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Introduction

The field of image studies along with the related field of identity & alterity studies, is undeniably booming. Since the end of the Cold War we are witnessing around the globe a reinvigoration of the quest for 'authenticity' and cultural defense. Logically, this results not only in new identifications and identities, but also in 'alterations' and alterities. It is becoming customary to use the term occidentalism in various ways to refer to one such alterity that frames the West as an Other.[1] This paper is concerned with such occidentalism in contemporary Egypt, and employs a textual approach focussing on non-fictional literature.[2]

Studies of images of the West, or Occidentalism, are far fewer than studies of images of the East, Orientalism. Ironically, this probably has to do with a eurocentric (or west-centric) tendency in Western academia. The irony lies in the fact that many of the studies into Western images of the East tend to criticise these Western images for being eurocentric. Yet when looking at the sheer mass of publications on Western images –when compared to the modest number of studies into non-Western images – we must conclude that also in this field of image studies, there is a certain preference for studying a Western actor, rather than a non-Western actor. Therefore one could argue that the plethora of studies of Western images of the Orient and its constituents, when compared to the infant status of the study of occidentalism, betrays an ironic eurocentrism, reminding those of us engaged in the study of occidentalism, of the ease with which we tend to forget the subjectivity of our position.

Partly because of the relative novelty of studying images of the West, the term 'occidentalism' has not yet been given a fixed and generally accepted meaning. Some have meant it to convey the meaning of Westerners' preconceptions of what is Western,[3] while others have used it to denote an ideology of anti-Western hatred.[4] Yet, the publication in which occidentalism is used most elegantly and in a most promising manner, is Chen Xiaomei's (1995, 2002). Xiaomei shows us how images of the West played a role in the wider political and cultural struggle in China after the rule of chairman Mao. While the state

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[1] E.g. Buruma & Margalit 2004; Fazlhashemi 2005; Xiaomei 2002; Carrier (ed.) 1995.
[2] Images of the West in Arabic fictional literature have been researched numerous times. See for the most recent such study Rasheed El-Enany 2006.
[3] Carrier 1995.
[4] Buruma & Margalit 2004. For a highly original and equally damning critique of this use, see Bilgrami 2006, pp.381-411.

media furnished the public with an image of Western culture characterized by exploitation, cruelty and general misery, independent media actors started to idealize life in the West. Xiaomei makes it clear that the most important objective of both parties is not to inform people about the West, but rather to illustrate and shape a political position. In other words, the images serve a certain purpose, and it is this purpose that drives the choice and coloration of the image.

Muhammad 'Abduh

With this idea of a purpose to occidentalisms in mind, let us turn to Egypt for an example. In the following quote we read how the Islamic modernist Muhammad 'Abduh (d.1905) traces the origins of European domination in the epoch of the Crusades:

> "[The Westerners] left for the Muslim countries and were agitated by their religious fervour; they conquered a great number of Muslim states. The devastating wars eventually ended with their departure. Why did they come [to us] and what did they take with them when they left?
>
> The religious leaders had succeeded in agitating their peoples, seeking to destroy peoples of the Orient [..] and to extend their power over the lands of the Muslims whom they believed they had the right to dominate. [..] Yet many of [the Westerners] settled down in the Muslim lands [..] and their spirits calmed down, and they started to observe the lives of those around them, listening to their opinions, and they became part of what they saw and heard. And it became clear to the Westerners that their exaggerations [..] did not live up to reality. Later they found that this religion (Islam, RW) combines perfectly with liberty, justice, science and art, they discovered that the freedom of thought and the pursuit of science are auxiliaries to the faith, and not its adversaries. [..] From these times onwards, ideas started to change, the wish to learn started to grow, and the desire to break the chains of tradition awoke inside them."[5]

In this small discussion of the Crusader episode, there is much of relevance to our study of occidentalism. 'Abduh suggests that Westerners, before they came into contact with Islam, were uncivilized, hatemongering fanatics. Only when they got into contact with the refined culture of Islam, did their minds open to freedom, science and arts. Here, Abduh essentially presents Western civilization as a civilization that was spawned by Islam: one could call this an appropriation of the West. Such an appropriation serves a purpose. By constructing this image of the West Abduh clears the way for Muslims to freely adopt and

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[5] 'Abduh 1953, pp.193-4.

adapt from the West. In a way, by locating the origin of Western civilization in Islam, 'Abduh makes the West *halal*. This effect of 'Abduh's construction of the West is clearly related to 'Abduh's modernizing project for Islam and Egypt, a project in which 'Abduh never shied away from using European examples. This occidentalism (an appropriation of the West) then clearly performs a discursive function in 'Abduh's modernist ideology.

Egypt: the Islamist angle

Elsewhere I have noted how in Egypt various ideological backgrounds co-determine the image of the West as can be glanced in the writings of three intellectuals in particular: the liberal journalist Rida Hilal, the marxist economist Galal Amin and lastly, the Islamist affiliated to Al-Azhar, Muhammad 'Imara.[6] It should be clear then that there are multiple images of the West. Yet my experience of skimming the bookshops and libraries of Cairo has taught me that Arabic books that specifically concern (relations with) the West are far more often than not, written from an Islamist point of view. For that reason the rest of this paper will be concerned with occidentalisms as presented from this angle.

