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EDWARD SAID: ON 'ORIENTALISM'

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On 'Orientalism'

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Featuring an interview with **Edward Said** Professor, Columbia University and author of *Orientalism*

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INTRODUCTION

[Montage of entertainment and news images]

SUT JHALLY: When future scholars take a look back at the intellectual history of the last quarter of the twentieth century the work of Professor Edward Said of Columbia University will be identified as very important and influential. In particular Said's 1978 book, *Orientalism*, will be regarded as profoundly significant. *Orientalism* revolutionized the study of the Middle East and helped to create and shape entire new fields of study such as Post-Colonial theory as well influencing disciplines as diverse as English, History, Anthropology, Political Science and Cultural Studies. The book is now being translated into twenty-six languages and is required reading at many universities and colleges. It is also one of the most controversial scholarly books of the last thirty years sparking intense debate and disagreement. *Orientalism* tries to answer the question of why, when we think of the Middle East for example, we have a preconceived notion of what kind of people live there, what they believe, how they act. Even though we may never have been there, or indeed even met anyone from there. More generally *Orientalism* asks, how do we come to understand people, strangers, who look different to us by virtue of the color of their skin?

The central argument of *Orientalism* is that the way that we acquire this knowledge is not innocent or objective but the end result of a process that reflects certain interests. That is, it is highly motivated. Specifically Said argues that the way the West, Europe and the U.S. looks at the countries and peoples of the Middle East is through a lens that distorts the actual reality of those places and those people. He calls this lens through which we view that part of the world *Orientalism*, a framework that we use to understand the unfamiliar and the strange; to make the peoples of the Middle East appear different and threatening.

Professor Said's contribution to how we understand this general process of what we could call stereotyping has been immense. The aim of this program is to explore these issues through an interview with him. He starts by discussing the context within which he conceived *Orientalism*.

EDWARD SAID: My interest in *Orientalism* began for two reasons, one it was an immediate thing, that is to say, the Arab-Israeli War of 1973, which had been preceded by a lot of images and discussions in the media in the popular press about how the Arabs are cowardly and they don't know how to fight and they are always going to be beaten because they are not modern. And then everybody was very surprised when the Egyptian army crossed the canal in early October of 1973 and demonstrated that like anybody else they could fight. That was one immediate impulse.

And the second one, which has a much longer history in my own life was the constant sort of disparity I felt between what my experience of being an Arab was, and the representations of that that one saw in art. I'm talking about very great artists, you know,

like Delacroix and Ang and Gerome and people like that, novelists who wrote about the Orient like Disraeli or Flaubert and you know the fact that those representations of the Orient had very little to do with what I knew about my own background in life. So I decided to write the history of that.

THE REPERTORY OF ORIENTALISM

EDWARD SAID: If somebody, let's say in the 1850's or 1860's in Paris or London, wished to talk about or read about India or Egypt or Syria, there would be very little chance for that person to simply address the subject, as we like to think in a kind of free and creative way. A great deal of writing had gone before and this writing was an organized form of writing, like an organized science. What I've called Orientalism. And it seemed to me that there was a kind of repertory of images that kept coming up: The sensual woman who is there to be sort of used by the man, the East as a kind of mysterious place full of secrets and monsters, you know, "the marvels of the East," was a phrase that was used. And the more I looked the more I saw that this was really quite consistent with itself. It have very little to do with people who had actually been there. And even if they had been there, there wasn't much modification. In other words you didn't get what you could call realistic representations of the Orient, either in literature or in painting or in music or any of the arts.

And this extended even further into descriptions of the Arabs by experts, people who had studied them. I noticed that even in the twentieth century some of the same images that you found in the nineteenth century amongst scholars like Edward William Lane who wrote his book on the Modern Egyptians in the early 1830's and then you read somebody in the 1920's and they more or less saying the same thing.

One great example that I always give is that the wonderful French poet, Gerard de Nerval who went on a voyage to the Orient, as he called it, and I was reading this book of his travels in Syria and there was something very familiar about it. It sounded like something else that I'd read and then I realized that what he was doing almost unconsciously was quoting Lane on the Egyptians. On the theory that the Orientals are all the same no matter where you find them, whether it's in India, or Syria, or in Egypt, it's basically the same assets. So there develops a kind of image of the timeless Orient, as if the Orient, unlike the West, doesn't develop, it stays the same. And that's one of the problems with Orientalism is it creates an image outside of history, of something that is placid and still and eternal. Which is simply contradicted by the fact of history. In one sense it's a creation of you might say, an ideal Other for Europe.

