

Islam and Orientalist Discourse: Need for Positive Response

*Mufti Mudasir**

Islam has indeed become the new spectre haunting the West. All too often the modern resurgence of Islam is portrayed as the new green menace—intolerant, medieval and barbaric—which has replaced Communism as the main threat to Western Civilization and its values. The Islam industry which produces countless books every year perpetuates the image of Islam as shown by the critics of Orientalism like Edward Said.¹ For centuries the Western writers depicted Islam in the most derogatory terms, sometimes equating it with fanaticism, as in Voltaire's *Mahomet, or Fanaticism* (1745), sometimes as the embodiment of tyranny pure and simple as in the views of Francis Bacon and quite often as primitive and even barbaric as in the following words of Ernest Renan's inaugural lecture at the College de France in 1862, which best represents the spirit of Orientalist discourse in its Islamic mode:

Islam is the complete negation of Europe.... Islam is the disdain of science, the suppression of civil society; it is the appalling simplicity of civil society, restricting the human mind, closing it to all delicate ideas, to all refined sentiment, to all rational research, in order to keep it facing an eternal tautology: God is God.²

These ideas still serve to explain the dominant Western views about Islam. The events such as the Iranian Revolution, the Muslim response to Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* and finally the 9/11 episode have made Islam into the most threatening menace in the Western eyes. It is the demon that needs to be understood in order to be controlled. There seems to be an ever increasing tendency towards a more openly polemical and rhetorical treatment of Islam than one came across in the classical Oriental works. The scholarship

*Sr. Assistant Professor, Department of English, University of Kashmir, Srinagar, 190006.

of the likes of Montgomery Watt,³ Wilfred Cantwell Smith⁴ and Hamilton Gibb⁵ is increasingly giving way to the polemical and openly hostile works. In fact the invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan and military intervention in many other Islamic regions is a clear indication that violence and language of violence go together. There can be little doubt that the prevalent representations of Islam are actuated by an explicit aim to tame the “unruly beast”. There is a tendency to essentialize Islam in terms of fixed representative tropes and symbols. As against the West which is defined by reason, freedom and perfectibility, Islam is defined by unreason, despotism and backwardness. This tendency is manifested in the way Islamic history is characteristically approached with certain prefigured and fixed conceptual categories seeking to essentialize Islam in terms of certain beliefs and attitudes. This xenophobia, as it has rightly been called, is the dominant trend of present-day Islamic Orientalism. One can readily identify the contours of this modern Orientalist discourse by looking at how everything Islamic is identified with categories of thought which are supposed to be antithetical to those espoused by the West.

The point to be understood is that this discourse on Islam does not simply appear to project Western imaginative constructions on the reality of Islam but evinces all signs of a serious, unprejudiced and objective scholarship. And yet, what is very noticeable is how this enterprise of understanding Islam is premised upon certain beliefs firmly entrenched in the Western mindset. One of the epistemic postulates of the Western discourses on Islam is the predilection to explain any feature of the Islamic contemporary social, political and religious history in terms of origins. The label of ‘original’ Islam, viewed as structurally flawed, is a recurrence and the penchant for discovering the origins seems to be the defining feature of all research. Investigating the beginnings of Islam, historical or textual, is thought to be holding the key to understanding any aspect of Islamic history, institutions, societies and thought. To enumerate a few instances of this tendency, there have been attempts to trace the roots of the Iran-Iraq war to the

conflict between Ali and Muawiyah in the seventh century and that of the Islamic Revolution of Iran to the martyrdom complex originating in the events at Karbala in the seventh century. Little attention is paid to the immediate conditions preceding these events and lesser still to the role of the Western powers in creating the conditions which precipitated them. This preoccupation with origins and beginnings to explain the contemporary history leads to positing a series of causal links which are more often than not facetious. What, in any case, emerges from these studies is an attempt to posit an essential Islam explainable in terms of a few universal, immutable and fixed attitudes. Reducing the immense diversity and plurality of Islam to a supposed essentialist core thus becomes a structural feature of the Orientalist discourse in its Islamic mode. In all this, two cardinal sins that Hegel warned against— that of essentializing and de-historicizing— are repeatedly committed.

