

## Modern Day Orientalism

One of Hourani's major goals in this book is to explicate the historical development and the intellectual substance of modern-day Orientalism. In this he roughly follows the lines laid down by Edward Said in his now classic work, *Orientalism*. Nevertheless, Hourani does not agree with some of the main conclusions of Said. Edward Said is of the notion that "Orientalism" is a type of knowledge constructed for the purpose of dominating the Orient, which is in this case Islam.

As Said defines the term, it has a number of interdependent aspects: 1) It is an academic tradition. This refers to institutions and scholars who study the East, be they historians, philologists, or theologians. 2) It also refers to a style of thought based on a distinction made between the Orient and the Occident—that the Orient is the "other." 3) It is also a Western type of knowledge that aims at dominating, restructuring, and wielding authority over the Orient. "Mr. Said," Hourani contends, "is right to say that 'orientalism' is a typically 'occidental' mode of thought, but perhaps he makes the matter too simple when he implies that this style of thought is inextricably bound up with domination, and indeed is derived from it." (p. 63)

It is true, Hourani maintains, that Western scholarship on Islam was motivated politically, and certain images of Islam, as a backward and totalitarian religion, were, and still are, reflected in the writings of many a Western scholar. But this was not the case with serious Orientalists. "E. G. Browne in England was a supporter of the constitutional revolution in Iran; Louis Massignon of the Algerian movement for independence; others, such as Hurgronje, used what influence they had in favour of a more sensitive and understanding attitude towards those whom their nations ruled." (p. 38)

Therefore, Hourani invites us, implicitly at least, to reexamine Edward Said's basic formulations, theses, and conclusions and study the relationship between Islam and the West in, perhaps, a more positive manner than does Said. It is true, Hourani argues, that at the level of religious encounter Islam was a problem for Christian Europe. But it is also true that another, no less important, attitude was at the center of the interaction between Christianity and Islam, and, later on, between secular Europe and the World of Islam, involving a deep exchange of ideas.

During the formative phase of Islam, distinguished Muslim theologians and thinkers, such as 'Ali al-Tabari, Imam al-Ghazali, and Ibn Hazm wrote major works in an attempt to refute the central

doctrines and tenets of Christianity. There is no doubt that ascendant Islam then presented a religious, intellectual, and political challenge to Christendom.

The world of "Islamdom," to use one of Hourani's favourite terms, was in the process of expansion at all levels. As a result, Christianity ceased to exist as an organized political, and economic force in the Middle East and North Africa, and, for a good period of time, in Spain. Christians felt the Islamic menace deeply, and, therefore, some of them were compelled to study the reasons behind the success of the Muslim world and the ramifications of the universally-oriented Islamic scholarship on their lives as the backward "other."

Isn't the Muslim world in a similar position today? Hourani ponders this questions, and proposes that because of modern Western political and cultural hegemony, better understood as colonialism, Arabs and Muslims were compelled to take a critical look at the nature of their decline, and formulate an appropriate religious, scientific, intellectual, and cultural response to the multifaceted Western challenge.<sup>1</sup>

In discussing the emergence and intellectual formation of modern Orientalist scholarship, Hourani points to two major characteristics, especially, of nineteenth-century Orientalism: (1) positivism, and (2) missionary training and outlook. In the first instance, positivism, as a Western (American and European) scientific movement, encouraged the Orientalist to gather useful data and information on the Orient, its history, theology, philosophy, and culture.

In the second instance, however, missionary training gave the Orientalist a clear religious conviction and a specific mission: conversion of the non-Christians, who were usually perceived as inferior to the white European Christians. The missionary Orientalist devoted his energy to two major areas of study: the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad. This is still the pivotal tradition in those leading (Christian) seminaries which promote Islamic studies both in Europe and the US.

