POLOGISTS FOR ISLAM INVITE US TO STUDY the vital role played by the Muslim philosophers of the Middle Ages in the transmission of classical thought. They praise the narrative intricacies of the Thousand and One Nights, the intense metaphysical vision of love conveyed by Hafiz, Rumi, or Omar Khayyam, and the remarkable visual legacy of Islam in architecture and design. Being dutiful Westerners, who “count nothing human alien to ourselves,” we attend to these things, and conclude that Islam has indeed produced one of the greatest civilizations that the world has known, that we have much to learn from it, and that we should be truly grateful.

In my own academic specialism, which is the philosophy of music, I am sensible that there is only one great philosopher who has written a book devoted entirely to the subject, and that is al-Farabi, who was himself a distinguished musician, and whose work is a formidable attempt to reconcile the neo-Platonic theory of cosmic harmony with the modes of early Arab music. Nor—to take another of my interests—is there a Western classic dealing with the moral status of animals that remotely compares with The Case of the Animals Versus Man Before the King of the Jinn, compiled by the “Ikhwan al-Safa”—a brotherhood of philosophers who lived in the fertile crescent in the Middle Ages. The idea of courtly love (from which flowed so much of our medieval literature) entered Europe from Muslim Andalusia, and found its first theological underpinning in the writings of Avicenna, while the dispute between al-Ghazali and Averroës over the nature and limits of philosophical knowledge is as rele-
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But what has happened to that great and disputatious culture? Where, for example, will you find printed copies of the philosophers? In American university libraries, certainly. But my attempts to lay hands on al-Farabi’s book on music—the kitab al-mousiqi al-kabir—have met with failure; the Arabic bookshop in London contains no Avicenna, no al-Ghazali, no Averroës, and the most accessible sources of Arabic philosophy are bilingual editions published in France. As for Hafiz and Rumi, these are familiar in translation. But look for them in their native Iran and you will find only bowdlerized versions. You can travel all over the Muslim world and find only expurgated editions of the Thousand and One Nights. Novelists and poets exist, but almost everywhere under a heavy pressure of censorship. New publications in Egypt must first receive an imprimatur from the Islamic seminary of al-Azhar, and it is a good year that sees 500 titles. There was a revival of Arabic letters in the Lebanon in the later 19th century, and the effect of this is still felt. But Lebanon was, at the time, a predominantly Christian country, flexing its muscles in anticipation of the Ottoman collapse. Check out the state of letters in Khomeini’s Iran, for example, and you will be astonished to discover a country that published its greatest poets in censored fragments, and accorded official credence to The Protocols of the Elders of Zion. True, things have improved since then, and it is reported that 35,000 books were published in Iran last year. Even so, the censors are active, and there is no reason to believe that this sudden revival is appreciated by the mullahs or likely to prompt a return of real Islamic culture.

The same message is conveyed by the newspapers of the Arab world, which seem to be largely indifferent to the literary, philosophical, and artistic traditions of Islamic civilization, referring to them always in a wooden and distant way, as though genuflecting at an unswept shrine before proceeding to the brothel. The impression is of a mass act of cultural suicide, of a kind that has no clear parallel in the history of the West. Of course, there are excellent native scholars of Arabic and Persian culture; but many are to be found in Western universities and those who stayed at home often live on the margins of society.

It is worth dwelling on this for two reasons. First, because it helps us to see the current conflict with Islam in perspective. To call it a “clash of civilizations,” as Samuel Huntington famously did, is to assume that two civilizations exist. But one of the contenders has never turned up on the battlefield. The clash that we witness is between Western secularism and a religion which, because it has lost its self-conscious part, can no longer relate in any stable way to those who disagree with it. The Islamist addiction to suicide bombings should be seen in this light, as the latest manifestation of a collective suicide.

But there is a more important reason to focus on the tragedy of Islamic culture. Close on 30 years ago Edward Said published his seminal book Orientalism, in which he castigated the Western scholars who had studied and commented upon the society, art, and literature of the Middle East. He coined the term “orientalism” to denote the denigrating and patronizing attitude towards Eastern civilizations that he discerned in all Western attempts to portray them. Under Western eyes the East has appeared, according to Said, as a world of wan indolence and vaporous intoxication, without the energy or industry enshrined in Western values, and therefore cut off from the sources of material and intellectual success. It has been portrayed as the “Other,” the opaque reflecting glass in which the Western colonial intruder can see nothing save his own shining face.

Said illustrated his thesis with
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escaped death at the hands of a knife-wielding Islamist in 1994, and is now increasingly censored), or that, having turned its back on Western culture, retreats into “the shade of the Koran,” as recommended by the late Muslim Brotherhood leader, Sayyid Qutb. It is cool and peaceful in the place to which Qutb invites his readers. But it is also dark. And although Qutb has not been censored by the Egyptian authorities, it is relevant to point out that he was hanged, in 1966.

Said’s targets were not merely living scholars like Bernard Lewis who knew the Muslim world and its culture far better than he did. He was attacking a tradition of scholarship which can fairly claim to be one of the real moral achievements of Western civilization. The orientalist scholars of the Enlightenment created or inspired works that have entered the Western patrimony, from Galland’s seminal translation of The Thousand and One Nights of 1717, through Goethe’s West-Östlicher Divan, to FitzGerald’s Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam. Of course this tradition was also an appropriation—a remaking of Islamic material from a Western perspective. But why not acknowledge this as a tribute, rather than a snub? You cannot appropriate the work of others, if you regard them as fundamentally “Other.”

In fact Eastern cultures owe a debt to their Western students. At the moment in the 18th century when ‘Abd al-Wahhab was founding his particularly obnoxious form of Islam in the Arabian peninsula, burning books and beheading “heretics” by way of demonstrating the rightness of his views, Sir William Jones was collecting and translating all that he could find of Persian and Arabic poetry, and preparing to sail to Calcutta, where he was to serve as a judge and to pioneer the study of Indian languages and culture. Wahhabism arrived in India at the same time as Sir William, and began at once to radicalize the Muslims, initiating the cultural suicide that the good judge was doing his best to prevent.

If the orientalists had a fault it was not their patronizing or colonialist attitudes but, on the contrary, their lamentable tendency to “go native” in the manner of Sir Richard Burton and T.E. Lawrence, allowing their love of Islamic culture to displace their perception of the people, to the point where they failed, like Lawrence, to recognize that the people and the culture no longer had much in common. Nevertheless their work remains a striking tribute to the universalism of Western civilization, and has now been vindicated by Robert Irwin, in a book—The Lust for Knowing: The Orientalists and Their Enemies—which shows Said’s Orientalism to be a scandal of pseudo-scholarship comparable to the works of Alasdair Crowley or Madame Blavatsky. Irwin exposes the mistakes, oversights, and downright lies contained in Said’s book and, if it was not obvious before, it is certainly obvious now, that the principal reason for Said’s popularity in our universities is that he provided ammunition against the West.

This is, however, a depressing conclusion to draw. For it seems in general to be true that many of those appointed as the guardians of Western culture will seize on any argument, however flawed, and any scholarship, however phony, in order to denigrate their cultural inheritance. Which makes it seem as though we too are now entering a period of cultural suicide, learning first to despise, and eventually to forget, the outlook that led those noble orientalists to undertake a task that only someone steeped in Western culture would dream of—the task of rescuing a culture other than their own.

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