Another notable feature of the Orientalist discourse is the tendency to deny to Islam that which seems to transgress these projected categories. Thus, Islamic philosophy is shown to be almost entirely derived from the earlier non-Islamic sources, Sufism is explained as essentially incompatible with true Islam and great thinkers of Islam are shown to occupy its fringes. The current Western challenge to Islam has to be comprehended in its two-fold nature; first, the challenge to religion as such by the Enlightenment tradition culminating in the postmodernist attack on concepts of history, human subject and truth; and second, the assault on the doctrinal and legal framework of Islam. The post-Enlightenment Western thought came to be identified essentially as a reaction against centuries of intellectual hegemony of the Church and the world-view it espoused because the Enlightenment itself was seen as implacably opposed to religion. The Enlightenment stance on religion was best represented in the works of philosophers such as David Hume and Ludwig Feuerbach, the latter arguing that religion was itself a projection of man's alienation from himself. The ideas of Marx and Engels lent further support to this thesis.⁶

One is, therefore, intrigued by the attempts made by some people during the emergence of socialist trends in the Arab world to reconcile Islam and Marxism.

Islam, understandably, did not figure prominently in the works of these philosophers because Christianity exemplified the essence of religion for them. Hence Spinoza, Hume, Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Marx, Russell and several others confined their discussions mostly to Christianity. It was when Islam was the subject of study that a different set of postulates came into play. Now it was not God as such but the God of the Qur'an, not prophethood as such but the prophethood of Muhammad (SAAS) which was under discussion. One of the most prolific contemporary writers on Islam is Kenneth Cragg who has authored several books including *The Event of the Qur'an* (1971), *Muhammad and the Christian* (1984), *Jesus and the Muslim* (1985), *Readings in the Qur'an* (1988) *Troubled by Truth* (1992), *Returning to Mount Hira: Islam in Contemporary Terms* (1994), *The Weight in the Word - Prophethood: Biblical and Quranic* (1999), *Muhammad in the Quran: The Task and the Text* (2001). Although marking a significant departure from his predecessors in making an attempt to engage with Islam on more or less its own terms, Cragg nonetheless finds it extremely hard to accept the Quranic idea of verbal revelation which requires belief in the objective nature of the Quran apart from the personality of the Prophet (SAAS). Trying hard to argue that the Christian idea of revelation in body and flesh, embodied in the person of Christ, is equally valid, he betrays his predilection to problematize the concept of a verbal revelation. He seems especially interested in probing the delicate question of the relation between the Qur'an and the *Sirah*. Although stating his position in these words:

We are not then attributing the "genesis" of the Qur'an to Muhammad, nor - in any final sense - its "composition". We are seeking to understand how these, with wholly divine initiative, engaged the Prophet's "heart and mind", staying, that is, inside Islam's own premises.⁷

he nonetheless wants Muslims to rethink the idea of the Prophet's status as 'unlettered' and minces no words asserting: the fact that, in measure, Muhammad was in debt to Jewish contacts, perhaps Jewish tutors, for elements of the Qur'an's allusions to Jewish Haggada, only made the final tension [between the Prophet Muhammad and the Jewish community] more acute.⁸

One appreciates Cragg's attempt towards a more sympathetic engagement with Islam, but wonders why he fails to distance himself from the orthodox Christian position that has refused the Prophet of Islam the honesty and integrity not uncommon even in ordinary men and women. Refusing to acknowledge the Prophet as unlettered and asserting that he had 'Jewish tutors' can only be interpreted in a way that would jeopardize his entire project of engaging with Islam on its own terms. What is, however, even more disconcerting than the above phenomenon is the increasingly tenacious hold on the Western popular imagination of the idea of Islam as the only capable power of not just undermining but destroying the very foundations on which the Western civilization is built. This trend, fuelled by the events of September 11, and fostered by some influential theories like that of Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilizations', is rightly termed as Islamophobia, literally, 'the fear of Islam'. The recent interest in Islam shown by the West is undoubtedly more because of this phobia rather than an attempt at sympathetic understanding which is rather rare. Some of the titles which have undertaken a study of this phenomenon include John Esposito's *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (1994), Norman Daniel's *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image* (2000), Jack Shaheen's *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (2011) and Chris Allen's *Islamophobia* (2011). These works provide some useful insights into how a particular image of Islam and Muslims is created in the media and literature to pander to the firmly rooted fantasies of the Western mind. Chris Allen, for example, has this to say about Europe's idea of Islam:

