

The Western Response to Islam An Overview

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In the encounter between the world and the West that has been going on by now for four or five hundred years, the world, not the West is the party that, up to now has had the significant experience. It has not been the West that has been hit by the world; it is the world that has been hit— and hit hard— by the West. The West (the world will say) has been the arch aggressor of modern times. And certainly the world's judgement on the West does seem to be justified over a period of about four and a half centuries ending in 1950.

(Arnold Toynbee, 'The World and the West in *Reith Lectures*).

This is Arnold Toynbee. One would only like to add that this aggression did by no means stop in 1950 but has continued to surge forward with renewed vigour though with cleverly manoeuvred change in strategy. One would also like to replace the word, 'world' by the word 'Islam' and then the quote would scintillate with precision and perspicuity.

The relationship of Islam and the West is a subject that has been profusely written about from various angles which include the Western Orientalist, the apologetic, the Islamic and the so-called historically objective and ideology-free angles. This brief write-up is designed to show the continuity and the near-consistency of the Western attitude to Islam in spite of the changing and sometimes even radically changing, perspective of the West on life, universe and almost on

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every other sphere of the world and its affairs. This attitude has persisted right from Islam's first encounter with the West up to the present time in a way which unmistakably points to its origins in the collective unconscious and cultural memory of the West. In relation to Islam the attitude of the West, on the whole (individual exceptions excluded), has not been merely that of reconstructing it with the intention of ultimately dominating and possessing it, as Edward Said's view of Orientalism so convincingly sets forth, but goes far beyond. The desire to dominate and possess does not always indicate hatred and phobia but may be reflective of a feeling of condescension and the holier-than-thou sentiment which looks on all that is non-white as the Whiteman's burden. With Islam the West has had and continues to have a special relationship—the relationship towards an adversary. The origins of the relationship are rooted in the collective unconscious of the West but it has been fed and nurtured in a deliberately planned manner.

Paradoxically the West has responded to Islam in this way even when its collective life had an apparently religious orientation. If we, for our convenience, divide the development of the Western civilization into two distinct phases—the medieval pre-Renaissance and the modern post-Renaissance phases—we notice the same revulsion against Islam in either of these phases though the first of these phases had an obvious religious orientation whereas the second phase was impervious to religion. In fact the Western civilization as it developed through the Middle ages to the Renaissance appears to have been composed of two ideological strands which, in Cantwell Smith's words, are the Graeco-Roman, and the Palestinian-Biblical strands. After the West embraced Christianity the Graeco-Roman strand which shaped the Western life until then, was overshadowed by the Palestinian-Biblical strand. The latter was introduced to the West in the shape of Pauline Christianity. Asceticism became the ideal of a virtuous life and the West was studded all over with abbeys and monasteries. Strangely the religious leadership of the Christian Europe—the Church—was in close alignment with the establishment of the day and the two together resisted all change, including advances in science, as a sign of destabilization. Consequently scientists like Bruno and Galileo

were severely persecuted. When Renaissance came and science triumphed, the West took an anti-religious direction. The Graeco-Roman spirit reasserted itself with a new-found vigour and materialism and secularism became the guiding principles of living. Now Islam as it is opposed to a system of belief and life is as much opposed to asceticism and escape from life as any materialistic and body-centred philosophy of life. It aims at the reconciliation of spirit and matter and body and soul on the basis of the cultivation of the soul and soul-directed bodily activity. The medieval pre-Renaissance West rejected Islam primarily for its humanism in addition to unfounded superstition whereas the post-Renaissance West discarded it for its spirituality:

زاہد ننگ نظر نے مجھے کافر جانا

اور کافر یہ سمجھتا ہے مسلمان ہوں میں (Muini 1966:142)

The narrow-viewing ascetic dubbed me an unbeliever
And the unbeliever takes me as steeped in faith

The following discourse will explain this brief comment which is central to the main thesis of this essay.

