

guardian.co.uk

## For god and empire

Pankaj Mishra on Freud and the Non-European by Edward W Said  
and Infidels by Andrew Wheatcroft

---

The Guardian, Saturday 17 May 2003

---

**A** [larger](#) | [smaller](#)

---

### **Freud and the Non-European**

by Edward W Said  
84pp, Verso, £14

### **Infidels: The Conflict between Christendom and Islam 638-2002**

by Andrew Wheatcroft  
442pp, Viking, £20

Edward Said is often called the most influential intellectual of the last few decades. But where precisely does his influence lie? Certainly, few of the western journalists who reported recently on Iraq's fresh baptism into western civilisation seemed to have looked at Orientalism or even Covering Islam. Some of them seemed eager to prove Said's main argument: that much of western scholarship and journalism on Asia and Africa helped, directly or not, western imperialists in "dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient".

The US State Department calls not upon Said, but upon his detractors, Bernard Lewis and Fouad Ajami, for advice on Middle Eastern matters. The academic-industrial complex to which Said's writings gave rise may appear to hum away smugly on many green campuses. But outside them, in the larger world of brisk paraphrase and soundbite, Said is billed mainly as the politically correct academic who accuses all western writers on the Orient of racist and imperialist bias.

This is a caricature. In his new book, *Freud and the Non-European*, Said does say that Sigmund Freud had "a Eurocentric view of culture", but he then quickly goes on to ask: "Why should it not be? His world had not yet been touched by the globalisation, or rapid travel, or decolonisation, that were to make many formerly unknown or repressed cultures available to metropolitan Europe."

According to Said, the most interesting writers are those who transcend the dominant political and cultural assumptions of their time and place. A good example is Freud, who in the 1930s thought of Moses as an Egyptian, giving to Jewish identity a non-European aspect. More often than not, individual writers remain in thrall to conventional pieties, even when they imagine themselves to be at their boldest. The early historians of the British empire, whom AJP Taylor once described as "chaplains on a pirate ship", no doubt felt they were part of a radical mission to civilise the world. These days, the middle-class Indian journalists who suppress the cruelties of Indian security forces in Kashmir see themselves as serving the noble cause of Indian nationalism. The American sages who announce periodically that history has ended, that civilisations are about to clash, or that Americans are from Mars and Europeans from Venus believe sincerely in American predominance as a force for good.

Of course, a Nepalese academic proclaiming the end of history from his office in downtown Kathmandu would immediately appear ill-informed in the way that an American pundit from an allegedly prestigious think-tank in Washington DC never does. Political, economic and cultural power manage not only to hide ignorance and insularity but also to exalt them into government policy and, eventually, into "facts on the ground".

In many ways, we live with the consequences of what a handful of provincial British

experts made of the world in the 19th century, when the British empire was even more unassailable than the United States appears today. In his history of India (a place he never visited), the utilitarian James Mill saw the country as perennially fought over by the two barbaric religious communities of Hindus and Muslims and sunk in a darkness that the British East India Company - Mill's later employer - was well placed to dispel with the help of utilitarian methods. There were no Indians then of comparable influence to point out that Mill did not much know what he was talking about. And so Mill's view that Hindus and Muslims formed two mutually antagonistic nations became institutionalised in colonial policies of divide and rule. This view was then played out in the bloody partition of India, and it presently informs the identities of the nation-states of India and Pakistan.

A similar sort of clumsy ethnic engineering has long gone on in the Middle East; it is not unreasonable to fear that the new state of Palestine, whenever it comes about, will, with Israel, repeat the disastrous recent history of India and Pakistan. In recent years, Said has qualified severely his support for a separate Palestinian state - a move that seems in line with his suspicion of the ethnic, racial, religious and national identities produced by modern imperialism.

As Said sees it, nation-states based on exclusive ethnic and religious identities suppress an older historical reality, where cultures and civilisations were interdependent, flowing into and out of each other - a cosmopolitan vision he wishes to affirm as he speaks of Freud and claims to find in him an "unresolved sense of identity". He wonders whether such uneasy ambivalence as Freud's, rather than divisive histories, could serve as the basis of a bi-national state for the Jewish and Palestinian peoples.

Sadly, such hopes are rarely heard outside the seminar room or lecture hall. The kind of moral and intellectual subtlety Said calls for is quickly trampled upon as nations are made and remade. But if it doesn't shape momentous events, it does help record them more scrupulously. Said's influence grows most fruitfully (if slowly) on fellow academics and writers, who can no longer hope to explain the contemporary world by putting the adjective "ancient" before the noun "hatred"; they have to work towards a better sense of the ever-changing historical conditions under which identities appear so eternal.

This is the task that Andrew Wheatcroft attempts with admirable energy in *Infidels: The Conflict between Christendom and Islam 638-2002*. This vast subject usually invites grand, if intellectually languid, overviews. They begin with an account of the Arab tribes spilling out from the Arabian peninsula and into the Byzantine empire. You get a bit about the romance of Moorish Spain and some exotic tales from the Crusades. There might be something about how the Arabs once helped preserve in the libraries of Baghdad - the city whose own past now lies plundered - the works of Greek literature which Europe had lost during its long Christian torpor, and which then made possible the Renaissance. But regret usually comes to tinge the description of the Turkish conquest of Constantinople in 1453.

On the other hand, the rise of the west in the last two centuries is charted reverently. And if the author wishes to be up to date, he ends with speculations about why the Muslim world not only failed to embrace, but instead grew to hate the modern world - a hatred (ancient?) that finally erupted on September 11 2001.

Wheatcroft does the history-as-spectacle bits. He starts with a tremendous account of the battle of Lepanto in 1571, but then he forgoes the chronology. He wants to tell us why certain events were remembered better than others; he wishes to find out how we know what we know about the past. As he puts it while discussing Ottoman rule in the Balkans: "What actually happened and what was written at the time diverged sharply." History reveals itself as mostly propaganda in this briskly provocative book, which not only describes but also shows the lethal power of the "words and images" Christians and Muslims have used against each other. He claims that the west has used these "weapons" more effectively than its rivals and victims. If so, the Arabic television station al-Jazeera looks set to redress the balance.

Wheatcroft is depressed by the American response to September 11, particularly by the "apocalyptic" Christian rhetoric of President Bush, which in his view represents a "fall from a modern world that respects progress into the dark domain of raw faith". He doubts the efficacy of such "decrepit and antiquated responses" to an enemy that may appear ancient but is "more post-modern than modern". He worries that such atavism "may even unravel the last two centuries of the west's social, cultural and spiritual development". But the aggressive self-righteousness that Wheatcroft deplores only sounds like a throwback to the ragged crusaders or the corrupt clergy of a now vanished Europe. It is in fact no more medieval than the videotaped exhortations to jihad. Far from being an aberration, it is one of the more prominent features of the west's social, cultural and spiritual development in the last two centuries - the time when economic and techno-logical revolutions and easy imperial victories created the west's sense of itself as constituting a unique and superior civilisation, which was clearly meant to bring the secret of progress to all inferior peoples across the globe even while depriving them of the resources necessary to achieve it.

It was a secular messianism, based upon brute force, which created, and continues to create, the west's many enemies. Born-again Christians may have produced recently a lot of atavistic stuff about "evil" and "crusades". But the Pope has hardly been lining up to bless the departing troops. For he too probably senses that they form the avant-garde not of Christianity but its delinquent 19th-century offspring, the deceptively liberal religion of infinite progress and happiness - the religion that still fills up its churches in the west but seems increasingly to find more bitter apostates than fresh converts elsewhere.

• Pankaj Mishra is writing a book about the Buddha.