Also, the nineteenth century witnessed the rise of a new type of Orientalism, one that was less religious and somewhat more liberal than its predecessor. This Orientalism is best exemplified by two main figures: Ernest Renan (1823-92), a French Catholic, and Ignaz Goldziher (1850-1921), a Hungarian born Jewish scholar. Hourani argues that although Renan lost his inherited Catholic faith, he "retained a basic seriousness in his search for truth." (p. 28) Renan fell under the spell of the school of philology, and basically believed that one could study a universal religion through the study of its basic terminologies, concepts, myths, and worldview.

Ignaz Goldziher, on the other hand, grew up in the secular liberal environment of Hungary in the 19th century, and though he was a highly secularized and assimilated Jew, he retained a concern for the study of Judaism as a monotheistic tradition. He believed that it was possible to study Judaism through studying the living spirit of Islam.

He opted to study Islam by examining two major principles: (1) the *Shari'ah*, and (2) the balance struck

by Islam between *Shari'ah* and *tasawwut*. The spirit of Islam, Goldziher maintained, was based on a vision of "creating and maintaining a balance between the law, the articulation of God's word into precept for action, and mysticism, the expression of the desire for holiness." (p. 41)

Underlying Hourani's discussion of Orientalism is the notion that it is a complex, empirical, pragmatic, religious-, and political-oriented movement. A wise scholar, therefore, cannot overlook its wide scholarly activities, and its research into the origins of Islam, history, and theological structure and formation. In this regard, Hourani echoes the words of the late Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988), a distinguished Pakistani scholar at the University of Chicago, who realized the potential of Orientalism, as well as the shortcomings of modern-day Muslim scholarship. To Rahman, writes Hourani, "The main work of the history of Islam . . . has been done by Western scholars, but the task should now be that of Muslims themselves." (p. 56)

Hourani considers H. A. R. Gibb as the best representative of twentieth-century Orientalism. Gibb, who, in various writings and discussions, was deeply committed to bringing out the salient features of classical and modern Islamic intellectual history, was an immense intellectual figure, who represented a living force in the British academia at the time.

'The last of the universal Arabists,' Gibb argued on behalf of applying the most developed social science concepts and methods in Islamic studies. In addition to his profound understanding of Islamic intellectual history, as an "elite culture," i.e. the product of the Islamic literati class, Gibb endeavoured to bring to light the great transformations, changes, and movements in the life of the Muslim community and the life of common people. One such example is the study of sufi *tarcaqs* and their impact on Muslim societies.

To Gibb, as well as to Hourani, Sufism has always represented vital forces in Islamic societies, past and present. In a sense, Hourani implies that the study of the "elite culture" in Islam is insufficient, since it cannot shed enough light on the dynamics of "popular culture" and its often unnoticed contributions to the life of the Muslim community. In discussing Orientalism, one cannot escape the feeling that Hourani himself is part of this eminent *silsilah* (chain) of learning. Hourani concludes his discussion of Gibb by saying that he was an intellectual and spiritual *murshid* (guide) if not the *qutb* (pole) of oriental learning. In his portrayal of T. E. Lawrence and Louis Massignon,

Hourani is very sympathetic. He considers both of them as lost European souls searching for a meaning in the desert of the Orient. Hourani maintains that "for both . . . this world was somehow a forbidden one: they had a sense of exile, of loneliness in a desolate country, of seeking something which visible forms could not give." (p. 118)

Also, "For both of them, life and travel in the world of Islam was the experience by which they became aware of themselves." (p. 118) They sought a decisive confrontation with themselves, a subjective self-examination, if you will, as a means of discovering the 'alien self in their lives.

Although Hourani thinks that Lawrence imposed a high sense of literary order on his *Seven Pillars of*

*Wisdom* (London, 1935), Massignon's work is more exceptional and lasting. The latter displayed concern for the plight of the Third World people, especially Muslims, and was distinguished by a sharp intelligence, a deep compassion, and great humility.

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1. The attempt at formulating an appropriate religious response to the West was a major preoccupation of the nineteenth century `ulama'. On this response, consult the following travel book, Sue Miller, *Disorienting Encounters: The Travels of Muhammad As-Saffar*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992.

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