

EDWARD SAID AND THE SPACE OF EXILE

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Abstract

In his memoir, *Out of Place* (1999), Edward Said described the condition of exile as the source of his most deeply held beliefs about himself and the world. His use of exile as a metaphor is in several ways analogous to the ways in which diasporic religious communities orient themselves in relation to space and time. Although Said was critical of the dangerous idea of sacred space, the space of exile is in certain respects similar to a religious myth in its shaping influence on his life, as revealed in his autobiography.

THE THEME of exile is central in Edward Said's critical and scholarly works. Exile is a political condition that Said shows to be especially painful and unjust in the case of the Palestinian people, whom he described as being in the terrible position of being exiles even while living in their own homeland and, ironically, 'turned into exiles by the proverbial people of exile, the Jews.'¹ In addition to this political meaning, Said frequently used exile as a metaphor to describe his vision of the role of the modern intellectual, who needs a critical, detached perspective from which to examine his culture. Said's 1999 memoir, *Out of Place*, reveals the autobiographical roots of his interest in exile as both a political condition and a critical concept. The memoir suggests that in spite of Said's principled opposition to religion, his conception of exile is in certain ways similar to the idea of sacred space.

The original meaning of exile is banishment, the political action that forces a person to depart from his country. Exile resembles but is not the same as being a refugee, expatriot or member of a diaspora. In practice, however, these terms are now often used interchangeably to refer to people displaced from their original home, even when they leave it willingly. Exile is a way of dwelling in space with a constant awareness that one is not at home. The exile is oriented to a distant place and feels that he does not belong where he lives. Exile is also an orientation to time, a plotting of one's life story around a pivotal event of departure and a present condition of absence from one's native land. An implicit travel narrative is central to the exile's identity; she remembers a difficult journey away from home and looks forward to returning some day. Exile involves orientation, or being pointed toward

something distant, and also disorientation, or feeling lost and at odds with one's immediate environment.

In *Out of Place*, Said describes how he was displaced from three childhood homes. He was born in Jerusalem in 1935 to parents who were Palestinian Christians from rather different backgrounds. The family did not spend much time in Palestine during Said's early life, but continued to feel the pull of their ancestral homeland even as it became increasingly dominated by Israeli rule. Said's father, Wadie, established a successful stationary company in Egypt, and Edward went to several schools in Cairo until 1951, when he was sixteen. He then went to Mount Hermon School in Massachusetts for two years, to Princeton University, and to graduate school at Harvard; he lived for the rest of his life in New York City, teaching at Columbia University until his death in 2003. In addition to Jerusalem and Cairo, Said describes a third displacement from Lebanon, where his family spent every summer for 27 years until 1971, when increasing political tension and violence made it dangerous to return. Although neither Said nor his family were literally exiled from any of these three Middle Eastern places, he describes his relation to Palestine, Egypt, and Lebanon in terms of having been displaced against his will from these childhood homes.²

An exile can react to displacement in many different ways. Usually he longs to return to the homeland and anticipates the joy of return. This was not the case, however, for Edward Said. He knew that the tragic situation of the Palestinians would not soon be resolved. After many decades in the United States and a successful career at Columbia, Said was quite content with his life in New York, despite his continued sense of not being at home there. Yet although he did not really expect to return to Palestine, Egypt or Lebanon, the consciousness of being an exile became central to his identity and his worldview. Even in Egypt and Lebanon he had felt out of place, because his family lived in an enclave created by his father's wealth and, as Protestant Christians, were isolated from the larger population. After many years in the little Lebanese village of Dhour, Said's father was unable to buy a plot of land for his grave: 'The idealised pastoral existence we thought we were enjoying had no real status in the town's collective memory.'³ His consciousness of being at odds with his environment is a deep part of Said's identity wherever he is, even in New York City, where after four decades he still saw himself as a temporary resident: 'Now it does not seem important or even desirable to be "right" and in place (right at home, for instance). Better to wander out of place, not to own a house, and not ever to feel too much at home anywhere, especially in a city like New York, where I shall be until I die.'⁴

