

**Developing more Bonafide Versions of Islamic Studies: Some Points**

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**ABSTRACT**

Scholarship and intellectual honesty demand persistent efforts and explorations to know the truer and more bonafide versions of a tradition and phenomenon, more so in presence of hostile environment to it. Islamic Studies entails the study of the methodologies and outputs of the study of Islam as a tradition, a culture and a civilization which encompasses wide regions of the world and long period of human history. It is the study of not only the past but also the present of a living civilization with a projected future.

As the discipline of Islamic Studies was developed in the Western European Universities as a part of the 'Orientalist Studies', it naturally inherits the biases, prejudices and political and religious agenda of Europe vis-à-vis Muslims, Islam and Muslim lands. Despite hyperbolic claims of objectivity and detached scholarship the 'Orientalist Project' on Islamic Studies aimed mostly at supplying material to the Christian Proselytizing Missions for demonizing Islam and Muslims and justifying the need for 'Colonization' and 'Civilization' mission by the self-acclaimed 'Civilized West'. The study of 'inferior' by 'superior' and dominant with strong cultural antipathy has seriously dented the empathetic and sympathetic approaches to the study of Islam and Muslims.

Looking for truer and more Bonafide versions of Islamic Studies is poised to usher in an era where commonalities and areas of convergence of traditional cultures civilizations can be explored. Further such studies shall provide the middle path for the humanity where man's basic world view is shaped by the 'Divine Knowledge' and his material engagements are modified and enmeshed in the moral and spiritual edifice of the religion towards a way of salvation from materialism, this worldism and its associate evils and act as a real tribute to rediscovering the worth of 'Oriental Studies'.

**Key Words:** Methodology, Authenticity, Orientalism, Islam, Revelation

**Introduction**

Contemporary world experiences have increased strife and tension among people at various levels. Inter and intra religious, and inter and intra cultural and civilizational conflicts have taken horrible shapes. The cry for peaceful co-existence and development of harmonious relations seem to carry no appeal and

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weight. Demonization of certain religions, cultures and their associated values, norms and symbols have become the mainstay of the dominant trait of the ruling culture and civilization. Sacred texts, personalities, values and cultural and civilizational assets of some are subjected to sustained vilification, resulting in the widening chasm between various sections of the population based upon various religious and cultural orientations. Islam, Muslims, their lands, values, norms, cultural and civilizational assets continue to be the target of demonization and vilification by the dominating Western Civilization.

West's development of 'Orientalist Project' regarding 'Islamic Studies' has been suffering from prejudice, bias and cultural antipathy. Edward Said has demonstrated through his scholarly works that the West has presented the Orient the way they liked it not as it has been. Further the Western attempts at an understanding of Islam generally proceeded from not only a position of dominance and confrontation but also from cultural antipathy.<sup>1</sup> Crusades of the medieval period, colonization of the 'Era of Western Imperialism' and post-colonial 'needs' of the West in holding unchallenging sway over large tracts of Muslim lands and resources has further blinded it to see the beauty and worth of Islamic Civilization. The 'War on Terror' is the garb behind which the West has launched a new crusade to demolish Islam, Muslims, and their countries along with their cultural and civilizational assets.

#### **Islam—Not a 'Problem' but a 'Problem Solving Mechanism'**

The discipline of Islamic Studies was developed in the Western Europe to look for the 'deficiencies' of a religion and 'culture' the West despised and supply the material to the 'Christian Proselytizing Missions' to demonize Islam. West's imperialist machinery did not possess only highly trained militaries with modern weapons to conquer the countries of Asia and Africa but large Christian Missionaries also accompanied them to convert the subject races to their religion. The lure of the cheap resources of the occupied territories and exploitation of their human and material resources was concealed in the mission of 'civilizing' the 'uncivilized'. In order to ensure that the subject races suffer from inferiority complex and strip them of having the advantage of belonging to superior cultures, they were made to associate themselves with the educational system and scholarly tradition setup as a part of 'Orientalist Project'.

