The God That Failed: The Neo-Orientalism of Today's Muslim Commentators

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Thirty years ago, Edward Said published Orientalism, the highly influential study challenging the authority of Western representations of the “Orient” through the twin prisms of knowledge and power. Said identified Orientalism as a type of discourse which possesses “a will or intention to understand” what was non-European, and “in some cases to control and manipulate what was manifestly different” (1978: 12). The study of the Orient, moreover, operated not as an innocent intellectual pursuit but functioned as a handmaiden to empire. The Orientalist always spoke for the Orient, and in so doing, developed a style for “dominating, restructuring, and having authority” (Said 1978: 3) over both an object of study and a region of the world.

The Orientalist, according to Said, was a sort of translator—often literally so—of the Orient to the Occident but was always translating one culture for another from the detached perspective of a learned Westerner. This distance endowed the Orientalist with his or her “flexible positional superiority” (1978: 7), so that

the relation between the Orientalist and Orient was essentially hermeneutical: standing before a distant, barely intelligible civilization or cultural monument, the Orientalist scholar reduced the obscurity by translating, sympathetically portraying, inwardly grasping the hard-to-reach object. Yet the Orientalist remained outside the Orient, which, however much it was made to appear intelligible, remained beyond the Occident. (1978: 222)

It is this distance—in part physical, but more fundamentally ontological—that preserved the essential framework of an “us” and a “them.” As we shall see, distance becomes more difficult to maintain in a globalizing age.
Said also shows us how, in the Orientalist canon, “Islam” accounts for the sum total of any Muslim’s experience. From Islam comes everything and to Islam goes everything, and Orientalism’s aim is to drive this point home with a repeated and relentless monotony. “It is evident that anything is possible to the Oriental,” writes British Orientalist Duncan Macdonald, because the “supernatural is so near that it may touch him at any moment” (quoted in Said 1978: 277). Thus, a recurring theme in Orientalist work is that “Islam” is the regulator of life from “top to bottom” (Said 1981: xvi), a motif Said characterizes as not just intellectually lazy but as a model of intellectual production that would be inapplicable to the serious study of Western culture. There the humanities and social sciences engage in “complex theories, enormously variegated analyses of social structures, histories, cultural foundations, and sophisticated languages of investigation” (Said 1981: xvi), but none of that is found in the Orientalist world of “Islam.” In short, it is not politics that produces (varieties of) Islam in history. Instead, “Islam” produces politics.

It is almost facile to point out that Orientalism, like imperialism, never seems to go out of style. In fact, in the age of terror, it has reemerged with a vengeance. *New York Times* correspondents—e.g., Robert Worth (2005)—prepare themselves for war reporting in Iraq by reading the old Orientalist Bernard Lewis, who himself has had virtually unparalleled access to the corridors of power in the Bush era. The old trope of “Islamic imperialism” is resuscitated in Efraim Karsh’s (2006) book by the same name. *The Arab Mind* (Patai 2002 [1973]), trash scholarship from a generation ago, is dusted off, reissued, and sent into wide circulation in the United States military; it was cited recently in the *New York Times* as a reference book in the library of a counterinsurgency colonel in Iraq (Gordon 2007).

