

Internalising Orientalism, Subjugating the West:

Reviewing NUS IAW's “A Muslim’s Success vs. Modern Western Success”

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*(On the talk conducted on 9th February by the NUS Muslim Society,
in conjunction with the Islamic Awareness Week 2011.)*

As fate (or divinity, whichever you prefer) would have conspired, today’s Critical International Relations Theory lecture about Orientalism coincided with a talk organised by the NUS Muslim Society that exemplified the Oriental mode of discourse, albeit with a reversal of roles. Held in conjunction with their Islamic Awareness Week, the talk explored the distinction between ‘Islamic’ and ‘Western’ conceptions of success – an exercise in essentialism, distortion, and misrepresentation of Islam and the West that should leave Edward Said reeling. It was deeply amusing/alarming to see how Islam was valorised and the ‘West’ being Othered by its own modality, although it pertinently questions whether the subaltern could write/speak back without perpetuating the egregious process of Othering.

The premise of the talk was already problematic: it rehashed Huntington’s “Clash of Civilisation,” but advanced the superior Islamic identity over the decadent, materialistic, and ‘secular’ West. To cast the West as a heathen land is outstandingly bad scholarship, since right-wing evangelicals have gained significant clout and ratcheted up the intensity of the culture war in the years of the Bush Administration. This is not to ignore that there are significant pockets of militant atheists, but again it reiterates how precarious it is to universalise the West as a monolithic bloc. The differences that inhered within Islam were also concealed to shore up the Islamic triumphalism that the speaker was propagating. It was classic Othering: the superior and cohesive Islamic values could be read off the decaying homogenous West, and vice versa. Identity is conceived in oppositional hierarchy, but this time Islam emerges victorious against the West.

In response to my criticism about his misrepresentation of the West, the speaker justified these reductive terminologies on a heuristic basis: he felt that he would otherwise be prevented from ‘saying anything’. This is intellectual laziness and academic irresponsibility: terminologies are fundamental building blocks that should strive for coherence and accuracy, and his reduction of the West into a godless, materialist, capitalist, and technologically-imbued dystopia fulfils neither. (And I doubt a ‘strategic essentialism’ ruse would work here, because the misrepresentation is far too great.) A useful rule for public presentation: Get your terminologies right before you speak – and if you can’t, then it probably means you are not prepared yet. (But do be prepared to get called out for it.)

I highlight the importance of terminology for another reason, because during the course of the talk, the ‘secular’ West was equated to being godless. This is unfortunate, because I would have thought that such categorical elisions would be avoided after Thio Li-ann had been exposed for that fallacy. Obviously not, because the moderator was insistent that secularism implicates the division of the public and private life. Another member of the audience drew the conceptual origin of the term to the denouement of the European religious wars, thus establishing the separation of church and state – which I think is factually wrong. The doctrine of separation did not manifest in Europe then (the Papacy persisted, and the crown of England created the Anglican Church after the Catholic Church refused to annul his marriage), and what the Treaty of Westphalia (which ended the state of general warfare) did was to establish territorial sovereignty and that princes had the prerogative to determine the official religion of their principalities. That was why writers like Spinoza and Locke had to argue for domestic religious toleration, since there did exist a single dominant church within each state. Locke did however advance for free conscience rights, which implied that the church should not have statist executive powers. And it was the Americans who realised this. But the term ‘separation of church and state’ itself did not occur in their constitution, but originally appeared in a letter written by Thomas Jefferson that references the First Amendment. Concerned with protecting free conscience, he established that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”. In a sense, far from implying godlessness, the separation of church and state ensured religious freedom. **Secularism is the condition that enables free worship and religious life.**

To then allude that secularism constrains religious observance to private life is quite absurd, since there is no blatant suppression against religious practices even in public. (I must say that it is quite staggeringly ingenious for anyone to declare that religious life has been confined to the private sphere during a religious talk that was housed in a public and secular institution.) And considering the religio-bureaucratic overlap in Singapore that is AMLA, to claim that Muslims are denied participation from political life is mind-bending – because some would argue that AMLA vests considerable (or even too much) power in the Muslim community to dictate public policy-making in family law and even more general concerns like HOTA. (Now, to what extent secularism should accommodate religious convictions is an altogether different matter, and here I roughly share Connolly’s idea of a ‘plurovocity’ — a plurality of doctrines negotiating the appropriate contours of society. Unfortunately though, the hostility against ‘secularism’ made this moot.)

It was disappointing that basic conceptual errors were made, upon which fallacious arguments were then built upon. Not only did it reduce the vigour of discourse, there was little time to engage in substantive issues that do deserve attention – such as the speaker’s general thesis that Islamic success implies human development and sustainable growth, and not merely economic and technological advancement. I concur wholeheartedly in so far as it was presented as a positive doctrine, although I vehemently disagreed with him using the foil of the dysfunctional West to posit the claim that only Islam has the true answer. This undermines the argument unnecessarily by denying potential collaboration with allies in the West who shares a similar ethos about human development/security and sustainability. The salience of the speaker’s point was smothered by his eagerness to celebrate the moral exclusivity and superiority of Islam. This is unwarranted: Islam may hold an answer to the excesses of capitalistic frenzy, but it does not have to be the only single one – there are other alternatives, including those originating from the West.

All this reminds me of Janadas Devan and Geraldine Heng's seminal text *State Fatherhood* where the authors mused over the irony of a proudly self-identified non-Western system (in their case, Singapore; in our case, Islam) appropriating a Western mode of discourse (Orientalism) to assert their superiority (Asian values and Islamic values respectively) and impute inferiority upon the West. This leads me to approach the problematique again: how can the subaltern write back against the hegemony without committing to the same destructive process of Othering? In this case, the answer is relatively simple: advocating for human development and sustainable progress from an Islamic perspective did not require the denigration of a (misconstructed) West. But perhaps, this tendency to Other the former hegemon would prove too enticing in other instances.

On a tangential note, the lecture theatre was impressively packed: although I'm not exactly sure whether I should be heartened by it. I believe (at least, I like to) that Islamic Awareness Week should be less religious affirmation and validation, and more intellectual discovery and exploration for the non-Muslim student population of NUS. The audience profile suggested otherwise, however: it appeared as an in-house affair, and if the intention of such religious Awareness Weeks were to inculcate heightened sensitivity and knowledge about one another's culture, this is obviously not the way to go.

(On another peripheral point, since it was used and deserves to be debunked — the 'tone argument.' All I will say: if you cannot handle vehement scrutiny and disagreement, then the talk should not be made public. However, props are due to the speaker for engaging sportingly with the critiques volleyed.)