Islam's first encounter with the West came through the conquest of Spain. At that time Europe was enveloped in darkness and ignorance and unacquainted even with the elementaries of a cultured and civilized life. In the midst of this darkness Islam lit the lamp of knowledge and science in Europe and produced a specimen of a universalist and humanitarian civilization which Europe had never experienced before. Unfortunately the second great meeting of Islam and the West came in the form of the Crusades whose war cry is summed up in Pope Urban II's clarion call to the Christendom to wage war on the wicked race. The legacy of the Crusades in the West is no past history but continuous to live on it the Western psyche. The medieval pre-Renaissance attitude of the West to Islam is partly based on this subconscious abhorrence, partly on ignorance and partly on monastic Pauline Christianity's aversion to Islam's humanism. Gradually the medieval West came to look upon Islam as a) a religion of secularism and self-indulgence and

b) a religion of sword and violence. The prophet of Islam, Muhammad (*sal Allahu alaihi wasallam*), was seen as, *al-a'iaz-u bi-Allah* (God forbid), the anti-Christ, an impostor, the black idol worshipped by the Beduins and the accursed word... was given wide currency. All this for the prophet who ordained it as an article of faith that no one can be a Muslim unless he believes in all the messengers of Allah and the books revealed unto them. As the Qur'an says:

قُولُوا آمَنَّا بِاللَّهِ وَمَا
 أَنْزَلَ إِلَيْنَا وَمَا أَنْزَلَ إِلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ
 وَالْأَسْبَاطِ وَمَا أُوتِيَ مُوسَىٰ وَعِيسَىٰ وَمَا أُوتِيَ النَّبِيُّونَ
 مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ لَا نَفَرِّقُ بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِنْهُمْ وَنَحْنُ لَهُ مُسْلِمُونَ

(البقره: ۱۳۶)

Say we believe in Allah and in that which was revealed unto us and that which was revealed unto Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac, Jacob and the tribes and that which was given to Moses and Jesus and that which was given to the Prophets by their Lord; we do not discriminate against any one of them and we obey Allah.

Muslims, who profess this faith, were called in the medieval West by such names as 'infidels', 'miscreants', 'pagnims', 'heathens', 'heathen hounds', 'enemies of God', 'Gentiles' and 'circumcised dogs'. Many Christian knights were adored for having broken or stolen the idol of Mahomet (*Muhammad sal Allahu alaihi wasallam*), who wound up all idol-worship once for all and called himself God's slave and messenger). Roland and Bevis of Hampton were credited with this achievement. Rinaldo of Montalban was glorified for the daring robbery of the golden Mahometan idol in *Don Quixote*. Dante's presentation of the prophet of mercy and his son-in-law and the fourth caliph, Ali, in the 'Inferno' of his *Divine*

Comedy is too shameful and embarrassing to quote. Indeed it is an insult to history and to literature alike. Meredith Jones adequately sums up the medieval Western view of Muslims:

[Saracens] are evil people, they spend their lives in hating and mocking at Christ and in destroying His churches, They are the children of the author of all evil, the Devil: like their ancestor, they hate God and are constantly placing themselves under the protection of Satan.* ... they are frequently presented as monstrosities; many of them are giants, whole tribes have horns on their heads, others are black as devils. They rush into battle making weird noises comparable to the barking of dogs. They are intensely emotional and excitable people, readily giving way to tears of joy and anger, always going from one emotional extreme to another. Socially they are embodiment of all foul practices. Thus they use slaves, they eat their prisoners, they buy and sell their womenfolk; and they practise polygamy. (Jones 1942:204-205).

Thevenot wrote in his travelogue that “the Turks do not believe that women go to Heaven and hardly account them Rational Creatures” (Thevenot 1687:560)

The post-Renaissance Western response to Islam is much more complex ranging from objective and sympathetic study, deliberate misrepresentation, dexterous distortion camouflaged by an apparent impartiality to positive acceptance by a rare individual here and there. For my convenience I divide this response into three categories:

I) Positive acceptance

As hinted above this attitude has never assumed the proportions of a movement or a force to reckon with but has generally remained confined to individuals like Marmaduke Pickthall, Muhammad Asad (Leopold Veis), Frithjof Schuon, Martin Lings, Maryam Jameela and Maurice Bucaille. Most of these outstandingly enlightened individuals could break themselves off the traditional

*This is how the Islamic way of seeking God's shelter against the evil of Satan is interpreted. God, save

us: أَعُوذُ بِاللَّهِ مِنَ الشَّيْطَانِ الرَّجِيمِ GRM

conscious and unconscious shackles to look at Islam from an impartial perspective. Most of them too mastered Arabic language and studied the Qur'an and the Sunnah in their original tongue and consequently discovered the truth of Islam and the universal relevance of its fundamental principles in their own terms.