But there is a (somewhat) new twist on an old doctrine, and it is worth paying it some attention. Today, contemporary multiculturalism melds with old-style Orientalism in the writings of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Irshad Manji, and Reza Aslan, three commentators who self-describe either as Muslim (Aslan), ex-Muslim (Hirsi Ali), or barely Muslim (Manji). Each also claims to reveal the true nature of Islam to Western audiences, promising an insider message of telling it to you like it is! (Hint: Everything Muslims do is motivated by Islam.) The fact that these explainers are themselves Western Muslims in some sense collapses the Orientalist distance between East and West; in other senses it does not, for there would be no need for explainers if there were no wide differences between peoples.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali was born in war-torn Somalia, which she fled as a child, eventually winning asylum in the Netherlands, where she later rose to promi-
nence as a legislator known for her anti-immigrant views. She is the author of several works, including the screenplay for *Submission*, a short film about the treatment of women in Islam by Theo van Gogh (for which she provided the voiceover narration and for which van Gogh would later be assassinated by Mohammed Bouyeri). She has published two books, one a collection of essays called *The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam* (2006), and the other an autobiography titled *Infidel* (2007). After questions arose regarding the truthfulness of her statements regarding her own immigration petition, Hirsi Ali left the Netherlands and relocated to the United States. She quickly received permanent residency, which was announced by the U.S. government through a press release (hardly a common practice, to say the least), and she began working at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank. Irshad Manji was born in Uganda under Idi Amin’s tyrannical rule. She and her family fled the East African dictatorship when Manji was four years old, settling in Vancouver, Canada, where she was raised. Manji is the author of *The Trouble with Islam: A Muslim’s Call for Reform in Her Faith* (2003), repackaged as *The Trouble with Islam Today* for the paperback version. Reza Aslan was born in Iran in 1972. He and his family left Iran after the revolution in 1979, when Aslan was about seven years old, settling in the United States. Aslan is the author of *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution, and Future of Islam* (2005).

The very existence of these explainers indicates the substantial presence of Muslims in the West, and each of their books either implicitly or explicitly raises the specter of misguided or dangerous Muslims living in our midst. The force of their message in other words is a mission: “Islam” can (or will naturally) be converted from its current treachery into a benign and more palatable force for the Western world. I offer that this is simply a ridiculous message, and that to focus on “Islam” is to entertain a distraction that takes us away from attending to the many serious political issues of our time.

Scholars may have little use for the autobiographical musings of Hirsi Ali or the puerile polemics of Manji. Nevertheless, the fact remains that Manji, Hirsi Ali, and Aslan have become some of today’s most prominent explainers of “Islam.” According to a search on BookScan (http://en-us.nielsen.com/tab/industries/media/entertainment, performed on October 5, 2007), Hirsi Ali’s *Infidel* has sold more than 120,000 copies in hardcover. Manji has sold more than 60,000 total copies of *The Trouble with Islam*, and Aslan’s *No god but God* comes in at over 70,000 sales. Moreover, each author is accorded significant media exposure and is credentialed by various institutions and think tanks of higher learning and the power elite, from Yale University (where Manji was a
fellow) to the conservative American Enterprise Institute (where Hirsi Ali is a fellow) to CBS News (where Aslan is a consultant). There should be no question that their influence is significant. Their offerings about "Islam," however, raise doubts, for these are the kind of explanations that demand explanation.

The idea of Orientals talking to Western audiences in a Western medium has its predecessors. Fouad Ajami, the Lebanese American historian, chronicler of Arab failures, and close confidant of several members of the Bush administration, immediately comes to mind. According to Adam Shatz, a senior editor at the London Review of Books, "Ajami's unique role in American political life has been to unpack the unfathomable mysteries of the Arab and Muslim world and to help sell America's wars in the region" (2003: 15). But in the cases of Hirsi Ali and Manji, who compose narratives centered on their own religious experiences, one could page back to the conversion narratives found in early editions of The Muslim World, a journal that began publishing in 1911, for precursors. There we find such narratives by Muslims as "How Christ Won My Heart" (1916), written by "an Indian Convert" in Lahore. We can read "A Mohammedan Imam's Discovery of Christ" (Barton 1916), or "The Story of My Conversion," written by one J. A. Baksh in 1926. These brief stories narrate the struggle to proclaim one's belief in Christ in the face of Muslim obscurantism in the Muslim world, and they come with all the good news that the gospel is spreading in Muslim territory. Comparing these essays with Hirsi Ali's and Manji's texts holds insofar as both sets of narratives describe the fundamentally closed world of Islam, but the similarity basically ends there. For one thing, the distance between the Muslim and Christian worlds is still fundamentally alive in the old narratives, as one or two converts along the missionary way may bode well for the power of the gospel, but do not reveal a fully formed social movement. Moreover, the early narratives are essentially about the righteousness of Christianity in the world. Today's Muslim commentators speak from their authority as Muslims to talk not about the glories of Christianity but about the failings of Islam.

