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No Special Pleading: Abolitionism, Orientalism, and Identity Politics

Demir Barlas

Introduction

American abolitionists during the nineteenth century invoked slavery in the Ottoman Empire as a means by which to criticize American slavery. In the resulting comparison of slaveholding powers, America did not come off well. Abolitionists mercilessly, and, this essay suggests, ironically, described slavery in the Orient as less oppressive than slavery in the West. This aspect of American abolitionist discourse is significant because, according to Edward Said, any suitably large body of Western discourse that describes the East should be orientalist; that is, it should exist for the purpose of essentializing the East as a means of preparation for military, material, and moral domination by the West. Given that Said's work *Orientalism* portrays itself as a valid descriptor of all Eastern-facing discourse from the late seventh century onwards, it is instructive to see how the great theoretical progenitor of post-colonial studies fails in being able to account for the conceptual relationship between abolitionists and (Ottoman) Islam.

The American colonies had inherited Christianity and were as such theologically hostile to Islam. Add to this the Barbary Wars that began in 1801, and the fact that the United States was engaged in a discursive and material struggle against Muslims since almost the founding of the nation. In light of these political and theological facts, it is natural to expect American discourse of this period to turn up orientalist tendencies.

Abolitionist archives instead reveal a complex, respectful, and moving engagement with Islam that serve to complicate generalizations about a universal orientalist discourse serving always to denigrate the Muslim and exalt the Westerner. Moreover, the discourse reveals the ways in which enfranchised Americans subjected their own country to harsh, sometimes essentialist criticism of the kind that some scholars believe has flowed only from the West to the East. American abolitionists were single-minded in their opposition to American slavery, and compared American and Turkish slavery as an instrument to condemn the former institution, not primarily to praise the latter. Nonetheless, the abolitionist archives problematize orientalism as a category, lend much-

needed nuance to America's historically dominant anti-Islamic discourse, and defy claims about America being an exceptional, superior nation.

The Turkish Other: A Superior Self

Abolitionism in the American context began before independence and was given strong voice by John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, who witnessed slavery firsthand during his tenure as a parish priest in Georgia. "You have seen their remains delivered to the deep. . . . You have carried the survivors into the vilest slavery," thundered the reformer in his *Thoughts Upon Slavery* (21). Wesley believed that American slavery was more pernicious than Muslim slavery. "Such slavery as is not found among the Turks in Algiers" (21).

This was one instance of a trope that appeared repeatedly in American abolitionist literature. "When did a Turk or heathen find it necessary to use a fellow creature thus?" Julius Rubens Ames asked in 1837 (213). In 1835, Charles Stuart favored the Turkish slaveholder in comparison to the American because, since Christians possessed the guide of the Gospel, their sin was magnified: "A Bible is more guilty than Koran land" (25). Or, as Edward Strutt Abdy expressed it, Turks "have a better excuse for slavery than we have. They find in the Koran what we seek in the colour" (26). Abdy went on to repudiate his slaveholding compatriots' belief in the divine sanction of color prejudice [out of which comes the especially vicious form of American slavery], which he said "places the Christians of North America, far in the scale of rational being, below the Mohammedans of Turkey, who are so totally unacquainted with this phantasy" (26).

Lest it seem that abolitionists were finding America lacking merely in the application of true Christianity, and on this basis alone finding the Muslims superior, remember that William Garrison Lloyd secularized American oppression by invoking politics: "American tyranny…is much more inexcusable than Turkish" (145). This is a remarkably helpful comment, as it illustrates the way in which the single-issue commitments of abolitionism grew to touch every aspect of the American polity. The single issue of slavery was a gateway to manifold issues of subjectivity, politics, and coercion. In this limited and idiosyncratic sense, abolitionism was what philosopher Daniel Dennett calls a *universal acid*: an idea that eats through other ideas (63).

In an early eighteenth century tract, Elihu Coleman expanded, in greater detail and in a religious comparison that once more slighted Christians, the same sentiment as Wesley's:

> Now although the Turks make slaves of those they can catch, that are not of their religion, yet (as history relates) as soon as any embraces the Mahometan religion, they are no longer kept slaves, but are quickly set free, and for the most part put to some place of preferment…Now, if many among those called Christians, would but consider how far they fall short of the Turks in this particular, it would be well; for they tell the negroes that they must believe in Christ, and receive the christian [sic] faith, and that they must receive the Sacrament, and be baptized, and so they do; but they still keep them slaves for all this. (18)

Expanding upon this comparison, Stuart also compared Turks favorably to the British: "The Turks, generally speaking, are better slavemasters than the British are" (13). Stuart also used the Turk to contradict American slaveholders' argument that they loved their slaves. Stuart asked his readers to imagine their reaction to a Turkish slave master making that argument: "Who could think that a Turk loved him [the slave] as himself, if he persisted in keeping him and his wife, and children, in forced bondage?" (19).