ORIENTALISM & EMPIRE

SUT JHALLY: Professor Said's analysis of Orientalism isn't just a description of its content but a sustained argument for why it looks the way it does. It's an examination of the quite concrete, historical and institutional context that creates it. Specifically Said locates the construction of Orientalism within the history of Imperial conquest. As empires spread across the globe historically the British and the French have been the most important in terms of the East. They conquer not only militarily but also what we could call ideologically. The question for these empires is: How do we understand the natives we are encountering so we can conquer and subdue them easier? This process of using large abstract categories to explain people who look different, whose skin is a different color, has been going on for a long time, as far back as there has been contact between different cultures and peoples. But Orientalism makes this general process more formal in that it presents itself as objective knowledge. Said identifies Napoleon's conquest of Egypt in 1798 as marking a new kind of imperial and colonial conquest, that inaugurates the project of Orientalism.

EDWARD SAID: There was a kind of break that occurred kind of after Napoleon came to Egypt in 1798. I think it's the first really modern imperial expedition. So he invades the place but he doesn't invade it the way the Spaniards invaded the New World, looking for loot. He comes instead with an enormous army of soldiers but also scientists, botanists, architects, philologists, biologists, historians, whose job it was to record Egypt in every conceivable way. And produce a kind of scientific survey of Egypt, which was designed, not for the Egyptian, but for the European. Of course what strikes you first of all about the volumes they produced, is their enormous size. They are a meter square. And all across them is written the power and prestige of a modern European country that can do to the Egyptians what the Egyptians cannot do to the French. I mean there's no comparable Egyptian survey of France. To produce knowledge you have to have the power to be there, and to see in expert ways things that the natives themselves can't see.

AMERICAN ORIENTALISM

EDWARD SAID: The differences between different kinds of Orientalisms are in effect the differences between different experiences of what is called the Orient. I mean the difference between Britain and France on the one hand and the United States on the other, is that Britain and France had colonies in the Orient. I mean they had a long-standing relationship and imperial role in a place like India, so that there's a kind of an archive of actual experiences of being in India, of ruling in a country for several hundred years. And the same with the French in North Africa, let's say Algeria or Indochina, direct colonial experience. In the case of the Americans, the experience is much less direct. There's never been an American occupation of the Near East. So I would say the difference between British and French Orientalism on the one hand and the American experience of the Orient on the other is that the American one is much more indirect, much more based on abstractions. The second big thing, I think that differs in the American experience from the British and French of Orientalism, is that the American Orientalism is very politicized by the presence of Israel for which America is the main ally.

[CNN News: Vice President Al Gore] President Clinton and I are proud, as are all Americans that the United States was the first nation to recognize the State of Israel, eleven minutes after you proclaimed your independence.

EDWARD SAID: And what you have in effect the creation of Jewish state in the middle of the Islamic Oriental world. And the sense that because it's a Jewish state and a Western state, self-declared, there is a greater coincidence between American interests there than there is between American interests in let's say in places like Iran and Saudi Arabia, which are important because of oil. I think the presence of this other factor, which is very anti Islamic, where Israel regards the whole Arab world as it's enemy, is imported into American Orientalism. I mean the idea for example, that Hamas terrorists on the West Bank are just interested in killing Jewish children, is what you derive from looking at this stuff and very little attention is paid to the fact that the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza has been going on for thirty years, it's the longest military occupation in this century. And so you get the impression that the only problem is that Israeli security is threatened by Hamas and suicide bombs and all the rest of it and nothing is said about the hundreds of thousands, millions of Palestinians who are dispossessed, living miserable lives as a direct result of what Israel has done and is doing. So there's a sense in which the Arab struggle for national independence and in the case of the Palestinians for national self-determination is looked at with a great hostility as upsetting the stabilities of the status quo. And that makes it virtually impossible, it's a tragedy, virtually impossible for an American to see on television, to read books, to see films about the Middle East, that are not colored politically by this conflict, in which the Arabs almost always play the role of terrorists and violent people and irrational and so on and so forth.