And the failures are many. Hirsi Ali, Manji, and Aslan all point to a clearly articulated set of problems that can be summarized as follows: "Islam" is or has become a totalizing system that lags behind the wheel of progress, defies individuality, and blindly oppresses its followers. Where they differ is in their views of how this happened, when it happened, and if there is any opportunity to emancipate Islam from itself.

Manji and Aslan take on the old cliché of "the closing of the gates of ijtihad." Ijtihad, of course, refers to the Islamic juridical principle of independent reasoning within religious law. Ijtihad has a long history within Islam and
Islamic jurisprudence, and many commentators (Manji and Aslan among them) have argued that the practice of ijtihad was essentially snuffed out in the ninth or tenth century C.E./A.D. This idea is commonly referred to as “the closing of the gates of ijtihad” in favor of irrational obedience to religious authority, and this closed door, in Manji’s and Aslan’s hands, explains the current intellectual, moral, and political stultification of “Islam.” Aslan, for example, writes that “the Traditionalist Ulama, who at that time dominated nearly all the major schools of law, outlawed [ijtihad] as a legitimate tool of exegesis . . . signal[ing] the beginning of the end for those who held that religious truth . . . could be discovered through human reason” (2003: 165). Manji, too, notes that “Baghdad oversaw the closing of the . . . gates of ijtihad and therefore the tradition of independent thought,” which led to a “freez[ing] of debate within Islam” so that “we in the twenty-first century live with the consequences of this thousand-year-old strategy to keep the [Islamic] empire from imploding” (2003: 59).

Furthermore, all three commentators—Manji, Aslan, and Hirsi Ali—point to the problems of hadith transmission (the system by which the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad are passed down through the ages) to argue that Islam has been forever beset by human fallibility, and the Ulama have been able to manipulate their believers into what modern science can now reveal as blind systems of oppression.

The problem with drawing attention to the inherent limitations of hadith transmission and the closure of the gates of ijtihad, two common preoccupations among many Orientalist schools, is that they are both non-issues. In 1984, Wael B. Hallaq asked the question, “Was the gate of ijtihad closed?” in an important article with that query as its title, answering that “a systematic and chronological study of the original legal sources reveals that these views on the history of ijtihad after the second/eighth century are entirely baseless and inaccurate” (1984: 4). (Many others who read inside the tradition, from Albert Hourani to Said Ramadan, reach the same conclusions.) Hallaq composed another retort to the perennial issue of hadith transmission in another essay, “The Authenticity of Prophetic Ḥadīth: A Pseudo-Problem” (1999). In brief, Hallaq here argues that since the science of hadith, a pursuit within Islamic jurisprudence, contains within it the means to adjudicate “strong” from “weak” ahadith, the Western discovery of hadith forgery is largely, in his word, “pointless.”

We can make a point, however, by noting the reliance of these contemporary travelers in Islam on such explanations. Manji’s and Aslan’s texts go to considerable lengths to pinpoint a period of Islamic glory (for Aslan, it is the period
of the Prophet; for Manji it is al-Andalus—Islamic Spain) in counterpoint to today’s distress. Hirsi Ali, on the other hand, ultimately finds nothing redeemable in Islam but argues that Muslims “don’t have to take six hundred years to go through a reformation” and need to “examine [their faith] critically, and to think about the degree to which that faith is itself at the root of oppression” (2007: 350). All three are invested, in other words, in drawing a singular narrative account of Islam, where the faith is both a singular system and a singular force in the world, and they rely on the production of a Grand Narrative to achieve their goals. But if post-structuralism has taught us anything it should be skepticism of all Grand Narratives, since Grand Narratives by design are propelled by such singular causes and effects that move their story forward in world historical time.