In his 1984 essay 'Reflections on Exile,' Said wrote that 'exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience.'⁵ For much of his

professional career, Said passionately and articulately protested the condition of the Palestinian people.⁶ He criticised attempts to turn exile into a heroic or romantic metaphor for the lonely artist or intellectual: 'You must first set aside Joyce and Nabokov and think instead of the uncountable masses for whom UN agencies have been created.'⁷ To think of exile in humanistic, aesthetic, or religious terms risks trivialising the suffering it inflicts: 'Is it not true that the views of exile in literature and, moreover, in religion obscure what is truly horrendous: that exile is irremediably secular and unbearably historical; that it is produced by human beings for other human beings; and that, like death but without death's ultimate mercy, it has torn millions of people from the nourishment of tradition, family, and geography?'⁸

In spite of this warning, Said goes on to interpret how exile can productively shape an intellectual's thinking. As examples, he refers to Theodor Adorno and Erich Auerbach, both of whom fled the Nazis and did vital work that reflects their experience of disruption. Said holds that exile can foster a scrupulous subjectivity, independence of mind, critical perspective and originality of vision. Being attuned to more than one culture can give the exile 'contrapuntal' awareness of simultaneous dimensions of reality. Because an exile's life is nomadic, decentred and lived on the periphery of the established order, he must create his own structures of meaning. In all of these ways, although exile is anything but a privilege or a pleasure, some positive things can come of it. While Said is resolutely secular in interpreting the potential value of exile, his effort to find meaning in it is analogous to traditional religious responses to displacement from a sacred space. In the biblical imagination, the expulsion from Eden and the loss of Jerusalem are traumatic ruptures that shape forever Israel's consciousness. The Babylonian exile became a primary source of positive values, such as the development of a form of Judaism freed from worship in the temple, and theologies (such as that of II Isaiah) that interpret suffering as more mysterious than simply divine retribution for sin. Said's attempt to find compensations and significant meaning in an experience of exile recalls the trajectory of Israel's story in the Hebrew Bible.

In *Out of Place*, Said describes how viewing himself as an exile affected his character and his orientation as a critical thinker. The memoir describes exile in terms that, while not religious, are more nuanced and complicated than Said's avowedly secular and humanistic values. In his critical and theoretical writings, Said was basically an Enlightenment rationalist who viewed religion as intolerant, dogmatic, anti-democratic, and a major impediment to his own commitments.⁹ He saw religious loyalties as deeply implicated in historic conflicts over particular places such as Palestine and South Africa. Said would be an incisive critic of the concept of sacred space; he would warn that violence and suffering inevitably follow when people

believe that they have a God-given right to a particular piece of land. Yet, in *Out of Place*, the way in which Said portrays exile shows certain affinities to the idea of sacred space. His depiction of the metaphorical space of exile reveals not only his secularist and humanistic values and commitments, but also an orientation that is familiar to the scholar of religion.

In *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion*, Thomas Tweed argues that religion situates people in time and space by providing them with tropes, rituals and institutions that position them in relation to boundaries. Religion also prescribes how to cross the boundaries that demarcate the body, home, the homeland and the cosmos. Tweed's theory of religion focuses on three themes: position, movement and relation. Religion, in this account, is the symbolic ways in which humans map the spaces in which they dwell and provide normative accounts of how to cross to other spaces.¹⁰

Tweed's theory of religion was formulated in the course of five years of research on the rituals and feasts of Cuban exiles in Miami. In *Our Lady of the Exile*, Tweed explores how Cuban exiles use symbols to locate members in time and space, to dwell within boundaries and to prescribe and proscribe various kinds of crossing over to another space. Drawing on J. Z. Smith's *Map is Not Territory*, Tweed creates a typology of three modes of religious mapping of the world. The 'locative' worldview emphasises belonging to a place that is associated with the center. This is the mode of spiritual cartography that scholars usually associate with the idea of sacred space. A second form of religious mapping, which Smith calls 'utopian' and Tweed terms 'supralocative', values transcending space rather than being located in any one place. The supralocative orientation is associated with the periphery rather than the center and is characteristic of diasporas and exiles. Tweed thinks that this mode tends to diminish or deny the significance of the homeland and the adopted land. He therefore proposes a third type, the 'translocative', to interpret the ways in which diasporic religion helps its followers to move back and forth in history and geography, constantly mediating between their homeland and their adopted land and between a constructed past and an imagined future.¹¹