ORIENTALISM TODAY – The Demonization of Islam in the News and Popular Culture

[MTV Video Awards 1998: MCA Beastie Boys] *That's another thing America really needs to think about is our racism. Racism that comes from the United States towards Muslim people and towards Arabic people and that's something that has to stop and the United States has to start respecting people from the Middle East in order to find a solution to the problem that's been building up over many years. I thank everyone for your patience in letting me speak my mind on that.*

SUT JHALLY: Many people believe the way that Americans understand the Muslim world is very problematic. Indeed anti-Arab racism seems to be almost officially sanctioned. You can make generalized and racist statements about Arab peoples that would not be tolerated for any other group. At the heart of how this new American Orientalism operates is a threatening and demonized figure of the Islamic terrorist that is emphasized by journalists and Hollywood.

Now Said recognizes that terrorism exists, as a result of the violent, political situation in the Middle East. But he argues that there is a lot more going on there that is misunderstood or not seen by the peoples of the West. The result of the media's focus on one negative aspect alone means that all the peoples of the Islamic world come to be understood in the same negative and paranoid way, that is, as a threat. So that when we think of people who look like that and come from that part of the world we think fanatic, extreme, violent. Said argues that understanding a vast and complex region like the Middle East in this narrow way takes away from the humanity and diversity of millions of ordinary people living decent and humane lives there.

[CBS News] We asked, "Would he plant a bomb to blow up the American's if the Islamic underground asked him too? The answer was yet."

EDWARD SAID: After I'd written *Orientalism* and a book called *The Question of Palestine*, in the late 70's and the beginning of the 80's, I wrote a third book, which is called *Covering Islam* and I thought of them as a kind of trilogy. And *Covering Islam* was an account of the coverage of Islam in the popular media. Immediately occasioned by the Iranian Revolution, which described itself as you recall, as an Islamic revolution. What I discovered was a huge arsenal of images employed by the media, large masses of people waving their fists, black banners, the stern-faced Khomeini, all of them giving the impression of the utmost negative, sort of evil emanation. So the impression you got of Islam was that it was a frightening mysterious, above all threatening, as if the main business of Muslims was to threaten and try to kill Americans. As recently as last year, 1996, that is almost sixteen or seventeen years after I wrote *Covering Islam*, I did an update of the book, and I wrote a new introduction. I found quite to my horror and surprise, that during those sixteen or seventeen years with a large number of events in the Islamic world taking place, which you would think would allow for more familiarity, with a more refined sense of what was taking place as reflected on television and print journalism, in fact was the opposite. I think the situation got worse. And that what you

had instead now was a much more threatening picture of Islam, represented for example by television film called *Jihad in America*, based on the bombing of the World Trade Center.

[TV: *Jihad in America*] *I've reported on international terrorism for the past ten years. And since the World Trade Center bombing I've been investigating the networks of Islamic extremists committed to Jihad in America. For these militants, Jihad is a Holy War, an armed struggle to defeat nonbelievers or infidels. And their ultimate goal is to establish and Islamic empire.*

...But this gathering did not take place in the Middle East. It happened in the heartland of America, Kansas City, Missouri.

...Combating these groups within the boundaries of the Constitution will be the greatest challenge to law enforcement since the war on organized crime.

EDWARD SAID: But never the same generalizations were made, let's say, about the Oklahoma City bombing, that this was a Christian fundamentalist, etc, etc. But the Islamic Jihad had come to America and you had these scenes of the most irresponsible journalism, where you'd see people talking in Arabic and then a voice over, saying they are discussing the destruction of America. Whereas if you picked up a little of what was being said, if you knew the language, had nothing to do with that. And that Islam and the teachings of Islam became synonymous with terror and the demonization of Islam allowed for very little distinction between piety, lets say, and violence. The so called independent media in a liberal society like this, in effect are so lazy and are controlled by interests that are commercial and political at the same time, that there is no investigative reporting, it's just basically repeating the line of the government.