In fact, many Salafi literalists—those who reject the major schools of Islamic law and instead argue for a direct reading of the Quran and sunnah (the sayings and actions of the Prophet Muhammad)—operate similarly, though out of opposite social circumstances. In Islam: The Religion of the Future (1984), for example, the Egyptian Islamist Sayyid Qutb offers a world historical narrative about the rise and fall of civilizations due to religion and human nature. After describing the rise and fall of capitalism and communist society, Qutb writes that “all these [capitalist and communist] civilizations were cut off from the original source without which social orders, principles and values cannot survive: the source of belief issuing from God which gives comprehensive interpretation to existence, to the status of man and his objectives on earth. Hence, they [the Euro-American] were basically temporary civilizations, without roots attached to the depths of human nature” (1984: 63). In Qutb’s account, human proximity to or distance from Islam explains history.

I should make it clear that I am not opposed to scholastic treatments of faith systems, or to examining them through history or even within a comparative framework. But that is not what is happening here. The problem arises not when a faith system is placed in history but when it is used to explain history. Thus arises the Grand Narrative. And with Aslan, Manji, and Hirsi Ali, the Grand Narratives they posit all describe a straightforward binary of a pre-modern Islam that has erected barriers for Muslims, hindering them from entering modernity. Moreover, these barriers—a rigid Ulama, intellectual sleights of hand like “closing the gates of jihād” and fabricating ahadīth, or even the very faith itself—account for the political behavior of Muslims throughout the world and in world historical time.

Each of these three texts relies on its own Grand Narrative to prove its point, and it is worth examining what kinds of threads underpin their Grand
Narratives to give them force to Western readers. Turning first to Hirsi Ali, we find a detail-driven memoir of a clearly turbulent life that involves survival in war-torn Somalia, flight to Saudi Arabia, refugee hardship in Kenya, oppression through female circumcision and forced marriage, and the remaking of a new life in the Netherlands. It is in many ways a compelling read. But perhaps the first thing to notice from the point of view of narrative is why we are drawn to the story. Part of the reason may lie in the structure of the work, which in fact replicates the American slave narrative in significant ways. Frederick Douglass titles the account of his life *My Bondage and My Freedom*; Hirsi Ali divides her story into “My Childhood” and “My Freedom.” And like the slave narrative, hers is also one about achieving true consciousness under a system of oppression. In the slave narrative, the discovery of consciousness is generally inscribed in the act of learning how to write. With Hirsi Ali, it comes with going to school in the Netherlands.

Consider how she describes the vocational college preparatory classes that she was finally able to take. There, she tells us, she studied history voraciously, and the performance of naïveté is instructive of the move from blindness to vision, not just in language but also in political thinking. “That history book taught me Dutch,” she writes. “The civics class, on the other hand, was full of terms I didn’t understand, like municipality and upper chamber. I scraped through it. I failed the Dutch class by one point: I still couldn’t write proper grammar. But because I had my Dutch equivalency exam, they let me enroll in Driebergen Vocational College anyway. By the skin of my teeth, I had made it” (2007: 229). Education and the Dutch language may bring consciousness to Hirsi Ali, but they also enable simplistic comparisons. “In February 1995,” she writes, “there were huge floods across Holland. When Somalis are faced with catastrophic weather, drought and flooding, they all get together and pray. Natural disasters are a sign from God, to show humans they are misbehaving on earth. But the Dutch blamed their government for failing to maintain the dikes properly. I didn’t see anybody praying” (2007: 239). When it comes to her education, she writes, “it seemed as if... everything I read challenged me as a Muslim. Drinking wine and wearing trousers were nothing compared to reading the history of ideas” (2007: 239).

