arabs and Muslims. To succeed, Said must anesthetize his readers’ critical faculties and incite their resentment of Western power and preeminence.

Certainly, Said’s conclusions can be convenient. Learning Arabic, Turkish, and Persian, and studying the Koran and Islamic jurisprudence, Muslim poetry and philosophy, and the social and political structures and history of the peoples of the Middle East are exacting and arduous labors. It’s much easier to forgo all that hard work and instead, following Said who follows Foucault, proclaim that such learning and study inevitably falsify their subject matter and ineluctably contribute to the domination of cultures that the Western mind can never hope to understand. Better not to engage in systematic study of Arabs and Muslims, and better still to take one’s stand against those who do. In this way, Said and his disciples stand the scholarly vocation on its head, transforming the self-imposition and social enforcement of ignorance into intellectual and moral virtues.

Our urgent need today for impartial and objective analysis of the Arab and Muslim world makes a thoroughgoing critique of Said’s work a top intellectual priority.

In ibn warraq, Said and his celebrated Orientalism have found a worthy critic. To be sure, Ibn Warraq is not the first to squarely confront Said. Bernard Lewis exposed massive flaws in Said’s understanding of the Islamic world in a lengthy and sharp 1982 exchange in the New York Review of Books. In a substantial 1999 essay in the New Criterion, Australian writer Keith Windschuttle demonstrated that Said’s depiction of the whole of Oriental studies as a form of imperialism is devoid of serious historical support, both in its depiction of the West and of the East. And in 2001, in *Ivory Towers on Sand: The Failure of Middle Eastern Studies in America*, Washington Institute for Near East Studies fellow Martin Kramer chronicled the baleful impact of Said’s writings on Middle East scholars. But Ibn Warraq’s is the first book-length, post-9/11 critique of Said’s views and of the fashionable “postcolonial studies”

paradigm that Orientalism spawned. And, with a rare combination of polemical zest and prodigious learning, it is the first to address and refute Said's arguments "against the background of a more general presentation of salient aspects of Western civilization."

A pen name taken by the author of *Defending the West* to protect himself from retribution from Muslims enraged by his writings, Ibn Warraq means "son of a stationer, book-seller, paper-seller." The name, adopted over the centuries as an alias by dissenting Muslims, evokes the ninth-century figure Muhammad al Warraq, who doubted that Muhammad was a prophet and insisted that the claims of Islam must submit to the authority of reason. It is certainly an apt choice for our generation's Ibn Warraq, who burst upon the scene in 1995 with his outspoken *Why I Am Not A Muslim*, then edited five volumes aimed at putting Islam in historical and philosophical context, and, with his most recent book, seeks to set the record straight about two centuries' worth of Western scholarship of the Arab people and of Islamic civilization.

Ibn Warraq has recently let himself be videotaped in public, and some information about him is available through writings and interviews (helpfully gathered at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibn\\_Warraq](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ibn_Warraq)). Of Muslim origin, he was born in India in 1946. In 1947, after the partition, the family left for Pakistan. According to a short profile in 2007 in *World Magazine*, he was sent to boarding school in England by his father "to circumvent a grandmother pushing him into local madrassahs." He later studied philosophy and Arabic at the University of Edinburgh and for five years in the 1970s taught school in London. In the 1980s, he moved to Paris, opened an Indian restaurant, and also worked for a travel agency. It took the 1989 fatwah issued by Islamic Republic of Iran ruler Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini calling for the death of Satanic Verses author Salman Rushdie to impel Ibn Warraq to concentrate his formidable talents as scholar and author on writing for the public about the question of Islam.

In *Defending the West*, Ibn Warraq demonstrates that Said is guilty of the major intellectual errors he ostentatiously decries in the twenty-fifth anniversary edition preface: obscuring the diversity and complexity of lived experience by falsely ascribing essential features to peoples and civilizations; and rendering categorical moral and political judgments without the adequate historical knowledge on which responsible judgment depends.

Said's transgressions against sound thinking begin with the forcing of the discipline of Orientalism onto a procrustean bed. According to the standard definition, Orientalism refers to Western scholarly study of the East, including not only or even primarily the Middle East but also Asia and even parts of Eastern Europe. But for no good theoretical or historical reason, Said severely reduces the term's range of meaning:

Said seems to use the term “Orientalist” for one who, on the whole, studies the Middle East, that is, the Muslim populations of the Middle East. The person who studies the Jews, or the Zoroastrians, is not in Edward Said’s view an “Orientalist.” For Said, the non-Muslims, and even non-Arabs, hardly exist, are occasionally mentioned, are never discussed or acknowledged as Orientals with a history and presence: there are no Copts, no Maronites, not Mandeans, no Samaritans, no Assyrians, no Greek Orthodox Christians, no Chaldeans, no Berbers, and of course no Jews in the “Orient” for which Said means — must mean — the Middle East and North Africa, peopled with Arabs and Muslims on the one hand and “all the others” on the other hand. All of these others can never be part of “the Other” about whose fate, at the hands of Western Orientalists and imperialists, Said is so concerned.