[TV: *Nightline*] *Only eight days ago I concluded a broadcast on the World Trade Center bombing by telling you what senior law enforcement officials were telling us, that the threat of Muslim extremists operating within the United States is an ongoing danger, something we'll have to live with from now on.*

EDWARD SAID: And repeating the lines of the people who have the most influence, for whom Islam is a useful foreign demon, to turn attention away from the inequities and problems in our own society. So, as a result, the *human* side of the Islamic and especially Arabic world, are rarely to be found and the net result is this vacancy on the one hand and these easy, almost automatic images of terror and violence. There is a handy set of images and clichés, you know, not just from the newspapers and the television, but from movies.

[Movie: *Aladdin opening song*] *I come from a land, from a faraway place where a caravan camels roam, where it's flat and immense and the heat is intense, it's barbaric but hey, it's home. When the winds from the east and the suns from the west and sand in the glass is right, come on down, stop on by, hop a carpet and fly to another Arabian night.*

EDWARD SAID: I mean, I myself, growing up in the Middle East in Palestine, in Cairo used to delight in films on the Arabian Nights, you know done by Hollywood producers, you know with Jon Hall and Maria Montez and Sabu. I mean they were talking about part of the world that I lived in but it had this kind of exotic, magical quality which was what we call today Hollywood. So there was that whole repertory of the sheiks in the dessert and galloping around and the scimitars and the dancing girls and all of that, that's really the material. It's the situation in the popular media is that basically Muslims are really two things, one, they are villains and fanatics.

[Unlabeled movie clip] I will dispatch the American people to the hell they deserve.

EDWARD SAID: And B, many films end up with huge numbers of bodies, Muslim bodies strewn all over the place, the result of Arnold Schwarzenegger or Chuck Norris, lot's of films about guerrillas going into kill Muslim terrorists. So the idea of Islam is something to be stamped out.

[Movie: True Lies] (fighting sounds, swords clashing, grunting)

EDWARD SAID: The whole history of these Orientalist representations, which portrayed the Muslim and the Oriental in effect a lesser breed, in other words, the only thing they understand is the language of force. This is the principle here, unless you give them a bloody nose they won't understand. We can't talk reason with them.

[Unlabeled movie clip] (Fighting scenes – screaming)

EDWARD SAID: Is the Arab world full of terrorists? Well, I mean, all you have to do is break down the question into common sense and say, there are terrorists as there are everywhere, but you know, there's a lot more going on there, I mean we're talking about 250 to 300 million people and one of the great problems with Orientalism to begin with is these vast generalizations about Islam and the nature of Islam. There is very little in common that you can talk about as Islam, let's say, between Indonesia and Saudi Arabia, I mean they are both Muslim countries but, you know, the difference is in history and language and traditions and so on. It's so vast that the word Islam has, at best, a tenuous meaning. The same is true within the Arab world. I mean Morocco is very different from Saudi Arabia. Algeria is very different from Egypt. And I would argue and in fact have argued, that the predominant mood of the Arab world is very secular. It's easy to attract attention and certainly the media's attention for some of the political reasons that are obvious. I mean, to discredit the Arabs to make them seem like a threat to the West, to keep the idea around at the end of the Cold War, that, you know, there are foreign devils. Otherwise what are we doing this gigantic military? You know, this huge military budget that is twice as much as an entire world's military budget combined.

So you have to have threat. And the result is it's very hard to find words that are sympathetic to the Arabs and Islam. Islam is seen as the enemy of Christianity and the

United States sees itself as a Christian or a Judeo-Christian country, in affiliation with Israel and that Islam is the great enemy. The competitor. There's a history of that. And I give the example of Dodi Fayad, you know, the erstwhile suitor of Princess Dianna. Well a few days before he died I read through the English press and it was full of the racist clichés of Orientalist discourse, I mean, that this is, *The Sunday Times*, one of the leading newspapers in England, had a head line to a 15,000 word story entitled, *A Match Made in Mecca*. And the idea of Muslim conspiracy as trying to infect, you know, taking over this white woman by these dark people, with Mohammad, the prophet Mohammad who is a historical personage of the seventh century somehow stage-managing the whole thing. That's the power of the discourse you see, if you're thinking about people and Islam and about that part of the world those are the words you constantly have to use.

[Movie]... *and you won't get hurt, I give you my word.*
 -- *No way, you wacko.*

EDWARD SAID: So discourse is a regulated system of producing knowledge within certain constraints whereby certain rules have to be observed.