The obscurant and anti-intellectual world of Islam functions as the slave system in Hirsi Ali’s universe, and Muslims are guilty of enslaving themselves. Hirsi Ali’s narrative makes this case repeatedly, and she liberally uses skin color to argue her point. Later, she begins work as a translator in the Dutch social welfare sector, and this experience further hardens her to the Muslims in her midst. “When I went to awful places—the police stations, the prisons,
the abortion clinics and penal courts, the unemployment offices and the shelters for battered women—I began to notice how many dark faces looked back at me. It was not something you could avoid noticing, coming straight in from creamy-blond Leiden. I began to wonder why so many immigrants—so many Muslims—were there” (2007: 243). Later, she answers her question. “If Muslim immigrants lagged so far behind even other immigrant groups, then wasn’t it possible,” she asks, “that one of the reasons could be Islam? Islam influences every aspect of believers’ lives” (2007: 279). Meanwhile, “by declaring our Prophet infallible and not permitting ourselves to question him, we Muslims had set up a static tyranny . . . we suppressed the freedom to think and to act as we chose. . . . We were not just servants of Allah, we were slaves” (2007: 272).

In the prototypical slave narrative, the former slave finds redemption in True Christianity. But Hirsi Ali’s salvation from slavery, updated for today, comes not through Christianity but through atheism. As the Bible has the power to move the spirit in the slave narrative, The Atheist Manifesto, loaned to her by her boyfriend, becomes Hirsi Ali’s path to emancipation (2007: 280). But the emancipation she details is not hers alone, for what would it matter if one Muslim gives up her faith? Hers is instead a broad prescription for all her co-religionists, and by the end of her narrative it is clear that she is lecturing all the Muslims of the world. If they are to enter modernity, they must give up God within their creed, not just individually but theologically. According to Hirsi Ali, Islam’s salvation is atheism.

Hirsi Ali’s text is actually rich in detail about different social movements and political strife. It gives us large amounts of context, making it in fact a text of lost promise. The same cannot be said of Irshad Manji’s The Trouble with Islam (2003), a polemic rife with willful distortions, patent inaccuracies, and self-aggrandizing sanctimony. I will not bother to list these—there are far too many to treat this as a serious work worthy of such scrutiny—but we can explore its narrative structure in a fashion similar to the way we explored Hirsi Ali’s memoir.

Manji’s is an epistolary text, full of Thomas Friedman–like platitudes and born out of disillusionment. “I have to be honest with you,” she begins. “Islam is on very thin ice with me” (2003: 1). She proceeds to catalogue the manner in which she was schooled in a “madrassa” in Richmond, British Columbia, and how the experience traumatized her into action later in life. In her junior
high school, she tells us, “dignity of the individual prevailed,” but in her “madressa,” she “entered... wearing a white polyester chador and departed several hours later with [her] hair flattened and her spirit deflated” (2003: 11). “Islam” is the cause of this oppression, we are lectured again and again, just as Muslims are the cause of every tragedy she can muster. “The Muslims of East Africa treated blacks like slaves,” she says (2003: 5). (And what about the Hindus of East Africa?) Muslims are responsible for the honor killings of Pakistan, the lack of independent women travelers in Malaysia, ethnic strife in Nigeria, and the Turkish nationalist genocide of Armenians of 1915. “Muslims did this!” she keeps intoning, as if every Muslim is individually responsible for the action of every other nominally Muslim person in the entire world and throughout time.

At the heart of Manji’s polemic is the way in which Muslim and/or Palestinian “culture” squelches the individual (2003: 158). She even draws parallels between the Prophet and bin Laden over the course of several pages, arguing that the Prophet “won decisive military victories through such primitive tactics as digging a ditch around his settlement, catching his opponents unawares, and crippling their combat-ready thoroughbreds,” and then offering that “bin Laden’s cavalry used box-cutters to attack a superpower” (2003: 149).

Such emotional blackmail is Manji’s style: she goes to great lengths to posit Islam as a faith locked outside the gates of modernity due to its tyrannical anti-intellectualism. While the West is proudly freethinking, and Jews are the most freethinking of Westerners, for Manji, “mainstream Muslims... suppress their brainpower [with] the stated aim of the no-thinking rule” (2003: 59). She gets more specific. The Palestinians, in Manji’s view, function as the ultimate expression of the failures of Islam, and the middle of her book is turned over to a narration of a six-day trip—paid for by a Canadian Jewish group—to Israel and the occupied territories. In Jerusalem, she encounters difficulty entering the Al-Aqsa compound but freely visits the Wailing Wall. There, she writes, “I borrow a pencil and scrawl a request to God, then weave through the crowd to approach the wall. As I spend time in search of an unused crack that will clasp my prayer, I realize I’m holding up the Jews behind me. Still, I don’t feel like an interloper [as the Palestinians have made her feel]. I feel at home. More viscerally than ever, I know who my family is” (2003: 85).