II) Sympathetic and Objective Presentation of Sorts.

This category includes a whole host of names whose attitude to Islam is not alike but all of them exhibit an objectivity of sorts. In case of some of them this objectivity seems to be natural and spontaneous whereas in case of others it seems studied and deliberately contrived. Some of them seem unprejudiced at heart whereas in the writings of others prejudice lurks in subtle and hidden ways. These names include Thomas Carlyle, Thomas Arnold, R.A. Nicholson, H.A.R. Gibb, Philip K. Hitti, A.J. Arberry, Montgomery Watt, George Sarton, G.W. Leitner, Kenneth Cragg, Alfred Guillaume, Allisandro Bausani, Annemarie Schimmel, Lois Beck, John Esposito, Ross Dunn, Michael Hart, William Chittick, Edward Said, Hastings Donnan, Francis Robinson, Cantwell Smith and Michael Giles. To see what a great difference of both kind and degree exists among these writers one may note, on one hand, how Thomas Carlyle, one amongst the first sympathetic Western students of Islam, speaks of the Qur'an which he calls Muhammad's book:

A wearisome confused jumble, crude, incondite, endless, iterations, longwindedness, entanglement; most crude, incondite, insupportable stupidity. (Said 1978:152).

And mark also the twisted statements of scholars like Gibb, Hitti and Cantwell Smith. Sometimes one wishes to categorise them with those who consciously carry on the medieval legacy. On the other hand, however, we come across in this grouping writers like G.W. Leitner whose understanding of Islam is extraordinarily unbiased. Note for instance the following passage about the Qur'an:

I believe we are now advancing towards a better understanding of this most remarkable book. But we still find in its translation such passages, for instance, as, "when in war women are captured, take those that

are not married.” The meaning is nothing so arbitrary. The expression for take that we have there is *ankohu*—marry, i.e. take in marriage or *nikah*, as no alliance can be formed with even a willing captive taken in war, except through the process of *nikah*, which is the religious marriage contract. Again we have the passage “kill the infidels wherever you find them.” There again is shown the want of sympathetic knowledge, which is distinct from the knowledge of our translators who render ‘qatil’ by ‘kill, when it merely means ‘fight’ and refers to an impending engagement with enemies who were then attacking Muhammad's camp. (Leitner 1893: Appendix VIII, p:5).

III) The Heirs of Medieval Legacy

This category consists of the majority of the Western scholars and their name is legion. It will be tedious to draw up a list of even the most prominent ones from them but their point of view is fairly represented by the outstanding names to whom reference is made below. Some of these faithful heirs to the medieval legacy of hatred and revulsion are forthright in their denunciation of Islam while others try to cover it under the veneer of scientific objectivity. Sir William Jones was one of those extraordinary Western scholars who studied the Oriental languages, literatures and religions very thoroughly and most of them in their original sources. His translations include those of *Mollakāt* and the *Sirajiyah* (about Muslim law), yet this is how he speaks of the Qur'an:

The Qur'an shines indeed with a borrowed light, since most of its beauties are taken from our scriptures. (Jones 1799: 1,279)

This is reminiscent of many a Western scholar like Edward Fitzgerald:

The pen of ‘KUN’— Esto. The famous passage of Creation stolen from Genesis by the Qur'an. (Fitzgerald 1856:289).

Fitzgerald had spent a whole life time in the Eastern lore particularly in the poetic world of Omar Khayyam and this is where his scholarly labours lead him.

Jones also calls the paradise of Muhammad as a sensual paradise in contrast to the idea of Beatitude underlying the concept of *Mu'iti* and Elysian happiness. Does he forget (or choose to forget), in spite of his great learning, that according to the Qur'an and the pronouncements of the Prophet of Islam the greatest bliss of

those who enter paradise will be their union with God and achievement of His pleasure (*ridwān*) and a blissful and everlasting life (*khulud*)? How does he ignore the Qur'anic definition of paradise as

وَلَكُمْ فِيهَا مَا تَشْتَهُ أَنْفُسُكُمْ وَلَكُمْ فِيهَا مَا تَدْعُونَ (خم.سجدة:٣١)

There for you is what your hearts desire and there for you is what you asks for.

