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German Orientalism in the Age of Empire

Religion, Race, and Scholarship

Suzanne L. Marchand

Louisiana State University

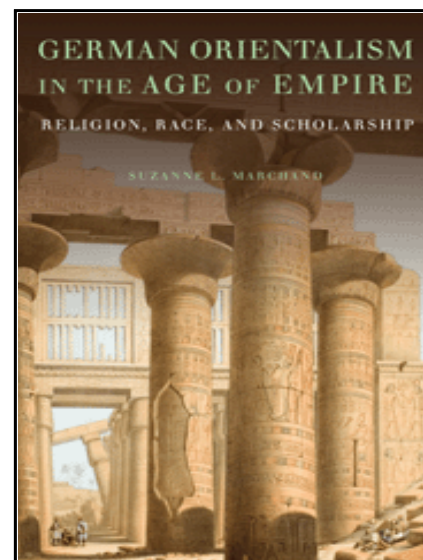
Nineteenth-century studies of the Orient changed European ideas and cultural institutions in more ways than we usually recognise. 'Orientalism' certainly contributed to European empire-building, but it also helped to destroy a narrow Christian-classical canon. This book provides the first synthetic and contextualised study of German *Orientalistik*, a subject of special interest because German scholars were the pace-setters in oriental studies between about 1830 and 1930, despite entering the colonial race late and exiting it early. The book suggests that we must take seriously German orientalism's origins in Renaissance philology and early modern biblical exegesis and appreciate its modern development in the context of nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century debates about religion and the Bible, classical schooling, and Germanic origins. Introduces readers to a host of iconoclastic characters and forgotten debates, seeking to demonstrate both the richness of this intriguing field and its indebtedness to the cultural world in which it evolved.

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Introduction

In an essay published in 1907, the Indologist and orientalist popularizer Hermann Brunnhofer offered a revealing account of the Orient's interest to Westerners, one that bears quoting at length:

The longing for the Orient accompanies the Occidental from the cradle to the grave. When the young farmer's wife of the Far West, deep in the most remote forest valley of the Rocky Mountains, holds her first-born child on her lap and imparts to him the elements of the Christian faith, she tells him about the shepherds of Bethlehem in the land of Judea, far, far on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean. She tells him about the star, which the wise men from the land of Chaldaea followed, and then of the rivers of the Nile and the Euphrates, of Mount Ararat on which Noah's ark came to rest after the Flood, of Mount Sinai from which Moses brought the earliest tables of the law to the people of Israel, of the great cities of Nineveh, Babylon, Tyre and Sidon, of the world conquerors Cyrus of Persia and the Pharaoh in Egypt-land.

... The Bible is the book through which the world of the West, even in times of the most melancholy isolation, remains persistently tied to the Orient. Even when one ignores its character as a sacred book of revelation, and examines it from a historical and geographical standpoint, the Bible can be seen as a world-historical book of wonders, as the book which ever again reawakens in the Aryans of the West, who have deserted their homeland, that longing for the Orient which binds peoples together. . . .

Brunnhofer then followed this immediately with a brief sketch of the origins and history of European oriental studies:

It was also religious need which in the educated circles of the West provided the most powerful impetus for the study of the Orient. The world of the West was captivated in its inner being by the information that it received through the Bible about the peoples of the Orient. But that which sufficed to please the taste did not satisfy the curiosity, which was afterward awakened. The Bible's accounts of language, morals and religions of the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Phoenicians, Medes and Persians were too scant not to inspire the desire, in the era of the renaissance of the sciences, for richer and more trustworthy information about the lives of the peoples of the East. So arose, at first, in closest connection to the Biblical scholarship inspired by the Reformation, an oriental philology and archaeology. These [sciences] limited themselves for many centuries to the study of the language and religion of the Semitic people. But towards the end of the previous century the languages and literatures of the Sanskrit-Indians and the Zoroastrian Persians were rediscovered, and then arose, quickly and at the same time as the philological study of Semitic

languages and religions, Sanskrit and Zend philology, to which soon too Egyptology and Sinology were added.¹