In the ubiquitous writings of the aforementioned Muhammad 'Imara, we find images of the West that appear carefully crafted to play the role of mirror image of a noble Islamic Self. The West is presented as an invidious civilization characterized most by its naturally oppressive and exploitative nature, squarely opposed to what is presented as the liberating truthfulness of Islamic civilization.[7] This culturalist and essentialist approach to imaging the West can be found among many other Islamist authors. E.g. Zaynab 'Abd al-'Aziz in *Mawqif al-gharb min al-Islam* perceives an a-historical Western hatred for Islam, that has existed since the beginning of Islam.[8] The same book is exemplary of the alarmist discourse employed in many of the Islamist discussions of contemporary Western culture, witness the jacket blurb:

> "We live in times when the truth is no longer hidden. We see now that there is not only a struggle between Islam and the West, but also that this is a struggle of religious fanaticism. To understand this, it will be enough for us to see Western extremism at work in its position towards Israel, the suffering of Palestinians, the

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[6] Woltering 2007.
[7] Ibid. Sources in which this image of the West can be found include 'Imara 2004a; 2004b.
[8] 'Abd al-'Aziz 2003, p.51.

concocted Gulf War, and the War of annihilation against Muslims, which has already started in Bosnia."[9]

Apart from the dramatic style of the text, it is remarkable to see how Bosnia features in this litany of Western misdeeds against Islam. In the Egyptian media in general and in Islamist circles in particular it is not uncommon for the war in former Yugoslavia to be presented as a *Western* attack on Islam/Bosnians.[10] The hostility between NATO and the Serbian aggressor is often simply forgotten or suitably ignored, in order to be able to sound the alarmbells over the Western onslaught. This suggests an eagerness on the part of Islamic authors to see signs of Islam being treated unfairly. We can see such eagerness in the following complaint of the aforementioned author, in relation to her discussion of the Vatican document Nostra Aetate (document on the relations with non-Christians), on which she writes: "It is remarkable that [the mentioning] of Islam comes, by way of order, [only] after [the mentionings] of the Hindu and the Buddhist beliefs. ..". So 'Abd al-'Aziz expresses her dismay at her discovery that the Catholic clergy sees fit to discuss Islam only after it has discussed Hinduism and Buddhism. She expresses her disappointment and a sense of not being taken seriously. Yet when we have a closer look at the document in question, we see that Nostra Aetate does not discuss religions in order of their decreasing importance, but rather in order of their increasing importance to Vatican history: a proper reading of Nostra Aetate shows Islam being treated as the Vatican's secondmost important religious Other, coming only after Judaism. As a concluding statement on occidentalism in the work of 'Abd al-'Aziz we can say that she clearly seeks to present the West as a danger to Islam in such a way as to induce fear, anger and Islamic solidarity in her readership.

'Abd al-'Aziz represents the rather less intellectual of Islamist publicists. Yet also a more systematic thinker such as Tariq al-Bishri adheres to the notion of the West and Islam being one another's opposite. In his *al-Hiwar bayna al-islam wa al-'ilmaniyya* Al-Bishri defines the West and Islam as systems, the difference being that Islam is based on the acknowledgement of God, while the Western system is based on material, wordly principles.[11] This is of course the well-known romantic idea of Oriental spirituality versus Western materialism. While Al-Bishri does not argue that the two systems must necessarily clash, he does see a conflict in principle, as is clear from his explanation for Islamic religious revivalism and extremism. According to Al-Bishri the Islamic revival was a reaction to a crisis of authenticity, brought about by Westernization. The extreme version of this Islamist activism should then be attributed to an extreme Westernization, much like Newton's

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[9] Ibid, jacket.
[10] E.g. 'Imara, 2004. p.13; Fahmy Huwaydi 1993.
[11] al-Bishri 2005a, p. 32.

Third Law of action and reaction: "Thus the estabishment of the Islamist movement was a result of the onslaught of westernization, and one can say that the extremism of westernization has given birth to the religious extremism".[12]

As has been mentioned above, most of the contemporary publications concerning the West are written from an Islamist point of view. Liberals are more likely to discuss specific policies of America or the European Union rather than an amorphic West.[13] Also leftist circles tend not to refer to the West as much as to globalization. This means that the Islamist trend is the dominant trend in shaping the debates on identity, culture and civilization, which have emerged after the end of the Cold War. Indeed, the Islamists are ideally placed for this debate, since they have always been thinking of the West in terms of culture, rather than in terms of an economic system.

This begs the question as to whether occidentalism in the Arab world today is generally as alarmist and dismissive as the abovementioned samples suggest. To a large extent this is a question of terminology. The term *al-gharb* ('the West') is more often used in relation to danger, oppression, exploitation etc., while *Urubba* (Europe) is often associated with exemplary political integration.[14] It would therefore be misleading only to read up on media articles and books with titles such as "Islam and the West", since 'the West' is also present in texts which refer to Germany, England or Canada, rather than to 'the West'. Moreover, the West is being shaped and understood outside written context altogether: 'the West' is also experienced in fastfood chains and cinemas showing Hollywood movies, etc. For anyone who has been to Egypt it will be clear that the public sphere is much more influenced by Western cultures than can be said reversely. Consequently one should take this into account when studying occidentalism in texts.

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[12] al-Bishri 2005b, p. 44 (the chapter from which this quote is taken, entitled *sayabqa al-ghuluww ma baqiya al-taghrib*, was originally published in 1982).
[13] E.g. the works of Rida Hilal, Sayyid Yassin.
[14] E.g. Hasan Nafi, *Al-Ittihad al-urubbi wa al-durus al-mustafada 'arabiyyan* (2004); Ibrahim Nafi, *Madha yagri fi sharq urubba?* (2001). These publications both discuss European integration in order for the Arab world to profit from its experience. Arab images of Europe are the topic of my chapter entitled 'Arab Windows' in an edited volume by Michael Wintle (forthcoming).

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