And

فَلَا تَعْلَمُ نَفْسٌ مَّا أُخْفِيَ لَهُمْ مِّن قُرَّةِ أَعْيُنٍ جَزَاءً بِمَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ (السجدة:١٤)

No soul yet knows what has been reserved for it of the soothing delights of eye— the recompense for good deeds.

How in spite of being a connoisseur of literature does Jones forget that while speaking of paradise, the Qur'an speaks in the language of symbol and metaphor? Otherwise the Prophet speaks of its as

ملا عين رأت ولا أذن سمعت ولا خطر على قلب بشر (بخارى و مسلم عن ابى هريرة)

That which no eye did ever see, nor did any ear hear of it nor did it occur to any human mind.

The fact is that *Jannah* as presented by the Qur'an and the Prophet's explanations of it in his traditions is, like the Islamic system itself, an ideal combination of the spiritual and the sensual with the spiritual as the governing element—the ultimate:

وَعَدَ اللَّهُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا
الأنهارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا وَمَسَاكِنَ طَيِّبَةً فِي جَنَّاتِ عَدْنٍ
وَرِضْوَانٌ مِّنَ اللَّهِ أَكْبَرُ ذَلِكَ هُوَ الْفَوْزُ الْعَظِيمُ

(التوبة:٣١)

Allah has promised believing men and women paradises under which flow streams and wherein they shall live for ever; elegant mansions

placed in everlasting gardens; and— God's pleasure the greatest (recompense). This indeed is success supreme.

Indeed it is mindboggling to understand how the modern materialistic West which has turned its back on all that is spiritual should castigate Islam for sensuality and this-worldliness so that even a balanced historian like Toynbee has this to say:

Islam as an institution has suffered throughout its history from the note of secularity which has been characteristic of it hitherto. In so far as this note of secularity has been a social blemish in the history of Islam, it must also be regarded as having been a personal misfortune in the career of Muhammad. (Toynbee 1951: III, 468).

If a historian gifted with the vision and farsightedness of Toynbee fails to see the exquisite synthesis, in the life-example of the holy Prophet, of beauty and grandeur and of spirit and matter; if he is unable to appreciate the grand miracle of the Prophet in saying yes to life's responsibilities but yet discharging them under the direction of a purified and unworldly soul; if his sense of history fails to marvel at the way in which the Prophet engaged himself in the mission of fulfilling the social and economic needs of the society but making all this subservient to the highest moral and spiritual ideals— in short if he fails to see how the Prophet brought God to the very centre of the life and the world (God, who had been confined to monasteries and caves)— then something is incorrigibly wrong with the Western mind-set vis-a-vis Islam

Professor Margoliouth in his book, *Life of the Prophet*, calls the Prophet “the bandit mystic of Arabia”. And this is how Joseph Gaer expands this idea in his popular book, *How the Great Religions Began*:

And Muhammad returned to his followers and told them that the angel of God had come to him, instructed him to go out and waylay the caravans carrying goods from Mecca to foreign lands. Muhammad and his followers went out plundering caravans. And whatever they plundered was divided equally among them. The success of their attacks on caravans, Muhammad explained to his followers, proved that Allah was with him. (Gaer 1954:205).

This is more-or-less the way in which Islam is looked at by Edward Gibbon,

Voltaire, H.G. Wells, Stanley Lane-Poole, William Muir, George Sale (notwithstanding his pioneering translation of the Qur'an) and Louis Massignon in spite of his glorification of Mansoor al-Hallaj as if he were the only heroic figure in the annals of Islam. Or, shall we say, he deliberately chose him rather than any one else to lionise.