Like all helpful typologies, Tweed's scheme provides a framework that doesn't exactly fit every particular instance, including Edward Said's powerful account of one exile's worldview. Said seems to me most to resemble the supralocative (Smith's utopian) type of religious cartography, which tends to deny the significance of spatial identification. Like the third or translocative type, however, Said does not want to diminish the importance of exile as an experience, but rather to keep it alive in consciousness. Said's version of exile is very different from Tweed's account of the Miami Cuban community, who turn to collective rituals and devotional practices. For Said, it is not these collective actions that are most important, but rather the intellectual activities

that were his life's work. Furthermore, the symbolic source of his deepest values was not the particular geographic places he left, but the experience of exile itself, the memory of having been displaced, and a childhood narrative of involuntary travel. Said's interpretation of exile in *Out of Place* shares certain features of both the supralocative and translocative types of diasporic religion, but it cannot be wholly identified with either one; moreover, it expresses certain additional aspects of the experience of exile that only an autobiographical account can illuminate.

In his memoir, Edward Said conveys the distinctive religious orientation of the exile toward a distant space, an idealised place from which he is absent. Despite Said's allegiance to intellectual ideals and principles that have little to do with geography, he expresses the fundamental human need for attachment to a particular place. He shows, too, how spatial metaphors provide an essential symbolic language for describing ultimate reality, however it is conceived of. I think that Said's principled opposition to religious obscurantism and irrationalism blinded him to dimensions of religion that were life-enhancing, including religion's role in giving symbolic form to the human need for orientation in space. In the rich personal life writing of *Out of Place*, however, Said reveals his yearning to belong to a particular homeland as well as his desire to cross over to other places, both geographical and metaphorical. His ongoing search for the right mode of dwelling and crossing over goes beyond political solutions or secular intellectual values, as important as these were for him. His autobiography articulates an exilic worldview and a normative account of how one ought to live in response to the condition of exile. Being an exile is not simply a fate inflicted on him, but a matter of vision and commitment that expresses his ultimate values. This reinterpretation of exile in terms of ideal values, the use of spatial metaphors to orient a person in relation to those values and the deliberate effort to keep the exilic consciousness alive in memory, are characteristic acts of the religious imagination of diasporic peoples.

In *Out of Place*, Said explores certain dimensions of exile that he does not discuss in his theoretical reflections or political writings. His sense of being out of step with others is rooted not only in the political situation of the Middle East, but also in the specific dynamics of a particular family. Said's relationships to his mother and father involved a puzzling combination of emotional closeness and estrangement. He often uses the metaphor of being out of place to describe these formative personal relationships. The adult writer still yearns for something that remains remote, both in his highly charged relationship to his parents, especially his mother, and in his attitude to his three childhood homes. *Out of Place* reveals affinities between the political spaces of Said's homelands and the psychological spaces in his family of origin, for instance when he compares his relationship to his mother to that

of ‘colony to metropole’.¹² It is his father’s severe illness that alerts Said to the political vulnerability of the places he has thought of as home: ‘The gravity of his illness acted as an early announcement of my father’s and my own mortality and at the same time signaled to me that the Middle Eastern domain he had carved out for us as a home, a shelter, an abode of sorts, with its main points tied to Cairo, Dhour, and Palestine, was similarly threatened with discontinuity and evanescence.’¹³ From the perspective of old age, Said discerns how both geographical ruptures and familial estrangements propelled him to search for a freely chosen identity: ‘I believe he [Said’s father] thought the only hope for me as a man was in fact to be cut off from my family. My search for freedom, for the self beneath or obscured by “Edward,” could only have begun because of that rupture, so I have come to think of it as fortunate, despite the loneliness and unhappiness I experienced for so long.’¹⁴