[TV: The Simpsons]

OK, Libya, exports?

-- *Yes, sir, you American pig.*

Ha, ha, ha, nice touch.

EDWARD SAID: To think past it, to go beyond it, not to use it, is virtually impossible because there's no knowledge that isn't codified in this way about that part of the world.

[Movie]

May I help you?

-- *Listen to the sound ...*

EDWARD SAID: And there's a certain sense in which in not really mounting a serious critique of it, the Arabs have participated and continue to allow themselves to be represented as Orientals in this Orientalist way. There is no, for example, information policy of the twenty Arab countries, twenty-two Arab countries, to try to give a different picture of what their worlds are like. Because most of them are dictatorships. All of them are dictatorships without democracy, who are in desperate need of U.S. patronage, government patronage, to support them, so they are not about to criticize the United States. Not about to engage in a real dialogue and in that respect I think the Arabs keep themselves collectively in a way that is subordinate to and inferior to the West. And in fact fulfills the kinds of representations that most Westerners have in their minds about the Arabs.

ORIENTALISM IN ACTION – The Media & the Oklahoma City Bomb

[CBS News] *The attack came without warning, and according to a US government source who told CBS news that it has Middle East terrorism written all over it.*

[CBS News] *The attack in Oklahoma City appears to have a familiar mark.*

[CBS News Interview: Steve Emerson, Author] *This was done with the attempt to inflict as many casualties as possible. That is a Middle Eastern trait.*

[ABC News] *The fact that it was such a powerful bomb in Oklahoma City immediately drew investigators to consider deadly parallels that all have roots in the Middle East. ABC News has learned that the FBI has asked the US military to provide up to ten Arabic speakers to help in the investigation.*

EDWARD SAID: Well, one of the interesting things about the persistence of Orientalism, I mean, almost when you think about it, almost astonishing persistence of it, was the Oklahoma City bombing in April of 1995. I can give you a personal example. I was in Canada giving some lectures at the actual time of the bombing. And, maybe half an hour after the event had occurred in the afternoon, my office was inundated with phone calls from the media. I rang my office from Canada as I frequently do to find out, you know, if there was any message for me that needed attention and so on. And, she said, every – twenty-five calls had come in from the major networks, from the cable channels, from the major newspapers, news magazines and so on and so forth, all of them wanting to talk to you. And I said, "What about?" "About this event in Oklahoma City." And I said, "What does that have to do with anything?" Well, apparently, somebody had volunteered, one of these instant commentators, that the notion that this seemed like a Middle East style bombing and that there were a couple of swarthy people around right after the bombing, or seen after the bombing.

[ABC News] *Within hours of the explosion, local police and the FBI had issued the All Points Bulletin looking for three men believed to be of Middle Eastern origin.*

[CBS News] *Sources tell CBS News that unofficially, the FBI is treating this as a Middle Eastern-related incident.*

[CBS News Interview: Steve Emerson, Author] *Oklahoma City, I can tell you, is probably considered one of the largest centers of Islamic radical activity outside the Middle East.*

EDWARD SAID: And this got them to think that they should talk to me, not because I had anything to do with it, but because by virtue of being from the Middle East I would have an inside insight into this. You know, and of course the proposition is so preposterous and so racist that just if you are from the area you would understand who and why this is being done. Never thinking for a moment that it was a local homegrown

boy called McVeigh who was totally American in his outlook and was doing it out of the best principles of American extermination and Ahab-like anger at, you know, the world.

ORIENTALISM AND THE PALESTINIAN QUESTION

SUT JHALLY: Professor Said is not only a literary theorist; he is also a very prominent and active representative of the Palestinian people. Said grew up in what was then called Palestine and is now called Israel and the Occupied Territories. When the State of Israel was founded in 1948, like millions of other Palestinians, Said and his family were made homeless as well as stateless. These exiled Palestinians now mostly live, either in the territories under the control of Israel or in refugee camps in the surrounding countries. One of the things that drives Said is the quest for justice and a homeland for the Palestinian people. And there is a close connection between Said's intellectual work and his political activism. As he himself remarks, he wrote three books that he thinks of as a trilogy and that in his mind are closely connected together, *Orientalism*, *Covering Islam*, and *The Question of Palestine*. He believes that finding a peaceful, humane and just solution to the conflicts in the Middle East, that is finding an answer to the Question of Palestine, will require overcoming the racist legacy of Orientalism that stresses the separation of people from each other, that regards difference as a threat that must be contained or destroyed. Because of the complex and bloody history of the Middle East, Said regards the situation in Palestine and Israel as the ultimate test case facing the twenty-first century, of whether we live together in peace and reconciliation with our differences, or whether we live apart in fear and loathing of each other, constantly under threat, constantly at war. In seeking a way out of this legacy of mistrust and conflict, Said draws upon the work of Italian philosopher Antonio Gramsci, who gives us the tools to think about these difficult issues in more productive and humane ways.