Brunnhofer was in some ways an exceptional scholar; he authored several books on Homer, Goethe, and the Hermeticist-heretic-magus Giordano Bruno, and – probably to ingratiate himself with Russian patrons – translated into German the oriental travels of the Czarevich.² What made him confident to speak as an orientalist, about the history of orientalism, was his specialized knowledge of Sanskrit philology and his publications on ancient “Aryan” culture and languages – but here he was saying nothing his contemporaries would have found surprising, or even particularly interesting. Indeed this whole passage was nothing more than a rather anodyne prologue for a rave review of Indologist Max Müller’s enormously important series of classics in translation, *Sacred Books of the East* (50 vols., 1879–1904). The point is that Brunnhofer’s career and his picture of western orientalism have virtually nothing to do with the one recent studies have conjured, and we begin this book by wondering why that might be, and in what ways we can reconcile the two points of view.

Some sort of reconciliation, or reckoning, is necessary if we are finally to answer the question, which was posed immediately upon the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in 1978, but which has never been treated in detail: what lies at the heart of German orientalism? Said famously, and self-consciously, left the Germans out of his analysis, despite the well-known fact that they were the pacesetter European scholars in virtually every field of oriental studies between about 1830 and 1930. He said simply that Britain and France “were the pioneer nations in the Orient and Oriental studies,” and that their positions, politically and intellectually, were taken over by the Americans after World War II. He reproached himself for seeking “to provide an understanding of academic Orientalism and pay[ing] little attention to scholars like [Heymann] Steinthal, [Max] Müller, [Carl Heinrich] Becker, [Ignaz] Goldziher, [Carl] Brockelmann, [Theodor] Nöldeke” (all of whom do have attention paid to them in this book), but insisted that

at no time in German scholarship during the first two-thirds of the nineteenth century could a close partnership have developed between Orientalists and a protracted, sustained national interest in the Orient. There was nothing in Germany to correspond to the Anglo-French presence in India, the Levant, North Africa. Moreover, the German Orient was almost exclusively a scholarly, or at least a classical, Orient: it was made the subject of lyrics, fantasies, and even novels, but it was never actual, the way Egypt and Syria were actual for Chateaubriand, Lane, Lamartine, Burton, Disraeli or Nerval. . . . What German Oriental

¹ Hermann Brunnhofer, “Die heiligen Bücher des Orients,” in idem, *Oestlisches Werden: Kulturaustausch und Handelsverkehr zwischen Orient und Okzident von der Urzeit bis zur Gegenwart* (Bern, 1907), pp. 25–7.

² Brunnhofer’s works include *Urgeschichte der Arier in Vorder- und Centralasien* (Leipzig, 1893); *Arische Urzeit* (Bern, 1910); *Homerische Rätsel* (Leipzig, 1898); *Russlands Hand über Asien* (St. Petersburg, 1897); *Goethes Bildkraft im Lichte der ethnologischen Sprach- und Mythenvergleichung* (Leipzig, 1893); *Giordano Bruno’s Weltanschauung und Verhängniss* (Leipzig, 1882); and the translation of Prince Espere Esperovich Uchomski’s two-volume *Orientreise seiner kaiserlich Hoheit des Grossfürsten-Thronfolgers Nikolaus Alexandrowitsch von Russland*, trans. Hermann Brunnhofer (Leipzig, 2 vols., 1894–99).

scholarship did was to refine and elaborate techniques whose application was to texts, myths, ideas, and languages almost literally gather from the Orient by imperial Britain and France.³

Said's statements were immediately recognized to be misleading, for the Germans did not merely follow in the tracks of others. Nor did they lack an "actual" relationship with the East – the German-speaking polities have had a very long and important relationship with both the Holy Land and the Ottoman Empire, and the Wilhelmine Empire did have colonial interests, and even colonial territories (Qingdao and Samoa, for example) in the East.⁴ It seemed clear that by excluding the Germans – as well as the Russians, Dutch, Greeks, and Italians – Said was engaging in a deliberate sort of deck-stacking: focusing exclusively on French and British literature and scholarship produced during the high imperial age, he was able to conclude that "orientalism" was a product of empire. But Said's paradigm took hold, perhaps because his grand claims did teach us to see so much that we had missed. And despite its dodges and flaws, Said's analysis has, until recently, continued to structure virtually all discussions about the relationship between the European mind and the cultures of the East, even when the Germans are added to the mix.