Said slowly recognised that his family had always avoided the subject of Palestine and their status as exiles: ‘It seems inexplicable to me now that having dominated our lives for generations, the problem of Palestine and its tragic loss, which affected virtually everyone we knew, deeply changing our world, should have been so relatively repressed, undiscussed, or even remarked on by my parents.’¹⁵ *Out of Place* links the author’s emerging political consciousness to his psychological disengagement from his family’s definitions and expectations of young ‘Edward.’ This process evidently continued as he wrote his memoir, for Said often speaks of his ongoing struggle to articulate his political positions in the context of his difficult relationships to his parents. Said’s mother and father hated politics and disapproved of his involvement in the Palestinian movement after he became a professor. The repression of Palestine in the family’s consciousness reflected a depoliticised life based on the illusion that they stood outside history. In the work that his aunt Nabiha did for Palestinian refugees in Egypt, Said saw an alternative: an active response to the suffering of exiles. He began to understand how a catastrophic experience of collective loss and dispossession had shaped his family’s history. During his early years in the United States, from 1951 until the 1967 Arab–Israeli war, Said managed to suppress his awareness of Middle Eastern conflicts. Composing his memoir elicited complex feelings of ambivalence about Palestine: ‘Even now the unreconciled duality I feel about the place, its intricate wrenching, tearing, sorrowful loss as exemplified in so many distorted lives, including mine, and its status as an admirable country for *them* (but of course not for us), always gives me pain and a discouraging sense of being solitary, undefended, open to the assaults of trivial things that seem important and threatening, against which I have no weapons.’¹⁶ The loss of Palestine brought suffering no matter how exiles reacted to it, whether by an illusory denial of the importance of politics,

or the ideological captivity of those who become so consumed with the Palestinian cause that they deny the humanity of Israelis or Americans, or Said's own ambivalences and troubled uncertainty about his relation to his family's earlier homes.

When he described his entire life as a sort of exile, Said knew that he was dying of leukaemia. A month after his diagnosis in 1991, he began writing a letter to his mother, who had died the previous year. He found himself wanting to revisit earlier times and places in his life. The activity of writing a memoir became his way of coping with the rigors of chemotherapy and the anxiety and pain of a long losing battle with cancer: 'The writing of this memoir and the phases of my illness share exactly the same time, although most traces of the latter have been effaced in this story of my early life. This record of a life and ongoing course of a disease (for which I have known from the beginning no cure exists) are one and the same, it could be said, the same but deliberately different.'¹⁷ His illness and anticipation of death must have influenced Said's conception of his life as a series of farewells, a record of departures.

Said realised only very late that he not only suffered, but orchestrated some of his life's many disengagements and ruptures:

To me, nothing more painful and paradoxically sought after characterizes my life than the many displacements from countries, cities, abodes, languages, environments that have kept me in motion all these years. Thirteen years ago I wrote in *After the Last Sky* that when I travel I always take too much with me, and that even a trip downtown requires the packing of a briefcase stocked with items disproportionately larger in size and number than the actual period of the trip. Analyzing this, I concluded that I had a secret but ineradicable fear of not returning. What I've since discovered is that despite this fear I fabricate occasions for departure, thus giving rise to the fear voluntarily. The two seem absolutely necessary to my rhythm of life and have intensified dramatically during the period I've been ill.¹⁸

Being uprooted was not only an event inflicted on him, but also an expression of Said's values and psychological needs. The ritualised repetition of a movement in space, which became internalised as a part of his identity, suggests another way in which his depiction of exile is fundamentally religious. For Said, as for the religious exile, the foundational event of displacement from home is reenacted in symbolic action and becomes a shaping structure of consciousness and identity. Departing from home was an act that Said needed to do again and again, and his memoir describes in these terms both the subject matter of his life and the process of writing itself: 'This memoir is on some level a reenactment of the experience of departure and separation as I feel the pressure of time hastening and running out.'¹⁹

As exile, as dying invalid, and as autobiographer, Said regards his life as provisional, temporary, precarious and vulnerable. The memoirist says a poignant farewell to the vivid details of the world he has known as he slips away from it, as if dying is an exile from his life.