In addition to these general and philosophical uses of Turks and Muslims, abolitionists made specific points of comparison between America and Turkey—in Turkey's favor. In 1834, Prudence Crandall argued before the Supreme Court as follows: "It was admitted, by the Court below, that the right of education is a fundamental right; and will it be questioned here? The Pope of Rome and the despots of Turkey may do it, but it will not be done in Connecticut" (12).

Enumerating a list of countries (including Turkey) that had abolished or were abolishing slavery, the Kansan preacher Joseph Edwin Roy concluded, "To us alone belongs the hateful championship" (31). In the same 1856 sermon, Roy went further in emphasizing Turkey's relative advantage in liberty: "A missionary has just written from Turkey, where he says he is more free to publish the gospel than he would be in half of the United States" (32).

Another 1856 sermon, preached by Theodore Parker in Boston, coincidentally made much the same point as Roy's about religious freedom: "it is a little striking to see, that, just at the time when Turkey offered freedom of religion to the Christians and all others, California was doubting whether she should allow the Chinese to set up a temple to Buddha" (12). The consensus abolitionist view about comparative oppression was expressed by Rufus Wheelwright Clark in 1850: "Our laws upon this point [i.e., the legal

qualification of slaves as property] are even more severe than those of the Turks at the present day" (30).

Nor did the fact of being citizens of a nominally democratic country prejudice the abolitionists against Turkey's monarchical nature. On the contrary, abolitionists were disposed to think of slaveholding America as a nation of petty pretenders. "To exercise political power . . . is but another name for aggression, no matter whether it be done by one despot or a confederation of despots," said the abolitionist James Brown in 1841 (26).

Sometimes abolitionists are almost fulsome in their praise, with John Bailey Adger writing, "in Turkey the fullest toleration of Christianity is the established policy of government," at a time when Christians, particularly of the lower classes, faced undeniable hardships in the Ottoman Empire (14). The scholar Bat Ye'or calls special attention to *dhimmitude*, or the institutionalized second-class citizenship conferred by Islamic theology on non-Muslim residents of the Ottoman state, and even Ottoman-friendly scholars such as Donald Quataert are forced to acknowledge the widespread massacres of Ottoman Christians by the Ottoman state.[1]

The very fact that so many comparisons with Turkey were made indicates how the Ottoman Empire, and the Islam that it represented for the West, could be drawn upon as an ontological equal, and often as a practical superior. Islam and Turkey are not universally lauded in the abolitionist literature, particularly in the aftermath of the Greco-Turkish War, and none of the abolitionists were Muslims themselves. Yet they were willing to give Islam and Turkey its due for a comparatively more decent treatment of slaves that was all the more remarkable given the fact that it took place in "Koran land." It is impossible to forget, after all, that the Qur'an does not abolish slavery, but rather seeks to soften and regulate it.

Some abolitionists moved well past such cross-religious judgments. As in the work of the abolitionist Charles Stuart, Turkey became more than just a point of comparison. It took on the status of subject, not object, as readers are asked to think of and through Turks, who are thus coded as a better self. Moving up to the state level, abolitionists were not afraid to judge their country and its laws against Turkey; they were not afraid to find America deficient.

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[1] See Bat Ye'or and David Maisel, *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians Under Islam;* Bat Ye'or, *The Decline of Eastern Christianity: From Jihad to Dhimmitude;* Bat Ye'or, Miriam Kochan, and David Littman, *Islam and Dhimmitude: Where Civilizations Collide* and Donald Quataert *The Ottoman Empire, 1700-1922.*

In the aftermath of *Orientalism*, though, there is a decided fear of engaging in the same kind of openness when the subject is Islam. Thus the scholar Ehud Toledano, considering the practice of slavery in the Ottoman Empire, refuses to find it repugnant: "'We should not fall into the fallacy of imagining the Other . . . as lacking the human sentiment of abolitionism . . . and hence to being fundamentally deficient" (128). And Toledano discounts the validity of American abolitionists' criticism of other slaveholding countries on account of their residence in the same country as Thomas Jefferson, a famous slaveowner. Reading closely, however, there is reason to find something fundamentally deficient in the Ottoman attitude to slavery as well as in the attitude of those scholars and onlookers who are disinclined to look too closely at the Islamic world's record on slavery. As Toledano writes, "The scholarly study of slavery in Ottoman society—and in Muslim societies as a whole—is characterized by a deafening silence" (135). The fact that Toledano does not draw any conclusions from this observation is because of what he cites as a "disinclination to investigate potentially conflictual and divisive topics across a cultural divide" (158).