The last few years have seen an increasing number of attempts to redress Said's omissions and efforts to refine his model. There have been highly sophisticated critiques of the intimate relationships between European science and colonialism, and equally sophisticated challenges to the subalternist "iron cage."⁵ While earlier work focused heavily on England, and secondarily on France, we have recently seen the appearance of a number of fine studies of Russian and Dutch imperialism, and many more seem to be in the works.⁶ There are now a number of excellent treatments too of orientalizing "othering" as the process occurred in Japan and the Ottoman Empire.⁷ In literary studies and art history in particular, scholars

³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978), pp. 17, 19.

⁴ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 19; Nina Berman has shown, with emphasis on the Crusades and other religious encounters, that Said vastly overstated the case in claiming that the German Orient was never "actual." See Berman, "Thoughts on Zionism, in the Context of German Middle East Relations," in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24, no. 2 (2004): 134. Berman's forthcoming book will document myriad forms of "actual" encounter between Germans and Asians and force us to rethink the exclusion of the Germans from studies of orientalism. Professor Berman has kindly allowed me to read several chapters of her manuscript, the provisional title for which is *Beyond Orientalism: Germany and the Middle East, 900–2000*.

⁵ To cite just a very few: Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ, 1999); Bernard S. Cohen, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge* (Princeton, NJ, 1996); C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge, 2000); David Washbrook, "Orient and Occident: Colonial Discourse Theory and the Historiography of the British Empire," in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 5, ed. Robin Winks; J. J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought* (London, 1997). On Germany specifically, Russell Berman, *Enlightenment or Empire: Colonial Discourse in German Culture* (Lincoln, NE, 1998); George Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa and Southwest Africa* (Chicago, IC, 2007).

⁶ Michael Francis Laffen, *Islamic Nationhood and Colonial Indonesia* (London, 2003); on Russia, Daniel R. Brower and Edward Lazzarini, eds., *Russia's Orient: Imperial Borderlands and Peoples, 1700–1917* (Bloomington, IN, 1997); Alexander Etkind, "Orientalism Reversed: Russian Literature in the Times of Empires," in *Modern Intellectual History* 4, no. 3 (2007): 617–28.

⁷ Stefan Tanaka, *Japan's Orient: Rendering into History* (Berkeley, CA, 1993); Ussama Makdisi, "Ottoman Orientalism" in *American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (2002): 768–96.

have become increasingly sensitive to the subtle and often contradictory ways in which the “Orient” was invoked or read.⁸ Finally, the last few years have seen the publication of careful new studies of particular branches of German *Orientalistik* such as Sabine Mangold’s *“Eine weltbürgerliche Wissenschaft”: Deutsche Orientalistik im 19. Jahrhundert* (Stuttgart, 2004), Indra Sengupta’s *From Salon to Discipline: State, University and Indology in Germany, 1821–1914* (Heidelberg, 2005), and Pascale Rabault-F Feuerhahn’s *L’archive des origines: Sanskrit, philologie, anthropologie dans l’Allemagne du XIXe siècle* (Paris, 2008). My book is deeply indebted to all of this important new work.

But at present there is still no comprehensive treatment, in German or English, of modern German orientalism, the field Said himself knew to be a key exception to his claims.⁹ Moreover, there are very few studies of modern orientalism that allow us to take seriously Hermann Brunnhofer’s history of the field and that seek to understand the specific roles played by orientalist scholarship in the cultural histories of Europe’s diverse states, comprehending the discipline’s debts to and rivalries with theology and classics. Fewer still detail the local politics of orientalism – its educational institutions, disciplinary hierarchies, interpretive traditions, canons of evidence, divisions of labor, and the individual obsessions and innovations, religious longings and personal grievances, overweening ambitions and just plain hard work that shaped its practice. Let me be clear: in no way am I advocating a return to the pre-Saidian way of writing the history of oriental studies. We do not need more uncritical histories of oriental scholarship – there are *Festschriften* and heroic biographies enough – that deny that orientalism had a politics. We need, instead, a synthetic and critical history, one that assesses oriental scholarship’s contributions to imperialism, racism, and modern anti-Semitism, but one that also shows how modern orientalism has furnished at least some of the tools necessary for constructing the post-imperialist worldviews we cultivate today.¹⁰