...Europe saw Islam as presenting a three-prong

challenge to its stronghold and wellbeing. First, Islam was both a religious and social ideology, one perceived to be able to challenge Europe's relative stability. Second, it was a proselytic religion, one that had the ability to challenge the ascendancy of the Roman Church as well as the expansion of Christianity. And third, if Islam was to be understood as a new dispensation from Heaven—one that was claiming to have completed the Abrahamic revelation—not only might it be argued theologically that it had superseded Christianity but through conversion and any social foothold gained with Europe's borders, so it might have had the potential to confine Christianity to the spiritual, theological and social wildernesses.⁹

And after a few pages he goes into the heart of the matter: Largely driven by political, economic and militaristic concerns, the eighteenth century simultaneously also witnessed a number of European countries expanding their empires across the globe. With imperial growth and academic inquiry functioning in close collaboration, new understandings about Islam and the Muslim world began to emerge that were not only premised and established as being rationalized and scholarly, but endorsed by power too. Emerging out of understandings that had for centuries considered Islam and Muslims as an enemy and rival, so newly emergent meanings began to be perceived from a more dominant position.¹⁰

Chris Allen's analysis clearly testifies to Edward Said's main argument in his book, *Orientalism*, that there existed a very intimate relation between power and knowledge with relation to the standard descriptions of Islam by the Western scholars. Said's memorable words have certainly not lost their sheen:

[Orientalism represented] a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.... Without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—even produce—the Orient politically,

sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period.¹¹

Despite some serious criticism of Said's foundational thesis that Orientalism has to be understood as discourse in Michel Foucault's sense of the word, it remains cogent and powerful. As is well known, Said found it important to distance himself from the epistemological skepticism underlying Foucault's idea of discourse. Although agreeing with him that discourses have to be understood as practices that systematically form the object which they speak and that a discursive structure is essentially characterized by the systematicity of ideas and opinions, Said did not share Foucault's view that there can be no possible way of escaping the circumscribing power of discourse and that the idea of true knowledge is a humanist illusion. For Said, the real Orient does exist and it is possible to know it as it is.

There is no doubt that the West's attitude to Islam has evoked diverse responses from the Muslims. However, not many of them have been positive. One of the most influential is the one manifested in some radical trends which seek to represent Islam in essentially monolithic terms and, ironically, like most Western writers, regard legal reform within it as its betrayal. Both seem obsessed with origins and a changeless ahistorical irreducibility and seem to conceive of the historical process as an aberration, distortion and corruption of the pristine Islam.¹²

A positive response to the state of affairs discussed above lies in what can be described as the revival of Islamic reason which will base itself on the rich tradition of philosophy within Islam. Although comprehensive in its range, it will reject both the literalism and ahistoricism of those groups which refuse to come to terms with the fact of historical change as well as the Orientalist notions based on these perceptions. It will repudiate the idealization of the past which is often based on a romantic notion of it, take seriously the phenomenon of historical change and resist the myths of cultural essentialism. It will resist the exclusivist and reactionary tendencies within Islam as strongly as it will repudiate a full-blooded

secularism. It will not fail to see that Islam's encounter with the West, howsoever disastrous politically, nevertheless made a view from outside possible, thus affording historical Islam an opportunity of self-criticism. It will address the habit prevalent among the masses of living in an imaginary world that is incongruent with reality and the mindset that drives some people resolutely to ignore the demands of temporality and to deny the historicity of ideas wrongly perceived to be religious. It will see Reason and Revelation complimenting rather than contradicting each other and emphasize the need to grasp the world-view of the Qur'an rather than an adherence to the dominant piecemeal or atomistic approach of the traditional exegesis which results in a pernicious legalism. All this will, of course, not mean any compromise on the belief in transcendence, an absolutely vital ground if value has to be saved from disintegrating into history and context.