In the final paragraph of *Out of Place*, Said describes his sense of himself as not a continuing, stable self, but rather a swirl of dissonant elements:

I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance. These currents, like the themes of one's life, flow along during the waking hours, and at their best, they require no reconciling, no harmonizing. They are "off" and may be out of place, but at least they are always in motion, in time, in place, in the form of all kinds of strange combinations moving about, not necessarily forward, sometimes against each other, contrapuntally yet without one central theme. A form of freedom, I'd like to think, even if I am far from being totally convinced that it is. That skepticism too is one of the themes I particularly want to hold on to. With so many dissonances in my life I have learned actually to prefer being not quite right and out of place.²⁰

For Said, being an exile means that he is always more than one thing, and therefore not determined, not static. Exile is the basis for his sense of freedom and his critical capacity. Being 'not quite right' sustains his skepticism, his contrapuntal awareness of simultaneous distinct realities, and his ongoing quest for autonomy. Said's deepest values and firmest commitments grow out of the experience of rupture, which he keeps vivid in his mind by reenacting it in various ways and linking it to his ideals. To be an exile, which was initially a fate imposed on him by outward circumstances, became a choice necessary to his psychic, intellectual and moral life.

Said describes many forms of disruption in his life, especially those with his ancestral homes, family members and, looming in the near future, separation from all that he knew he would lose when he died. Exile is the primary symbolism he uses to convey his sense of identity. It is a secular ideal for Said, and perhaps he chose the title *Out of Place* because it better resists the rhetorical inflation that often accompanies efforts to interpret the significance of exile. From Said's perspective, there is certainly no God behind the political struggles that determine the fate of the Middle East's many refugees and exiles. Yet Said's account of being out of place resonates with the type of religious meaning characteristic of diaspora communities. He describes an orientation to a longed-for distant place that strongly resembles the exile's experience of sacred space. He was at first forced, and then chose, to view himself as displaced from where he belongs, as the condition of exile became the source of his most deeply held beliefs about himself and the world. The space of exile shapes Said's worldview, and he repeats the act of leaving home again and

again; exile functions in his life like the myths and rituals by which religions orient believers. Edward Said is significant both for his criticism of the dangerous idea of sacred space and for the example of his life writing, which reveals how the space of exile came to shape his worldview and symbolise his ultimate commitments.

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REFERENCES

- ¹ E. Said, 'Reflections on Exile,' in *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000), p. 178.
- ² At a later point Said was actually banned from Cairo for fifteen years, because in 1958 he unknowingly signed a contract which violated Egypt's exchange-control laws (see *Out of Place*, p. 289). Said's memoir has been challenged for exaggerating his family's rootedness in Jerusalem, Cairo and Lebanon. This is not the place to examine his accuracy about the facts of his family history; what is indisputable is the genuineness of Said's feelings of dispossession, loss and grief, and the prominent role of exilic metaphors in his thinking.
- ³ Edward Said, *Out of Place* (New York: Vintage, 1999), p. 269.
- ⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 269.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 173.
- ⁶ In addition to several other books by Said, see especially his *After the Last Sky* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986; rev. ed 1999), which combines political analysis, autobiographical reflections and photographs by Jean Mohr.
- ⁷ E. Said, 'Reflections on Exile,' p. 175.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 174.
- ⁹ See Said's *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 51: 'Religious enthusiasm is perhaps the most dangerous of threats to the humanistic enterprise, since it is patently anti-secular and antidemocratic in nature, and, in its monotheistic forms as a kind of politics, is by definition about as intolerantly inhumane and downright unarguable as can be.' For an interpretation of how Said's secular criticism is open to at least one form of interpretation of religion—Vico's 'rational civil theology'—see W. J. T. Mitchell's 'Secular Divination,' in Homi Bhabha and W. J. T. Mitchell (eds), *Edward Said: Continuing the Conversation*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 99–108.
- ¹⁰ T. Tweed, *Crossing and Dwelling: A Theory of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).
- ¹¹ T. Tweed, *Our Lady of the Exile: Diasporic Religion at a Cuban Catholic Shrine in Miami* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 93–98.
- ¹² Edward Said, *Out of Place*, p. 60.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 261.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 294.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 117.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 142.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 216.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 217.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 222.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 295.