The general perception that 'Enlightenment' and 'Age of Science' has unleashed the forces of logic and reason and neutrality to appreciate others does not largely hold true in case of Islamic Studies. If Crusades in the medieval times reinforced the religious and cultural bias against Islam among Europeans for centuries,

colonial and post-colonial hegemonic and dominating discourses have created fresh hurdles in rescuing Islamic Studies from its otherwise historical baggage. Creation of Zionist State, control and manipulation of oil and other resources of the Muslim World has led to the ‘War on Terror’ syndrome in the garb of which many Muslim countries have been ruined and everything associated with Islam and Muslims is being demonized and ridiculed with impunity. The centers of Islamic learning are increasingly being manipulated to produce compliant scholars to collaborate with West’s and other anti-Islamic forces’ agenda on Islam and Muslims.

It is no wonder that the major function of the centers of the Islamic Studies at Cambridge, Oxford, Leiden, Sorbonne and Berlin Universities was to produce ‘Civil Servants’ trained in the art of colonial administrations, to arm Christian missionaries with arguments for conversion and produce a body of scholarship that justified European domination of Muslim lands.<sup>2</sup> The colonial legacy of these institutions of Islamic learning continues in the Western Universities with renewed vigor in the post-colonial phase as well. Islam and Muslims are studied as a ‘problem’ albeit from the perspectives of Western values and culture.

The problem of the orientalist scholarship has caused intellectual and spiritual disaster of high magnitude and serious distortions have been caused to Islam—its form and content. The languages employed for the purpose need urgent modifications to rectify the distortions and restore the brilliance of its form and content. Ismā‘īl al-Rājī al-Fārūqī comments:

The present situation of the English language—when it expresses matters pertaining to Islam, its culture, history and civilization, to the Muslim World or the Muslims, whether used by Muslims or non-Muslims—is chaotic. It constitutes an intellectual and spiritual disaster of the highest magnitude. And it carries a universal injustice against the human spirit.<sup>3</sup>

Traditional centers of Islamic learning in Muslim countries have been under pressure to update their syllabi and ‘widen’ their perspectives of religious studies to accommodate the ‘new’ perspectives on religious studies.<sup>4</sup> A chain of departments of Islamic Studies and departments of Arab and Oriental learning flourished in the so called independent world, largely shaped on the pattern of the premier institutions in the West. Resources of Islamic World have been diverted to fund and maintain the institutions of ‘Islamic learning’ which follow the West’s agenda. Ahmad Ghorab has convincingly argued how ‘Oxford Centre of Islamic Studies’ is involved in subverting Islam and engaged in the creation of a legacy of scholarship that amounts to total betrayal of Islamic ethos and how compliant

scholars from the Muslim world are made to collaborate with the West in the development of the perverted scholarly trend.<sup>5</sup>

The world is in serious crisis. The crisis is in all fields of thought and action. West's paradigm has little to offer for solutions. Western man's rebellion against 'Divine Guidance' has landed him in serious trouble. The West has in its arrogance neglected and mocked at the serious offers of alternate paradigm of thought and action. Sayyed Hossein Nasr has complained that the West focuses its attention only on the slogans and emotional outbursts emanating from the Muslim world and ignores the serious intellectuals of the Muslim world who have demonstrated in a scholarly manner the relevance of Islamic world view as a basis for solving man's gigantic problems which have hitherto remained unsolved owing to the materialistic outlook of the West.<sup>6</sup> The need of the times is to look at 'Islam' as 'Problem Solving Enterprise or Mechanism' and not a problem to be dealt with.