The call to revive Islamic Reason is not new but in the current scenario it assumes an unprecedented significance. It is well known that *kalam* came into existence to provide a philosophical foundation to those theological doctrines which had their origin in the Revelation. In spite of Ghazali's arguably devastating critique of *kalam* and other philosophical formulations which had arisen from the convergence of principles derived from Greek thought and Islam, philosophical thought was not completely snuffed out.¹³ Ibn Rushd's rejoinder to Ghazali's *Tahaafah* is itself a proof of this¹⁴. But there is no point denying that after Ghazali philosophy increasingly came to be regarded with suspicion, more likely to be frowned upon than looked upon with approval. Following his spectacular triumph, Ghazali, as Iqbal also observed, helped deepen the wedge between Reason and Revelation, making the latter the sole source of religion, and insisting on a complete surrender of Reason to it¹⁵. The consequences of this severance between the two fountainheads of Islam were, as Fazlur Rahman and some other scholars have pointed out, disastrous for the intellectual life of the Muslims. Recreating an intellectual space for Reason should in no case be misconstrued as a step towards some kind of 'natural

theology' within Islam and hence there can be no question of an apologetic stance which tries to demythologize faith by appealing to a false notion of Reason. If the principal error of 'apologetic Islam' lay in misapprehending the true character of Reason, trying to explain away the supernatural with a characteristic naiveté, the principal error of most 'radical groups' lay in the inability or unwillingness to distinguish the nucleus of Islam from its more temporal and mutable aspects. Considering the plethora of academic and non-academic works which flow every day from all over the world on Islam, the Qur'an and the Muslims, it is imperative that a response which is indigenous and authentically Islamic, rather than purely pragmatic or secular, be evolved. At a time when Western scholars are revisiting some of their long-established assumptions for understanding Islam, it would be sad if the Muslim scholars fail to take the initiative to address the problems and leave the field of Islamic studies entirely to the Orientalist.

References

- ¹ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York; Pantheon, 1978.
- ² Ernest Renan. *Oeuvres Completes*. Paris, France: Calmann-Livy, 1947, Vol. 2, p 333.
- ³ He was a famous Orientalist of 20th Century who wrote extensively on the Prophet's (SAAS) Sirah (*Muhammad at Mecca, Muhammad at Madina and Muhamad! Prophet and Statesman*) and Islamic theology, (*Formative Period of Islamic Thought and Islamic Theology and Philosophy*). Recently some studies have been made on Watt like *Islam aur Mushtashriqin*, Lucknow *Sirah of Prophet Muhammad (SAW) and the orientalism: A Study of Approach of William Montgomery Watt* (Unpublished Ph.D Thesis) Shah-i-Hamadan Institute of Islamic Studies, University of Kashmir, Srinagar.
- ⁴ He also belongs to modern times and has written on modern Islamic history and comparative religion. *Islam in Modern History* and *Modern Islam in India* are his renowned works.
- ⁵ H.R.Gibb is renowned for his *Studies on the civilization of Islam and Modern Trends in Islam*, Beacon Press, 1962.
- ⁶ See Maryam Jamila, *Islam Versus the West*, M.M. I. Delhi and Khurshid Ahmad *Socialism and Islam*, Kuwait.
- ⁷ Kenneth Cragg. *Muhammad in the Quran: The Task and The Text*.

- London: Melisende, 2001, p.10.
- ⁸ *ibid.* p.79.
- ⁹ Chris Allen. *Islamophobia* London: Ashgate, 2011, p.26.
- ¹⁰ *ibid.* p.30.
- ¹¹ Edward Said. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon, 1978, p.3.
- ¹² The issue is also subject of John L. Esposito (ed.) *Political Islam: Revolution, Radicalism or Reform*(Routlage London)and Iftikar H.Malik, *Crescent between Cross and Star*(Oxford, Karachi).
- ¹³ This criticism is made by Ghazzali in his renowned work, *Tahfat al-Falasifah* (Incoherence of the Philosophers).
- ¹⁴ Ibn Rushd has made the refutation of Ghazzali's work in *Tanfath-al-Tahafah*.
- ¹⁵ For a detailed discussion on reason and revelation see first chapter of Allama Iqbal's *Reconstruction of Religious Thought*, Lahore.