This egregious organizing distortion is, as Ibn Warraq shows, the first of many that follow.

The first of *Defending the West*’s three parts, “Edward Said and the Saidists,” is based on an essay Ibn Warraq published a decade ago. Despite some regrets about the tone, he incorporates it more or less intact on the ground that through the attention it has received it has achieved a life of its own. And indeed, Ibn Warraq does not mince words here. Declaring that the “totally pernicious influence of Edward Said’s Orientalism” has made “self-examination for Arabs and Muslims, and especially criticism of Islam in the West, very difficult,” he locates the crux of the problem in the book’s blame-the-West-first spirit and its anything-goes rhetorical tactics. Orientalism, he observes,

taught an entire generation of Arabs the art of self-pity — “were it not for the wicked imperialists, racists and Zionist, we would be great once more” — encouraged the Islamic fundamentalist generation of the 1980s, bludgeoned into silence any criticism of Islam, and even stopped dead the research of eminent Islamologists who felt their findings might offend Muslim sensibilities and who dared not risk being labeled “Orientalist.” The aggressive tone of Orientalism is what I have called “intellectual terrorism,” since it seeks to convince not by arguments or historical analysis, but by spraying charges of racism, imperialism, and Eurocentrism from a moral high ground; anyone who disagrees with Said has insult heaped upon him. The moral high ground is an essential element in Said’s tactics. Since he believes his position is morally unimpeachable, Said obviously thinks he is justified in using any means possible to defend it, including the distortion of the views of eminent scholars, interpreting intellectual and political history in a highly tendentious way — in short, twisting the truth. But in any case, he does not believe in the “truth.”

One can understand why today, in the context of the war against jihadist terrorism, Ibn Warraq has regrets, for example, about calling Said’s tactics “intellectual terrorism.” But his description of those tactics and their impact on Middle East scholarship is spot on.

Ibn Warraq studied philosophy and Arabic, taught school, opened an Indian restaurant, and worked for a travel agency before turning his formidable talents to writing about Islam.

Ibn Warraq's criticisms of Said come fast and furious. He shows that Said routinely produces pretentious, meaningless, and contradictory speech. Most notably, in the fashion of the more glib postmodernism, Said stresses that "the Orient" does not exist but is rather the paranoid construction of Western scholars. This, however, does not prevent him from blatantly contradicting himself by positing that two centuries of study by scholars in Europe and the U.S. have produced "a growing systematic knowledge in Europe about the Orient" and "a fair amount of exact positive knowledge about the Orient." Nor does it stop Said from decrying Orientalists because — contrary to his insistence that a real Orient does not exist and contrary to his acknowledgment that the Orientalists have gained substantial knowledge of it — they have "no interest in, much less capacity for, showing what the true Orient and Islam really are."

Furthermore, Said commits "historical howlers" and engages in acts of "intellectual dishonesty." For example, he asserts that "at the end of the seventeenth century, Britain and France dominated the eastern Mediterranean, when in fact the Levant was still controlled for the next hundred years by the Ottomans." That's no small blunder for a book about European imperialism in the Middle East.

Meanwhile, Said's repeated mischaracterizations of the writings of Orientalists such as R.W. Southern, Friedrich Schlegel, and Sir William Jones, to mention only a few of the distinguished scholars whom Said defames — sometimes ascribing to them the opposite of what they say, sometimes criticizing them for claims that are in fact true and documentable — cannot be chalked up to ignorance or carelessness. After all, while Said was not trained as a historian, he was, as he himself emphasizes, schooled in the great humanist tradition, which puts a premium on the careful interpretation of texts. Moreover, this training makes his accusation against Jane Austen of sympathy for the slave trade on the basis of a preposterous reading of a single passage from *Mansfield Park* all the more scandalous. And it makes his gross interpretation of Dante, whom he charges with anti-Muslim bias for putting three eminent Muslims in the outer circle of Hell along with virtuous heathens like Plato and Aristotle all the more inexcusable. As Ibn Warraq points out, "these illustrious Muslims were included precisely because of Dante's reverence for all that was best in the non-Christian world, and their exclusion from salvation, inevitable under Christian doctrine, saddened him and put a great strain on his mind — *gran duol mi prese al cor quando lo 'ntesi* — great grief seized me at heart when I heard this."