#### **More Bonafide Versions Needed**

The 'Orientalist Project' remains deficient in portraying the true worth of Islamic culture and civilization not only because it is sought to fulfill the unjustified needs of the West to have an "enemy" and look for 'new monsters' to serve certain functions.<sup>7</sup> According to Noam Chomsky, "the Evil Empire" was invoked when needed for domestic economic management and for controlling world systems.<sup>8</sup> The Western materialistic world view renders it incapable to appropriate and value a civilization and culture which is based on Divinely Revealed Knowledge. Islam is the only divinely revealed religion and possesses a particular world view accordingly, which contrasts and contradicts the western world view. Traditional religions based on divinely revealed knowledge have distinct metaphysics and their systems of culture and civilization cannot adequately be comprehended, appropriated and benefited if that metaphysics is not fully understood. For a proper correction in the distortion of Orientalists in Islamic Studies, one must access the authentic sources of Islamic culture and civilization where its traditional worldview, values and metaphysics are preserved and have remained untouched by the onslaught of Orientalists' invasions.

The need to look for rescuing a tradition and civilization from persistent distortion and manipulations is justified for upholding the value of truth and justice. Further, it shall facilitate the humanity to access it for solution to the problems it faces because of its hostile attitude to the divine sources of knowledge. Hence knowledge and value of Islam and its cultural, intellectual and civilizational worth must be acquired from its bonafide and loyal upholders and not from those whose loyalty

rests with its detractors and whose intellectual make up is primarily shaped by the Orientalist masters only.

Hence, accessing Islam through bonafide channels shall yield fascinating results and open up the gates of knowledge which have hitherto remained locked. A more loyal and bonafide scholarship is to seek the divine guidance to the ailing humanity which suffers from very serious crisis. In view of Richard Falk:

At present, it is mainly the consequence of globalization of western cultural influence, including its commitment to modernization, that has produced a world order crisis of multiple dimensions—nuclearism, industrialism, materialism, consumerism...<sup>9</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Islamic Studies as a discipline which has emerged and developed as a part of “Orientalist Project’ needs to be rescued to assign the legitimate position of the repository of the last revealed religion and a living culture and civilization, which has successfully resisted the invaders of the past and present. Further, a more bonafide and more loyal tradition of scholarship is poised to play as a rescuer to the contemporary global crisis on the basis of its revealed knowledge and insights. Further, Islam has projected a ‘middle path’ needed for blending of ‘living a life on earth’ and preparing for a permanent abode in the eternal bliss in the Hereafter. The spiritual and ethical basis for material enterprises puts human life on the strong and healthy pedestal and builds up human life which earns him ‘goodness’ in this world and ‘goodness’ in the Hereafter—Material life is based on spiritual foundations and enmeshed in ethical and moral edifice and saves man from the perils of this worldism and its associate evils.

## Notes and References

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Said, *Covering Islam*, New York: Vintage Books, 1977, p. 163

<sup>2</sup>ZiauddinSardar, *Islamic Futures and Policy Studies*, New York: Mansell Publishing Limited, 1985, p. 311

<sup>3</sup>Ismā‘īl al-Rājī al-Fārūqī, *Towards Islamic English*, Virginia: International Institute of Islamic thought, 1995, p. 8

<sup>4</sup>Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Pakistan are already seen affecting changes in the syllabus of Islamic studies in their religious seminaries. The other Muslim countries too are under tremendous pressure to act likewise. The Islamic seminaries in non-Muslim dominated countries like India too face pressure to affect changes in their system by governments and their sponsored institutions.

<sup>5</sup>Professor Ahmad Ghorab has stirred the intellectual world by his book *Subverting Islam: the Role of Orientalist Centres* (1995, the open press, Kualalumpur) he has served at many universities in the Gulf region as professor of Islamic Studies and has been expelled for criticising the nexus between the western powers and Muslim rulers.

<sup>6</sup>SayyedHossein Nasr in the Foreword to *Our Philosophy* by Allama Muhammad Baqir Al- Sadr, London, 1989, p. 8

<sup>7</sup>Noam Chomsky, *Deterring Democracy* ( Verso, 1991), p. 89

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 89

<sup>9</sup>Richard Falk, *Exploration at the Edge of Time: the prospects for World Order*, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992, p. 48.