That is what this book seeks to offer. It is a critical history of the *practice* of oriental scholarship, one that treats the politics of the field, but does so without presuming that those politics were primordially and perpetually defined by imperialist relationships. It is not a book about “orientalism” in the wider sense of “the image of the Orient” all Germans possessed or the “discourse on the Orient” they purportedly all shared; whether such things existed is something I very much

⁸ See, for example, Bradley L. Herling, *The German Gita: Hermeneutics and Discipline in the German Reception of Indian Thought, 1778–1831* (New York, 2006); Todd Kontje, *German Orientalisms* (Ann Arbor, MI, 2004); Nina Berman, *Orientalismus, Kolonialismus und Moderne; Zum Bild des Orients in der deutschsprachigen Kultur um 1900* (Stuttgart, 1997); Andrea Polaschegg, *Der andere Orientalismus. Regeln deutsch-morgenländischer Imagination im 19. Jahrhundert* (Berlin, 2005), and the older, but still useful, René Gérard, *L’Orient et la pensée romantique allemande* (Nancy, 1963).

⁹ Of course, there are many specialized studies, in addition to those just cited, upon which I draw heavily. To cite just a few: Ludmila Hanisch, *Die Nachfolger der Exegeten: Deutschsprachige Erforschung der Vorderen Orient in der ersten Hälfte des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Wiesbaden, 2003); Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany, NY, 1988); Stephen Vernoit, ed., *Discovering Islamic Art: Scholars, Collectors and Collections, 1850–1950* (London, 2000).

¹⁰ Of course, the multi-cultural worldviews common in European and American academic circles surely still retain Eurocentric elements, as Tomoko Masuzawa has recently demonstrated in *The Invention of World Religions: Or, How European Universalism was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism* (Chicago, IL, 2005).

doubt. Whether or not we could access such an image or discourse by cobbling together statements by a colonial official here and a novelist there is, to me, even more dubious, and I have decided, for theoretical as well as evidentiary reasons, not to try to create such an entity. My evidentiary reasons for rejecting the idea that German “orientalism” was a single, shared discourse are on display throughout the book. But the theoretical underpinnings of my work require a bit of elaboration here, especially as the rest of this book seeks self-consciously not to wear its theory on its sleeves. I do want to make a generally important contribution to European intellectual and cultural history, and my readers should know what sort of contribution to the study of knowledge-making this book purports to be.

Perhaps most provocatively, this book calls into question the widely used method of discourse analysis, at least as it has been applied to the study of European “orientalism.” All too often, it seems to me, those who have followed Said’s lead and adopted the Foucauldian tactic of analyzing only the surfaces of the texts they study end up simply reiterating what we know, namely that people make representations for their own purposes; too rarely do they ask about the *variety* of those purposes, or about the rootedness of those representations in weaker or stronger interpretations of original sources. Too frequently, discourses are identified by selectively assembling lines and phrases from disparate texts, and in the attempt to make power relations paramount, modern commentators are led to pick out metaphors or generalizations that have more to do with our own interests than with the authors’ original ideas. This is not really Foucault’s fault; his primary purpose was to offer a philosophical deconstruction of the identities we have unreflectively assumed, and his work has helped us to gain critical purchase on the institutions, sciences, and thought-structures of both past and present. But the re-elaboration of his philosophical critiques as historical methodology regularly results in tendentious bricolage, and when applied indiscriminately, this method frequently produces distorted and present-oriented pictures of hypostatized entities such as “orientalism.”