Said puts all this sloppiness and sophistry and specious argumentation in the service of the claim for which Orientalism is famous: Arabs and Muslims are the victims of a West that is driven to ravage the East, and not by tendencies to acquisition and conquest shared by all

peoples but by the uniquely brutalizing principles of Western civilization. In a discussion of nineteenth-century European imperialism and its culmination in World War I, Ibn Warraq shows that elementary historical considerations swiftly dispose of Said's signature thesis:

Where the French presence lasted fewer than four years before they were ignominiously expelled by the British and Turks, the Ottomans had been the masters of Egypt since 1517, a total of 280 years. Even if we count the later British and French protectorates, Egypt was under Western control for sixty-seven years, Syria for twenty-one years, and Iraq for only fifteen — and, of course, Saudi Arabia was never under Western control. Contrast this with southern Spain, which was under the Muslim yoke for 781 years, Greece for 381 years, and the splendid new Christian capital that eclipsed Rome — Byzantium — which is still in Muslim hands. But no Spanish or Greek politics of victimhood apparently exists.

Yet these facts are not likely to dissuade Said's disciples, whose grievances against the West do not ultimately depend upon historical claims but rather are rooted in an underlying belief in the West's distinctive intellectual blindness and moral depravity.

That's why, in a display of staggering erudition, Ibn Warraq devotes the bulk of his somewhat quirky and quite compelling book to a defense of Western ideas, particularly as they have been expressed in Orientalist scholarship — philological, historical, archeological, literary, and philosophical — and in Western depictions of the Orient in painting, sculpture, music, and literature.

In Part II, he identifies rationalism, universalism, and self-criticism as “the tutelary guiding lights of, or the three golden threads running through, Western civilization.” He chronicles with gusto how from classical antiquity right up through the Orientalists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these golden threads received expression in a curiosity about foreign lands and peoples, a respect for the variety of ways of being human, a desire to organize and systematize knowledge, and an inclination to put one's beliefs to the test of empirical evidence and reasoned argument. To be sure, the West has often failed to live up to its principles. Nevertheless, as Ibn Warraq observes in a variety of contexts, whereas Islamic civilization, particularly over the last two hundred years, has tended to close itself off to the outside world, the historical record reveals that Western civilization is second to none in its passion for learning about and learning from other civilizations.

Ibn Warraq completes his defense of the West in Part III with a survey of the treatment of the East in Western painting, sculpture, music, and literature. He begins on a happy note: Orientalist works of art that Said maligns as instruments of cultural oppression are now fetching fortunes, and are especially in favor among Arab art collectors. This represents from his perspective the triumph of artistic taste over intellectual charlatany. In painters such as Thomas Hope, Eugene Delacroix, Alexandre Gabriel Decamps, and John Frederick Lewis; in painters who wrote about the Orient including Leon Belly, Alfred Dhodencq, and Gustave

Guillaumet; in Charles Cordier's sculpture; in Mozart's *The Abduction from the Seraglio* and *The Magic Flute*; and even in the writings of Rudyard Kipling, Ibn Warraq finds a powerful determination to convey the color, texture, and, most of all, the humanity of the men and women of the East. In conclusion, he quotes appreciatively George Eliot's remark, "Art's greatest benefit to men is to widen their sympathies." Like his vivisection of the main doctrines of Said's *Orientalism* and his account of Western rationalism, universalism, and self-criticism, Ibn Warraq's illumination of the benefits conferred by Orientalist art widens sympathies.

This is in stark contrast to Edward Said's *Orientalism*, which in the myriad ways Ibn Warraq brings to light narrows sympathies. Nonetheless, in the final lines of the twenty-fifth anniversary edition preface, Said expresses a generous hope: "I would like to believe that *Orientalism* has had a place in the long and often interrupted road to human freedom." With this Said confirms, despite the scorn his book heaps upon it, his moral and intellectual dependence on Western civilization, which, to an extent unrivaled by other civilizations, has made liberty its governing principle. Let it not be said, even by Said's harshest critics, that his *Orientalism* has no place "on the long and often interrupted road to human freedom." Let it be said, rather, that Said has made a memorable contribution to human freedom by provoking Ibn Warraq to defend the West.

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