For Manji, Judaism stands as the ultimate expression of modernity and the culmination of the West. She presents Judaism as broadminded, universal, and liberal to the core; this is especially evident in her narrative on the state of Israel. Judaism and Israel function as the antitheses to Islam, and as models to aspire to. She uses cultural-religious terms—Islam and Judaism—
but it is really politics that drives her framework. Manji refuses to grant the Palestinians even basic rights. Instead, she imperiously lectures them about how they deserve their fate, due solely to the faults of their Muslim culture. In this bizarre narrative, where Islam is “irredeemably rigid” (2003: 33) and “brain-dead” (2003: 31), Judaism, in fact, even becomes the true Islam. She asks, “How many of us know the degree to which Islam is a ‘gift of the Jews’?” (2003: 29). And thus her self-label as a “Muslim Refusenik” takes on another dimension. “That doesn’t mean I refuse to be a Muslim,” she writes, explaining why she calls herself a refusenik. “It simply means I refuse to join an army of automatons in the name of Allah. I take this phrase,” she continues, “from the original refuseniks—Soviet Jews who championed religious and personal freedom. Their communist masters refused to let them emigrate to Israel. For their attempts to leave the Soviet Union, many refuseniks paid with hard labor and, sometimes, with their lives” (2003: 3). For Irshad Manji, “Islam” can enter modernity. It just has to become Jewish.

Turning to Reza Aslan’s *No god but God* (2005), we find a more complicated narrative, but one that nonetheless operates on a grand scale, describing how Islam is well on the road to replicating Christianity. Aslan’s book is full of the performance of partisan scholarship (he proudly accepts that he is writing an “apology” for Islam), and, insofar as it is a book about Islam as a faith, it is relatively unproblematic. (And I should add that Aslan’s text is immeasurably more nuanced than Hirsi Ali’s and Manji’s, and that some of his public interventions are helpful. But this need not mean his book is beyond criticism.) The first half of the book travels over familiar territory. Here Aslan narrates the early days of Islam with control and sympathy, describing the religion’s emergence within the social context of the Arabian peninsula of that era.

More fundamental problems soon arise, however, and from two different directions. The first is the use of what Aslan calls the “story” of Islam to explain the subsequent history and politics of the Middle East and South Asia. (If this is “Islam’s story” then where is Indonesia or Mali or Albania?) The second is the central conceit of the book, namely that Islam—like Christianity—is going through a reformation.

In fact, Aslan’s book reads like a revisionist history of the Iranian revolution. The initial message of Islam was freedom and liberty, he tells us, but that message has, since the early days of the revolutionary message of egalitarianism, been hijacked by the clerics.
Throughout Islamic history, as Muslim dynasties tumbled over each other, Muslim kings were crowned and dethroned, and Islamic parliaments elected and dissolved, only the Ulama, in their capacity as the link to the traditions of the past, have managed to retain their self-imposed role as the leaders of Muslim society. As a result, over the past fifteen centuries, Islam as we know it has been almost exclusively defined by an extremely small, rigid, and often profoundly traditionalist group of men who, for better or worse, consider themselves to be the unyielding pillars upon which the religious, social, and political foundations of the religion rest. (2005: 139)

The arrogance of this approach, summarizing the sweep of fifteen hundred years of human history within a few words, is at bottom breathtakingly simple. (Not to say historically untenable—what about popular Islam, for one thing?) The idea of a clergy tyrannically holding sway over the masses of people flies in the face of the complex and variegated ways authority and state power have functioned throughout the history of the Muslim world.