EDWARD SAID: Gramsci, in *The Prison Notebooks*, says something that has always tremendously appealed to me, that history deposits in us our own history, our family's history, our nation's history, our tradition's history, which has left in us an infinity of traces, all kinds of marks, you know, through heredity, through collective experience, through individual experience, through family experience, relations between one individual and another, a whole book, if you like, on a series of, an infinity of traces, but there is no inventory, there's no orderly guide to it.

So Gramsci says, "Therefore the task at the outset, is to try to compile an inventory," in other words to try and make sense of it. And this seems to me to be the most interesting sort of human task. It's the task of interpretation. It's a task of giving history some shape and sense, for a particular reason, not just to show that my history is better than yours, or my history is worse than yours. I'm a victim and you're somebody who's oppressed people or so on, but rather, to understand my history in terms of other people's history, in other words to try to understand, to move beyond, to generalize one's own individual experience to the experience of others. And I think the great goal is in fact to become someone else. To transform itself from a unitary identity to an identity that includes the other without suppressing the difference. That, he says is the great goal. And for me I think that would be the case. That would be the notion of writing an inventory, historical inventory, which would try to understand not only to understand one's self but to understand one's self in relation to others and to understand others as if you would understand yourself.

Palestine is so important in this respect because of its local complexities, let's say Arabs and Jews, Arab Muslims and Arab Christians and Israeli Jews of themselves very mixed backgrounds. I mean we're talking about Polish Jews, Russian Jews, American Jews, Yemeni Jews, Iraqi Jews, Indian Jews, it's a fairly complex mosaic somehow finding a way to live together, on land that is drenched, saturated with significance on a world scale, unlike any other country in the world. I mean it's holy to three of the major religions and every inch of it has been combed over and fought over for the last several thousand years.

And the pattern so far has been the Zionist pattern which is to say that 'it's promised to us, we are the chosen people, everybody else is sort of second rate, throw them out or treat them as second class citizens.' In contrast to that, some of us, not everybody, but many Palestinians have said, 'well we realize that we are being asked to pay the price for what happened to the Jews in Europe, under the Holocaust, it was an entirely Christian and European catastrophe in which the Arabs played no part, and we are being dispossessed, displaced by the victims. We've become the victims of the victims.'

But, as I say, not all of us say, well they should be thrown out. Because we have been thrown out and so we have another vision, which is a vision of co-existence, in which Jew and Arab, Muslim, Christian and Jew can live together in some polity, which I think it requires a kind of creativity, and invention that is possible – vision that would replace the authoritarian, hierarchical model. But this idea that somehow we should protect ourselves against the infiltrations, the infections of the Other, is, I think, the most dangerous idea at the end of the twentieth century. Unless we find ways to do it, and there are no short cuts to it, unless we find ways to do this, you know there is going to be wholesale violence of a sort represented by the Gulf War, by the killings in Bosnia, the Rwandan massacres and so on. I mean those are the pattern of emerging conflict that is extremely dangerous and needs to be counteracted and I think therefore it's correct to say that the challenge now is – I wouldn't call it anything other than co-existence. How does one co-exist with people whose religions are different, whose traditions and languages are different but who form part of the same community or polity in the national sense? How do we accept difference without violence and hostility?

I've been interested in a field called Comparative Literature most all of my adult life and the ideal of Comparative Literature is not to show how English literature is really a secondary phenomenon to French literature or Arabic literature is kind of a poor cousin to Persian literature or any of those silly things, but to show them existing, you might say, as contrapuntal lines, in a great composition by which difference is respected and understood without coercion. And it's that attitude I think that we need.