When applied to the study of “the Orient” this method is particularly pernicious, delivering a definition of identity which presumes a primordial, binary distinction between “Europe” and “the Orient.” We find ourselves believing that all Europeans – whether women or men, aristocrats or peasants, classicists or orientalists, Czechs or Scots – were actually cognizant of and bound by this reified “discourse,” no matter who these individuals were, what they did or did not know, and what the context was in which their statements were made. Perhaps the distinction between European and Oriental was crucial for some individuals; but where is the proof that this binary distinction *actually* was what mattered most to all or even the majority of nineteenth-century inhabitants of the landmass we are calling “Europe”? Surely at least some Europeans defined themselves by means of other sets of distinctions – male and female, Christian and Jew, academic philologist and on-the-spot diplomat, German and Frenchman?¹¹ When scholars take up the subject of “orientalism,” they seem to forget that many of those they lump together as “Europeans” did not inhabit this identity exclusively, or without

¹¹ Billie Melman’s wonderful *Women’s Orient: English Women and the Middle East, 1718–1918* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1992), suggests the importance of gender for the western travelers’ interpretation of eastern cultures.

discomfort; there were plenty of self-critical Britons, Bavarians, and Hungarians who were worried enough about Europe's own warts – its history of intolerance, its materialism, its erasure of traditions, its tendency to treat others as means to an end – that they emigrated, converted, or risked destroying their own careers, or even lives, by publicizing their grievances. Some lived their lives in borderlands like Sweden, Estonia, or Croatia where they themselves felt “orientalized” – and believed the ultimate “other” sat in Rome, St. Petersburg, or Vienna, not in Istanbul, Cairo, or Dehli. We cannot *start* with the belief that Europeans found the categories “European” and “Oriental” primordial or totalizing and hope to discover how complicated these cultural relationships might really have been.

In what follows, I will show that the variable mix of identities inhabited by even the subgroup of Europeans studied here *did* make for different relationships to Asia and its cultures. Some, of course, did despise “mysterious India” and “decadent Persia,” and thought the West wholly untainted by “oriental” values and vices. But as Brunnhofer suggested, every Christian certainly knew that he or she shared the “Holy Land” and some of their holy scriptures with eastern peoples, and professional students of the Orient were perhaps even more aware than most laypersons that the Orient had been continually linked to Europe from the earliest times. The peoples of the Near East, at least, were known to inhabit places with languages, cultures, and histories, which were both shared and not shared with post-Renaissance Christian Europe – and Central Europeans especially knew that the Ottoman Empire continued to cast a long shadow across the Bosphorus. Even some forms of racial thinking, fleshed out by specialists but widely popularized, were founded upon linkages between East and West, as was the case in speculative reconstructions of “Aryan” and “Semite” origins. It is far too simplistic to say that nineteenth-century Europeans always thought of themselves as a united group, over and against “the oriental other.” In some contexts, the peoples of Asia were rendered “others” – but in other contexts they were treated as kin: relatives, wayward brothers, long-lost fathers, or sons in need of tutelage, but family members, just the same. We need to appreciate the richness and complexity of Europeans' relations with the Orient in order to see just how much imposing that binary distinction distorts our understanding of the lives of “others,” by whom I mean, this time, the eighteenth-, nineteenth-, and early twentieth-century Europeans whose worldviews differed so much from those we now hold.

The foregoing explains why this book focuses on the *practice* of oriental studies in Germany rather than on “the German image of the Orient.” It seems to me that this is an important way, if surely not the only one, of finding what Bradley Herling has called “a third way,” a means to understand orientalism which does not become merely a critique of ideology (à la Said) or a hermeneutical defence of scientific progress.¹² The study of practice is an important way in which historians of science have tried to get beyond the constructionist/progressivist impasse, and it

¹² Bradley Herling has kindly allowed me to cite here his very important methodological mapping of this terrain, “‘Either a Hermeneutical Consciousness or a Critical Consciousness’: Renegotiating Theories of the Germany-India Encounter.” His paper was originally presented at the German Studies Association Conference in Saint Paul in September 2008. Kris Manjappa is also seeking a “third way”; see his “‘Ecumenical Thinking’: Gadamer’s Hermeneutics and the Critique of Post-colonial Theory,” forthcoming in *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 2010.