But besides sounding very much like contemporary Iran, Aslan’s view of a singular Ulama deciding the worldly fates of believers sounds a lot like the history of Christianity in Europe. In fact, in virtually every section one turns to in Aslan’s book, the comparison to Christianity is drawn. Sometimes it is explicit, so the brief nine-year reign of the Abbasid caliph Mu’tasim is known only for its “inquisition” (2005: 140). Or when Aslan describes the umma, he writes that “put simply [the umma] is the Church in Islam” (2005: 146). Sufis are compared to Teresa of Avila, and are placed in opposition to the clerical order of the Ulama. Moreover, we are told that “Sufis” believe that “God’s very essence—God’s substance—is love. Love is the agent of creation” and that they “understood Muhammad in the same way that many Christian Gnostics understood Jesus: as the eternal logos” (2005: 215). Sufis and the Indian reformer Sayyid Ahmed Khan are, unsurprisingly, the good guys in this narrative, peacefully opposed to the black-robed Ulama.

For a moment, consider Sufism with more than Pacific new-age appreciation. Many of the often quite violent and often very hierarchical anti-colonial struggles the Arab world witnessed—ranging from the Mahdi movement in Sudan to Abdel Kader in Algeria—were Sufi-led or -inspired, and they certainly complicate Aslan’s narrative. The text does acknowledge Shah Wali Allah’s political Sufism, but only to transition to political Islam (2005: 218–19) and not to investigate the premise that Sufism could be more than private mysticism. Aslan’s examination of political Islam itself is preceded by a brief discussion of colonialism, which is put this way: “European ideals of secularism, pluralism, individual liberties, human rights, and, to a far lesser degree, democracy—that
wonderful legacy of the Enlightenment that had taken hundreds of years to evolve in Europe—were pressed upon the colonized lands with no attempts to render them in terms the indigenous population would either recognize or understand” (2005: 222–23), as if the ravages of colonialism are due to the arrested development of the colonized themselves.

These consistently drawn parallels between “East” and “West” structure Aslan’s story. Of course, there is nothing wrong with analogy or drawing historical correspondences as a heuristic device. But a problem arises when analogy overwhells the analysis to the point of emulation. In Aslan’s narrative, it is as if “Islam” must follow the same world historical script as Christianity. Under such a weight, Islam will always fail, for the simple fact that Islam is not Christianity.

More troubling still is the manner in which politics is subsumed to the narrative of Islam, and from the opening pages of the book—a narration of how Aslan mediated and translated a sudden altercation between American missionaries and an irate Muslim conductor on a train in Morocco—to the ending, which refutes the “clash of civilizations thesis” in its analysis of the September 11 terrorist attacks, we are told that this is a book that will explain not just a faith system but the paroxysms of the world. The violence of our age is due to a struggle over leadership, Aslan concludes, exactly as in the Christian past. “All great religions grapple over [authority],” he writes (so “lesser” religions don’t?), “some more fiercely than others. One need only recall Europe’s massively destructive Thirty Years’ War . . . to recognize the ferocity with which interreligious conflicts have been fought in Christian history. In many ways, the Thirty Years’ War signaled the end of the Reformation . . . and [led] ultimately to the doctrinal relativism of the Enlightenment. This remarkable evolution in Christianity . . . took fifteen vicious, bloody, and occasionally apocalyptic centuries. . . . And Islam has finally begun its fifteenth century” (2005: 248).

In Aslan’s narrative, one that is putatively about the world, responsibility becomes easy to assess. The “story” of Islam, with its incomplete reformation, is the sole cause of today’s violence. “What is taking place now in the Muslim world is an internal conflict between Muslims,” he writes, “not an external battle between Islam and the West. The West,” he continues, “is merely a bystander” (2005: 248).

