NOTES ON ORIENTALISM AND RELIGION

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It was my initial plan to write a paper about the Arya Samaj in Africa, taking off from Richard King's description of that movement within its colonial context in Orientalism and Religion. Then, when I reread that book, I found it such a compelling read that I decided to change my focus to a review essay of Orientalism and Religion itself. I have written several such essays in recent years, and they have generally followed the standard scholarly recipe for the genre: one part homage and two parts hatchet job. This is the first time that I have had occasion to present such an essay in the presence of the author of the book, an embarrassment which I am going to do my best to ignore. I should say at the outset that I think that Orientalism and Religion is a very good book. It is an important book, too, which does a convincing job of bringing together religious studies, South Asian studies, and contemporary theory. I also believe that Orientalism and Religion will prove a useful book as well, particularly since King presents postmodernism, post-Orientalism, and postcolonialism in a way that easily can be understood by the general reader.

Having praised Caesar, I can now move on to the serious work of this article. Despite its many strong points, I am left with some questions about King's argument. As the leading American expert on the Arya Samaj, a distinction which I have heretofore carried with admirable sang-froid, I could not help but notice a couple of minor errors in the interpretation of that movement. In this essay, I will take those errors as my point of departure for more substantial criticisms of Orientalism and Religion. At the very least, I hope to point out those minor errors, thereby insinuating myself into the footnotes of the second edition of Orientalism and Religion. But I also aspire to contribute here to a consequential discussion of King's project. It is the ambiguity of my critique that I had intended by the parentheses in the title of this paper—footnotes on Orientalism and Religion, which may be something more than just footnotes.
1. The Vedantin who was not one

I am in general agreement with King’s argument that the philosophical school known as Vedanta, and even the specific version of Vedanta associated with Shankara, has often been read as the philosophy of India in the modern period by Westerners and by Indians themselves. Yet King carries this argument a bit too far when he writes:

In this sense, for the Hindu intelligentsia of the nineteenth century, the philosophical traditions of Vedanta seemed to typify the ancient, noble and ascetic “spirituality” of the Hindu people well. Rammohun Roy, Dayananda Saraswati, Swami Vivekananda and Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan were all unanimous in a rereading of the Vedanta (however differently conceived) that rendered it compatible with social activism and worldly involvement. (1999: 134)

My specific problem with this quote is the inclusion in it of Dayanand Saraswati (1824-1883), the founder of the Arya Samaj, with other Vedantins.

In the history of Hindu literature the term “Vedanta” has referred to two different things. One is the Upanishads, which are called the Vedanta because they are the latest strata of Vedic literature. “Vedanta” literally means “the end of the Veda”. Secondarily, the term “Vedanta” is also the label of one of the six schools of classical philosophy in the Hindu tradition, presumably because that school relies heavily upon the Upanishads. In the passage which I just quoted from Orientalism and Religion, King is talking about the tendency of modern Indian social reformers to interpret Vedanta, and especially the nondualist Advaita version of Vedanta, in a way that complements social activism—no mean feat since the monism of Advaita has more often been seen as conducive to withdrawal from worldly life.

There can be no doubt that Dayanand shared with Rammohan and Vivekananda a commitment to social activism. He was dedicated to an active program of social reform, and castigated the nuncios of his day for their unwillingness to work for the public good (see Llewellyn 1998). Yet it makes little sense to me to describe this in Dayanand’s case as based on a reading of the Vedanta, and here Dayanand differs from both Rammohan and Vivekananda.

First, let us consider the Upanishads. Dayanand was committed to the principle that the Vedas are free of error, an infallible record of