is an approach early modern intellectual historians have used to good effect; but it has been slow to catch on amongst students of modern ideas. In my case, I focus on the knowledge-making practices of those individuals who counted as “orientalists” in their cultural milieu, namely the men (and they were mostly men) who invested time and effort in actually learning to read and/or speak at least one “oriental” language. This means that it is heavily a book about academics, though it also contains extensive treatments of travelers and diplomats, popularizers and missionaries, pastors and rabbis. These are the people who chose “knowing the Orient” as a career, and they were, after all, the individuals nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German society believed most worthy to write and speak about eastern cultures; even after Imperial Germany entered the colonial race, it was chiefly to them that Germans looked to explain the religious, historical, and cultural significance of Asia, and to understand its complex linguistic, artistic, and ethnographic relationships with Europe. Sometimes they also helped rule or exploit it – and those instances too need careful elaboration. By trying to understand why these individuals wrote or did certain things at certain times I hope to be able to illuminate the ways in which the techniques they pioneered were used to explore new areas or to shore up old prejudices, to advance ambitions, and to undermine conventions, to exploit others or to attempt to liberate them. I am not writing this book to resurrect “orientalism” or to bury it, but out of the profound conviction that we need a critical history of its practice and its practitioners in order to understand our more recent efforts at writing postcolonial and global history as part of a much longer, and much more complicated, trajectory.¹³

For the purposes of this book, then, “orientalism” is defined as a *set of practices*, practices that were bound up with the Central European institutional settings in which the sustained and serious study of the languages, histories, and cultures of Asia took place. Many, but by no means all, of the scholars treated in this book actually did call themselves “orientalists” – some would have described themselves as theologians, classicists, historians, geographers, archaeologists, or art historians. Their designation as such became increasingly conventional as academic specialization drove disciplinary development and increasingly divided those who studied the so-called *Naturvölker* of sub-Saharan Africa, Australasia, and the New World from those who studied *Kulturvölker*, people of high culture, refined spirituality, and (critically) readable ancient texts. Beginning about 1800, further divisions were made, at least in the philosophical faculty, between those who studied Greek and Roman texts and those who studied other ancient texts (there were as yet few academic posts for the study of modern European history or languages). This meant that institutionally speaking, an entity called “orientalism” was created under which virtually all non-classicizing humanists, from

¹³ The general understanding of the origins of postcolonial thought divorces it from older forms of scholarship in ways that make it seem almost a *deus ex machina*, a sudden and entirely salutary development dating to the last decades of the twentieth century. I do not wish to invalidate subaltern criticism, which has contributed so much to the decentering of Europe; nor do I wish to criticize the institutionalization of world history – I am, after all, one of seven authors of a world history textbook (Robert Tignor et al., *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart*, vol. 2, 2nd ed. 2008). On the contrary, I simply want to show that today’s conceptions and preoccupations were foreshadowed, and in some ways, prepared for, by the orientalists of the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. For more on this, see the Epilogue, herein.

Assyriologists to Sinologists, were thrown together, like the diverse animals of a single continent housed in one particular section of a zoo. Societies, journals, and institutes defined themselves as “oriental” often in the same way, meaning, essentially, the study of *Kulturvölker* beyond the classical world. It is this institutionally defined subject position, above all, that holds this book together, rather than an “ism,” a political stance or the intellectual coherence of “*Orientalistik*.” Even so, I should also note that some of those who made important contributions to what by the end of the century began to be called *Orientforschung* continued to identify themselves primarily as theologians, archaeologists, comparative linguists, or even classicists. Practices and subject matter were shared across institutional divisions, perhaps even more than in today’s universities.