This disinclination to quarrel and compare was faced by the abolitionists as well, the difference being that they overcame it in the interests of their cause. There was, at the time, no more volatile and divisive topic than slavery, yet abolitionists took the field and expressed their condemnation in robust, vivid language that was unafraid to identify the "fundamentally deficient" in America and abroad. Abolitionists were not afraid to hurt slaveholders' feelings; they came to realize they were engaged in revolution. John Brown, the violent abolitionist whose attempt to liberate slaves precipitated the Civil War, exemplified this.

Finally, it is impossible to adopt the belief that *all* knowledge about the Orient served the interests of orientalism *qua* the will to dominate. As we have seen, plenty of abolitionist knowledge about Turkey and Islam was remarkably generous, and sometimes evangelistically apologetic, regarding its subject. A survey of the abolitionist archives does not code Turkey and Islam as weak or inferior but, rather, as strong and superior, even at a time when the Ottoman Empire had elsewhere been coded as the Sick Man of Europe. It is also enough of an anomaly to fatally jeopardize *Orientalism's* argument that all Eastern-facing discourse was designed to affirm the West at the expense of the East. The abolitionist literature unequivocally shows the opposite: a discourse that affirmed the East at the expense of the West.

Exceptionalism and Exclusionism

1831 was an important year in the formation of the dominant American self-image. It was the year that Alexis De Tocqueville invented the trope of American exceptionalism (42). Less famously, in the same year, Theodore Sedgwick delivered a lecture in Stockbridge, Massachusetts in which he said: "There is no more ordinary disposition in human nature than that of ascribing intellectual superiority to the race, cast, color, or nation, to which we belong" (6). There was, in other words, nothing objectively exceptional about exceptionalism; it was merely a common, but pernicious, frame of mind that had to be overcome in order to subscribe to the principle of abolitionism. An acute expression of this sentiment came from Theodore Dwight Weld:

> If those persons are their fellow citizens; if they are in the same class of society with themselves; of the same language, creed, and color; similar in their habits, pursuits, and sympathies; they will keenly feel any wrong done to them, and denounce it as base, outrageous treatment; but let the same wrongs be done to persons of a condition in all respects the reverse, persons whom they habitually despise, and regard only in the light of mere conveniences, to be used for their pleasure, and the idea that such treatment is barbarous will be laughed at as ridiculous. (122-123)

Questioning hitherto ironclad assumptions about white, Christian, American, and male dominance led the abolitionists to take a dim view of this dominant layer of their country's society. A sense of ineradicable shame on behalf of their country colored much of the discourse, including this succinct question found in Gerrit Smith's letter to U.S. Senator Henry Clay: "What will other countries and coming ages think of the politics of our statesmen and the ethics of our divines?" (16). Or, as another abolitionist put it more bluntly, "We are ashamed of our country. The blush is on our cheek. We cannot stand up before the world" (*Third Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society* 10).

Exceptionalism does not, of course, exist in a vacuum. The discourse has historically been deployed to give America the high ground in matters of public and private diplomacy, war and peace. It is the discourse that legitimizes invasions, coups, and other violent and illegal interventions in the affairs of other peoples. In this sense, exceptionalism is a kind of orientalism; it is used for precisely the same hegemonic purposes and its "knowledge" is generated in the same ways that Said claims for classic European imperialism.