This is a false dichotomy if ever there was one—to be forced to choose between a civilizational clash and an internal, civilizational civil war—for why can’t it be neither? But the idea that the West is “merely a bystander” and, by extension, that “Islam” is a victimizer of the West ends Aslan’s narrative, More-
over, it is the central thread that connects Aslan to Hirsi Ali to Irshad Manji. But surely this is ridiculous. The process of assigning political responsibility means assessing who, individually, does what to whom. It means grappling with the historical details of particular wars, state-building projects, specific colonial and postcolonial policies, the rise of secular nationalism, regionalism, military pacts, control over resources, globalization, and everything else. The narratives of Aslan, Hirsi Ali, and Irshad Manji, on the other hand, reduce politics to the spurious fact that Muslims are agents of Islam and only of Islam throughout the pages of history. Such epic civilizational narratives as these talk the language of political responsibility while obfuscating the same. To Western audiences, however, this is an oddly comforting story. It means that the world, meaning now the Western world, has been invaded by “Islam,” an Islam that for centuries has been on the march to defeat individuality at every turn, is anti-modern to the core, and has a totalitarian-like Comintern at its heart called “the Ulama.” The truth of the proposition is made all the more “truthful” when it issues from the lips of Western Muslims. And the solution, if one can be found, is simplistically plotted as a stripped-down ijithad, for ijithad brings with it reformation, liberalism, and individuality.

Orientalism provides the means by which these narratives succeed, for it enables precisely this kind of wholesale summary of the complexity of human experience. It is Orientalism that endows one with the authority to proclaim the wish that “Islam” would become or emulate atheism, Judaism, or Christianity (or, in the case of Thomas Friedman, that Islam would finally just become Hinduism). But Orientalism does not account for the overarching structure of these three stories. In their repeated insistence on a system of tyranny defeating human liberty, these stories fundamentally replicate another narrative in our recent history, one similarly made more concrete by the collapsing of distance, since it is ex-fellow travelers who tell them. I am referring to familiar Cold War narratives published in the middle of the twentieth century, and particularly the confessional tales composed by ex-Communists.

In 1949, Richard Crossman edited an influential series of essays with the title *The God That Failed*. Reprinted through the 1960s and, as Frances Stonor Saunders shows, supported by the Congress for Cultural Freedom, a wing of the Central Intelligence Agency, *The God That Failed* features essays by André Gide, Richard Wright, Stephen Spender, Ignazio Silone, Arthur Koestler, and others who describe their excited journeys into Communism and their disillusioned return. The narratives in the book share a good many characteristics, most notably that Communism defeats every ounce of individuality, mainly by its collective belief that—as Arthur Koestler put it—Communism is “the
incarnation of the will of History itself” (1949: 58). Similarly, Ignazio Silone characterizes the history of the Communist International (sounding very much like these accounts of Islam) as “a history of schisms, a history of intrigues and arrogance... toward every independent expression of opinion” (1949: 89). In The God That Failed, Communism is a bullying, anti-human pursuit recklessly imposing its idea of Truth on the world through brutality (Wright) and murder (Spender).

It is far less important to adjudicate the truth of these claims than it is to connect old rhetorics of persuasion and argument to newer rhetorics, allowing us to see how certain tropes function in our society, how they are consistent, and how they differ. With this in mind, one crucial comparison arises. The failures of Communism spelled out in The God That Failed are likened to the failures of organized religion; the acolyte of Lenin was seen as being the same as the Catholic neophyte. “The strength of the Catholic Church,” writes Crossman in his introduction, “has always been that it demands the sacrifice of [spiritual] freedom uncompromisingly, and condemns spiritual pride as a deadly sin. The Communist novice, subjecting his soul to the canon law of the Kremlin, felt something of the release which Catholicism brings to the intellectual, wearied and worried by the privilege of freedom” (1949: 6). Communism, like organized religion (especially Catholicism), flees from freedom and defeats the individual. The existence of this old narrative endows contemporary tales of “Islam” with the “truthfulness” on which they rest, because “our” violence, in this mythology, promotes liberty, while “their” violence is forever atavistic.

In The God That Failed, Communism loses because it turns ideology into religion. In the hands of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Irshad Manji, and Reza Aslan, “Islam” fails because it has transformed religion into ideology.

Works Cited


