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ABSTRACT

“The Islam Industry in America:
Neo-Orientalism in Popular and Academic Discourse”

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Whenever one speaks on the subject of Islam in the West post-9/11, one faces a new hegemonic reality. There was of course prejudice or ignorance about Islam prior to 9/11. But the parameters of the debate have shifted. It has become much more acceptable to be blatantly ignorant about, and prejudiced against Islam after 9/11. We have witnessed a climate of tolerance for intolerance when it comes to Arabs and Muslims. There was now space for people to articulate their open bigotry against Muslims in popular and academic discourse. Indeed, the US government, mainstream media, and the prevailing intellectual culture set an unashamedly Islamophobic tone, and society tended to follow. The debates and discussions on Islam in the contemporary United States contain some peculiar characteristics. Islam – in Western public and intellectual discourse – is not like any other religion in several ways. The various reductionist and essentialist approaches to Islam outlined in this presentation which tend to be convenient mechanisms to avoid serious political analysis and engaging a deeper historical understanding of the Islamicate world, are the leading cause of much of the shallowness and quackery coming from the contemporary Islam industry in the US. This paper will provide an updated account of Edward Said’s classic critique of Western approaches to Islam found in his work *Orientalism*. It will use the insights of postcolonial and critical theory, as well as progressive political sociological approaches, to deconstruct and dissect neo-orientalist trends found within mainstream – and even liberal-left – approaches to Islam today.