Oriental studies in German-speaking Central Europe certainly was different from British and French “orientalism,” for reasons that have to do with Imperial Germany’s late leap into the colonial race, but also with other cultural factors, such as the Austrian Habsburgs’ long and usually “hot” border with the Ottoman Empire, the power of the tradition of Christian Hebraism in German Protestant territories, and the cultural dominance of Germandom’s state-sponsored universities. How different its practices really were from those of others – including not only the French and British, but also the Russians, Dutch, Italians, and Swedes – is something that deserves further comparative study. Here, however, I will argue that the cultural politics of *Orientalistik* were defined much less by “modern” concerns – such as how to communicate with or exert power over the locals – than by traditional, almost primeval, *Christian* questions, such as (1) what parts of the Old Testament are true, and relevant, for Christians? (2) how much did the ancient Israelites owe to the Egyptians, Persians, and Assyrians? (3) where was Eden and what language was spoken there? and (4) were the Jews the only people to receive revelation? The German Reformers’ attempts to clean up God’s Word had involved orientalist knowledge from the first – and indeed sixteenth-century humanists had already struggled with many of the philological and chronological questions that would plague their descendants 300 years later. Although new sources were added, the old ones – particularly the Old Testament, the church fathers, and classical authors – continued to exert a powerful effect on the imaginations of even the most cutting-edge scholars long beyond the Enlightenment.

In addition to cultural factors, numerous a priori points of departure shaped individual perspectives on Asian culture and history: does humankind progress, or is what we see the result of a fall from a more perfect state? Can people borrow and learn from one another peacefully, or are conquest or racial mixing the only way cultures really affect one another? Are humans essentially monotheists, or nature-worshiping animists? Is religion the foundation of stable societies, or an opiate elites use to suborn the masses? It will be my job in this book to appreciate the persistence of such questions, sources, and orientations, while also showing how these were, over the course of the last 200 years, posed in ever more specialized terms, complicated by new evidence, and voiced to an ever-larger public. It will also be my job to show how various forms of racial speculation arose in the course of these debates and how Germany’s quest to bask in imperialist sunshine, after 1884, contributed to, but did not wholly transform, these older debates and traditions.

Thus if this book seeks, in new ways, to provide an answer to a question posed by Edward Said, it is not ultimately a book framed by a Saidian, or an anti-Saidian, theoretical structure, and as grateful to him as I am for putting this highly important field on the map, Said's work will, from this page forward, scarcely be mentioned. To the extent that his framework insisted on a totalizing, global view of European–oriental relations, it simply does not help me understand what the German scholars were actually saying and doing.¹⁴ As I became more and more interested in finding out what German orientalism, as a cultural phenomenon, actually was, I became less and less convinced that it was about European culture “setting itself off against the Orient” or that its leading ideas were informed by the imperial experience.¹⁵ I would certainly agree with Said that European orientalism was enabled by the exerting of imperial authority over the East – how else can we explain the flood of manuscripts, artifacts, and specimens that gave library-bound scholars in the West the ability to claim themselves to be world specialists in medieval Persian poetics or Sanskrit literature?¹⁶ And I would also agree that European orientalism “has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world.”¹⁷ But unlike many of the recent commentators on Europe's “culture of imperialism,” I do not think that all knowledge, orientalist or otherwise, inevitably contributed to the building of empires, or even to the upholding of Eurocentric points of view. In general, I find presumptuous and rather condescending the conception, so common to these readings of cultural history, that all knowledge is power, especially since the prevailing way of understanding this formulation suggests that power is something sinister and oppressive, something exerted against or over others. Of course, knowledge can be used in this way, but knowledge as understanding can also lead to appreciation, dialogue, self-critique, perspectival reorientation, and personal and cultural enrichment. Oriental studies did

¹⁴ Said's rich readings of individual texts sometimes undercut a theory which demands that imperial politics is always *the* structuring element. Like Bernard Porter, I recognize that empire might have been structuring the cultural institutions and mental operations of nineteenth-century actors in ways that have not left traces in their texts, but I am rather dubious about depending on the proverbial “argument from silence,” all too often invoked by those who wish to claim that European culture in this period was completely suffused with dreams or fantasies of empire. See Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society and Culture in Britain* (Oxford, 2004). I agree with Dorothy Figueira that one of the main problems with Said's method is that it imposes a primarily political authorial intention onto texts, “disregarding the testimony of a work's language, reception and character as narrative, poetry, translation, scholarship or artistic performance. By consigning to a secondary position the work of individual artists, a text becomes a commentary on a political situation rather than an expression of the motivations and desires that inspire the individual artist or scholar.” Dorothy Matilda Figueira, *Translating the Orient: The Reception of Sakuntala in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Albany, NY, 1991), p. 5.