Abolition offered a robust counter-narrative to the political aims and outcomes of exceptionalism. Consider this anonymous poem quoted by Edward Josiah Fuller in his April 7, 1836 sermon to the Calvinistic Church and Society in Hardwick, Massachusetts:

> And shall we scoff at Europe's kings,
> When freedom's fire is dim with us,
> And round our country's alter clings,
> The damning shade of slavery's curse? . . .
> Go—let us ask of Constantine,
> To loose his grasp on Poland's throat;
> And beg the lord of Mahmoud's line,
> To spare the struggling Suliote.
> Will not the scorching answer
> From turban'd Turk and fiery Russ,
> Go—*loose your fettered slave at home*!
> Then turn and ask the like of us. (14)

This is a fascinating poem in that, despite producing what Said would call oriental knowledge, it deliberately reconfigures such knowledge as *speaking against* the occident, not the orient. Moreover, it does so in a way that codes the "turban'd Turk and fiery Russ" as occupying the moral high ground, thus sabotaging any discourse of American exceptionalism that could be used to justify American slavery.

Surely such discourse, whose purpose was to employ the East to attack the West, cannot be made to fit into the same space as discourse whose purpose is to prepare the way for the West's invasion and colonization of the East. To characterize both of these modes as orientalism, in Said's sense, is clearly to explode the significance of the term, because it cannot simultaneously be for and against the East, *and* it cannot simultaneously treat the East as superior *and* inferior. If so, *orientalism* becomes meaningless as a descriptive term, and even formally loses the significance Said claims for it.

In none of this do I deny the existence of an actually pernicious, and actively hostile, discourse of true orientalism. Said, though, is not content with isolating and calling attention to this trend within orientalist discourse. He insists that the entire body of Eastern-facing Western knowledge is tainted in the same way. In taking issue with this claim, I do not wish to elide or minimize the existence of orientalism proper; Said has done a magisterial job of bringing much of it to light, so this essay need not be concerned with it. I am merely doing the necessary work of whittling down *Orientalism's* universal pretensions.

Weld, Sedgwick, Smith, and other abolitionists were keenly aware of how subjective affiliations like race generate purportedly objective discourse. This is the same fundamental insight into the relationship of power and knowledge later articulated by Said. Where the thinkers diverge is in their engagement with identity, agency, and implication. Said believes that it is impossible for the Western observer to situate herself outside the orientalist episteme: even the well-meaning outsider remains an orientalist. It is a fact of being, like skin color. Abolitionists, on the other hand, believed in the possibility of, and actively worked towards, achieving a different kind of knowledge about slavery. For abolitionists this knowledge emerged from personal choice: abolitionist literature repeatedly suggested that those individuals who disavowed the power that came with slave ownership would become epistemologically open to the arguments of abolitionism.

On the basis of Said's argument, the abolitionist, too, stands condemned, unable, despite good intentions and good actions, to remove herself from the power structures of America. After all, the abolitionist is not behind the whip, is not the colonized; thus, according to the doctrinaire interpretation of identity politics, s/he is tainted and unable to speak for or about the oppressed without becoming further implicated in oppression.

What room is left in *Orientalism*, and in other radical identity politics, for the contrition and cooperation of the privileged white subject? The question ought to be taken up after the following excerpt from the American Anti-Slavery Society's 1854 description of the English abolitionist movement:

> It was an Anti-Slavery Society and neither a Christian nor an Anti-Christian, a believing nor an unbelieving, a Jewish, Pagan nor Turkish institution—leaving every member of the Society to advocate the grand Anti-Slavery principle in just such way, and by just such arguments, as he might think best and most effective. (141)

The pursuit of basic human equality led in this case to the formation of a society of equals specifically described as such. The English abolitionists, and their American counterparts, thus took a hopeful view of politics in which cause outweighs identity. In *Orientalism*, by contrast, identity outweighs cause. Only people with particular insider identities can write particular histories; everyone else is tainted as a *de facto* hostile and unreliable outsider.

The taint is not because, as in the abolitionist discourse, the white man is on the wrong side of a specific cause that he has the power to accept or reject;

the taint is intrinsic and cannot be shed; and all the information that comes from it is tainted. As Said writes, "All academic knowledge about India and Egypt is somehow tinged and impressed with, violated by, the gross political fact" of imperialism (11).

One of the lamentable outcomes of this view is that it presupposes, and therefore engenders, a zero-sum view of inter-group relations dominated by enmity and devoid of the possibilities of discourse or dialectic. It is also epistemologically crude, unable to make a distinction between, say, the abolitionist John Brown and a slaveship captain. Both, after all, are tainted by the gross political fact of being occidentals.

Abolitionism speaks eloquently against all kinds of identity-based thinking that elide the common character and pride of humanity. As it turns out, though, the discourse has been employed primarily to subvert the racist politics of white Americans; however, as demonstrated, another reading can easily deploy the discourse against racist politics generally, regardless of their point of racial origin.

