FACETS OF ORIENTALISM—INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

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More than two years have passed now since the demise of Edward Said on 25 September 2003. The political events in the Middle East have in the meantime moved in directions that have left his political and mediatory commitments, which had been strongly battered anyhow over his last years,1 almost without any further response. As a founding figure of post-colonial studies, however, Edward Said still exerts a persisting influence on several academic disciplines, and his heritage as a cultural critic “Out of Place” continues as a lasting challenge for any reflection on the thorny field of socio-cultural interaction in the present world.

The present issue of this journal attempts to take up that challenge and to give some further impulse to the debate on European Orientalism and its repercussions both within and outside European societies.2 Its contributions discuss different facets of Orientalism—both within public as well as academic life, relating it to the inner tensions and contradictory trends within European as well as Middle Eastern society and culture. While some of them derive a good part of their perspectives from an engagement with Edward Said’s work, all of them go beyond it or supplement it in several important ways. One is the study of the interaction of professional orientalists with their own society and their handling of their personal commitments to Middle Eastern politics and culture. The other is the extension of the field of research


2 See for a more recent contribution to this debate already Y. Courbage, M. Kropp (eds.), Penser l’Orient. Traditions et actualité des orientalismes français et allemand, Orient-Institut/IFPO, Beirut 2004.

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on Orientalism and post-colonial discourse to the Middle Eastern intellectuals themselves, something that has until now hardly found attention. Sadiq Jalal El-Azm’s early critical assessment of Said’s book as “Orientalism in Reverse” still awaits confirmation from a closer scrutiny of Middle Eastern responses to Said. The third is another extension of his approach to the study of Judaism and Antisemitism within European, especially German, society, where a kind of ascription to and even self-identification with the “Orient” can be observed in the relations between German society and its Jewish minority for the 19th and early 20th century.

Jacques Waardenburg pleads for a fresh approach towards the study of life and works of Louis Massignon, one of the most prominent French Orientalists of the 20th century, who has remained fairly unique with his unusual combination of academic, political, and, at the same time, strongly religious commitments. Starting from his own personal academic experience with Massignon in the last years of his life, he sets out to reconstruct his biography by mapping his multiple fields of influence. He discusses his scholarly methodology and achievements as well as his position as an influential religious figure within the Catholic world. This was related to Massignon’s particular approach to Islamic religious texts which to him enshrined an “inner meaning”, a presence of divine “grace” that could be discovered by textual as well as personal experience. Massignon’s rare combination of interests which included the history of medieval Islam and its mysticism along with contemporary developments within the Arab world of the 20th century has, in Waardenburg’s eyes, also not been properly assessed, yet. He sees Massignon’s major contribution to the study of Islam in his resolute appeal to common norms, values and beliefs and in his radical break with those fixed antagonistic structures which usually set apart “Islam” and “Christianity”, or “Islam” and “European civilisation”. Calling for a treatment of Massignon’s life and works within the general methodological perspective of the Study of Religions, he highlights his great importance for the history of the relations between Christians and Muslims and of their attitudes toward each other’s religion.

The response of Middle Eastern intellectuals to Edward Said, his works and his political positions is assessed by Markus Schmitz...