¹⁵ Cf. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 3.

¹⁶ We have only to think of the situation the other way round to see this. Imagine hundreds of scholars in Isfahan, Cairo, Tokyo, Calcutta, Beijing, and Istanbul reading, writing, and publishing vast quantities of material about the Germanic tribes, Anglo-Saxons, and Gauls – but almost never doing so in German, English, or French. Imagine the same group of scholars collecting multitudes of medieval European manuscripts, and taking them off to libraries in Baghdad and Shanghai; picture Iranian scholars excavating the castles of the Teutonic knights, while Chinese archaeologists tackled Stonehenge – both groups telling Europeans how the reconstructions should look, and pilfering, buying, or otherwise extracting artifacts to fill the museum basements in Teheran and Beijing to overflowing. Surely the Germans, English, and French would have found this intolerable? On the other hand, one might well ask, would the Russians or the Portuguese have minded?

¹⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 12.

partake of and contribute to the exploitation and “othering” of nonwesterners, to be sure; but it also has led to positive outcomes of the type just listed, and I cannot subscribe to a philosophical stance that suggests that such things do not motivate or characterize the pursuit of knowledge.

Before we leave the theoretical realm, I would like to invoke another series of critical assessments of western orientalism with which I am in rough agreement. This position, first roughed out by the nineteenth-century Indian philosopher Ramohan Roy, but recently restated by Amartya Sen, underlines the West’s tendency, at least since the Enlightenment, to contrast the East’s spirituality or “imaginative irrationality” with western rationality.¹⁸ Characteristic of William Jones’s Indophilia as well as the Indophobia of James Mill, this parceling out of talents, as Sen argues, has led to the undervaluing of India’s materialist and rationalist traditions; the same critique could be applied to discussions of the special talents of the Semites, who have repeatedly been praised for their soulfulness but damned for their failure to create secular institutions or beautiful works of plastic art.¹⁹ As Partha Chatterjee also notes, this division of the western material world (including technology, science, economy, and politics) from the eastern spiritual world reproduced itself in anti-colonial nationalisms, which regularly recommended accepting and imitating the former (seen as culturally inessential) while insisting that cultural core identities lie in the spiritual realm.²⁰ Both those who loved the East, and those who despised it, tended to play down its materiality and even its quotidian forms of existence, a tendency exacerbated in the German scholarly world in which ancient and religious texts remained central to the study of the Orient.

But two important corollaries to this claim have been overlooked. First of all, if European intellectuals tended to spiritualize the East, they also tended to find distasteful material engagements with “others”; nineteenth-century academics in particular evinced little interest in the East’s modern economic, military, or political conditions. To assess or address any of these topics was a job for the journalist, official, or businessman, none of whom had the same sort of cultural respectability as did the academic. That is to say, the intellectual work, which was most closely related to the real practices of colonialism, or pre- or postcolonial exploitation, was something the scholars did not think worth their time or worthy of their training (though some of their students did end up in such jobs, and during the Great War, many credentialed academics did do some of this sort of work). Of course this does not mean that the scholars did not endorse colonial endeavors (most did), but it does mean that they recognized that there were different ways of speaking about the Orient, and that they chose to speak about things of less utility and more permanence rather than about, for example, the price of land in Egypt or how to draw up a contract in China. If they focused on the ancient Orient and its

¹⁸ Bimal Krishna Matilal, “On Dogmas of Orientalism,” in K. K. Das Gupta, P. K. Bhattacharyya, and D. K. Choudhury, eds., *Sraddhanjali: Studies in Ancient Indian History* (Delhi, 1988), pp. 17–18; quotation p. 18. Amartya Sen, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity* (New York, 2005), pp. 139–160.

¹⁹ Kalman P. Bland, *The Artless Jew: Medieval and Modern Affirmations and Denials of the Visual* (Princeton, NJ, 2000); Margaret R. Olin, *The Nation Without Art: Examining Modern Discourses on Jewish Art* (Lincoln, NE, 2001).

²⁰ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments* (Princeton, NJ, 1993), p. 6.