Abolitionist groups and discourse were in practice and principle open to all who advocated the "grand Anti-Slavery principle." This was the foundation of an unshakeable moral and epistemic principle that the abolitionists shared with Al-Ghazali, the most prominent of Muslim scholars, who wrote:

> The intelligent man, therefore, first knows the truth, then he considers what is actually said by someone. If it is true, he accepts it, whether the speaker be wrong or right in other matters. Indeed, such a man will often be intent on extracting what is true from the involved utterances of the erring, since he is aware that gold is usually found mixed with dirt. (68)

In *Orientalism*, the dirt of skin color and national affiliation outweighs the gold of scholarship or even goodwill. How lamentable that, despite the advice of Al-Ghazali and abolitionists alike, there remain so many who know the truth by the speaker, not the speaker by the truth.

Limits on Discourse

Should the entire subject of Arab and later Ottoman slavery be smoothed over, as Toledano suggests it should, because sensibility of identity outweighs truth of cause? Is there any political reality to be struggled over at all, or just

a welter of identity interests? If so, there is no cross cultural community at all. There is no East in the sense that Said invokes it; for, once identity credentials serve to limit discourse, no one can speak about anyone else's history, religion, or politics. There can be no discourse at all, only solipsistic, self-representational, and self-affirmative discourse. And, irony of ironies, the kind of knowledge ultimately generated by *Orientalism* becomes precisely that which Said ascribes to the orientalist: "an overall campaign of self-affirmation" (Al-Ghazali 68).

It may be that meaningful change of any kind is impossible unless self-affirmation is first dethroned and replaced by political principle and truth-telling. This is what the abolitionists succeeded in doing for America: they shamed it. At no point did they accept that the slaveholder should be treated as Said suggests the Orient should be treated: "for purposes of co-existence and enlargement of horizons" (Al-Ghazali 68).

As Wilson Armistead concludes, "Human nature works out the same in slaveholders just as it does in other men, and in American slaveholders just as in English, French, Turkish, Algerine, Roman, and Grecian" (4). Or, in the words of Abdy, "the human heart, no matter what its covering, throbs everywhere with the same desires and glows in all with the same passions" (41). If so, there is no reason to approach every nation and identity grouping with special rules of engagement, but rather to apply the same standards to all, as did the abolitionists themselves.

As Sedgwick and Weld note, there is no more natural instinct than to want to defend the in-group in which one finds oneself. But at what cost? The abolitionists felt that, in the case of a slaveholding America, it was at the price of one's very humanity that could not be dissociated from one's American pride. Slavery should not be tolerated, even if the penalty is that one feels less affirmed about oneself as a white American Christian, or even if one is lynched.

In the abolitionist literature, the reality of self-debasement (acknowledging the "hateful championship") was better than the self-affirming delusion of wickedness. It is not always imperative to feel good about yourself and the identity affiliations you claim; it is important, rather, to be on the side of the truth, regardless of who your fellow travelers then become, and how you feel about yourself. Still, we continue to live in a moment in which the identity-based friend-foe distinction outweighs the idea of political and human principle that might overcome individual differences.

The problem is that, once principle is replaced by identity, the door is more open to conflict. What Said considered an identity-based "enlargement of

horizons" ironically ends up being a *constraining* of horizons. That is because to fight over identity is to fight endlessly, since identity conflict is incommensurable, irreconcilable, and, according to Al-Ghazali, irrational: "These are wronged persons in whose hearts rancor is hidden like a secret malady: then, when the suggestions of the liars stimulate it, its fires flare up in their hearts and they submit to the acceptance of every absurdity out of a longing to attain their vengeance and to redress their affairs" (166). Al-Ghazali's wide-ranging inquiry and spirit of freedom allowed him to forge a personal creed and philosophy and to cast off what he calls "servile conformism;" a conformism that, even in trying to escape the influence of the occidental other, the postcolonial subject still enters via the back door of identity politics (53).

In the confrontational moment embraced by postcolonial subjects, solidarity is absolute and rejection of the political foe is total. There is no room for a quest like Al-Ghazali's, one in which the subject can traverse friend-foe boundaries in the search for truth. *Orientalism*, while it purports to speak of new horizons, is actually a limiting discourse that puts the postcolonial subject on a footing of eternal suspicion and hostility against all knowledge produced in the West while eager to produce only flattering discourse about the East. The discursive stance of abolitionism offers a welcome counterexample.

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