Not seldom does it happen that the Western scholars in their frenzy to malign Islam, become downright ludicrous and farcical. What can illustrate it better than the apocryphal and malicious story so consistently perpetuated by Western intellectuals about the burning of the central library at Alexandria. Gibbon, in his *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, has given a graphic description of this unfounded and deliberately fabricated myth accepted unquestioningly by the Western mind. It is related that when Muslim conquerors reached Alexandria in the seventh century A.D., they sought instructions from the Caliph about the library and were told that if the books are in accordance with the Qur'an, they are unnecessary and may be destroyed and if they contradict the Qur'an, they are dangerous and should certainly be destroyed. Gibbon himself, on historical evidence, does not believe in this story nor has any other genuine historian found it worthy of serious consideration but yet it continues to be repeated as if it were an established fact. This crime is committed brazenfacedly against the religion whose holy book was inaugurated with *iqra* (read) and *a'llama bi al-qalam* (Allah imparted knowledge through the pen) and whose Prophet declared that God's angels spread their wings in the paths of the seekers of knowledge and that men of learning are the heirs of the legacy of God's prophets.

Yet another instance of the supercilious and facetious attitude of the West towards Islam. Professor Brockleman, one of the leading German Orientalists, writes that Muhammad permitted "the selfish and self-centred Arabs" to pray for mercy on them and on Muhammad only and on no one else. This is a deliberate distortion of an incident in which the Prophet expressly taught a Bedouin who was praying in this way that he should ask for God's mercy for all. Quite natural from the Prophet who is described by the Qur'an as *rahmatan li al-alamīn* (mercy

unto all mankind) and the messenger of *Rab al-alam* (the nourisher of all the worlds).

Even a serious and sympathetic writer like Professor Guillaume in his penguin book on Islam, while speaking of modern Islam in the subcontinent, refers to the four most prominent leaders of Islamic thought as Sir Syed Ahmad Khan, Justice Amir Ali, Mohammad Iqbal and Shaikh Mohammad Ashraf. Justice Amir Ali was an ordinary writer like so many numerous writers on Islam and could, by no stretch of imagination, be regarded as a leader in Islamic thought and Shaikh Mohammad Ashraf; he was a known bookseller of Lahore. These two have been picked up along with Mohammad Iqbal and Sir Syed as the leading Islamic thinkers of the subcontinent overlooking such stalwarts as Mawlana Abul Kalam Azad and Mawlana Abul A'la Mawdudi:

The present attitude of the West towards Islam remains, in essence, unchanged with the difference that there is heard a voice of dissent, of sanity here and there but it is drowned in the pandemonium of belligerent voices sustained and manipulated by misinformation, disinformation and perversion. Here is how Conor Cruise O'Brien argues the case of the repulsiveness of the Muslim society in an article published in *The Times* (London) of 11 May 1989:

It [Muslim society] looks repulsive because it is repulsive. A Westerner who claims to admire Muslim society, while still adhering to Western values, is either a hypocrite or an ignoramus, or a bit of both. At the heart of the matter is the Muslim family, an abominable institution... Arab and Muslim society is sick, and has been sick for a long time. In the last century the Arab [sic] thinker Jamal al-Afghani wrote: 'Every Muslim is sick and his only remedy is in the Koran'. Unfortunately the sickness gets worse the more the remedy is taken.

This is a clear echo of William Gladstone's proclamation in the British parliament that so long as the Qur'an existed there can be no peace in the world.

Of late the West has found a new stick to beat Islam with. It is now identified with terrorism. Having terrorised with superior force many downtrodden nations, a majority of whom unfortunately happens to be Muslims, and having usurped the homelands of some of them and having taken over as tutors to teach some of them

democracy and civilization by killing them and devastating their lands and plundering their resources, it dubs their resistance to terrorism as terrorism.

This scenario is by no means heartening. As a civilizational and cultural entity it seems difficult that the body-centred West can come to terms with Islam which accepts body only in terms of the soul. Samuel P. Huntington's idea of the clash of civilizations seems to have quite some substance from this point of view though he fails to identify the real ground of the contradiction and though his emphasis invariably falls on the superiority of the West. When we add to this fundamental civilizational difference of perspective the West's inveterate intellectual and emotional aversion towards Islam, the situation assumes grimmer proportions. But the salvation of mankind does not lie that way. The West's prodigious material resources and technological power have to be reconciled with the wholesome spiritual values of the East. It seems that the West's boundless might, in the absence of any moral and spiritual control, is running amuck and threatening not only the West but the whole of the world. No lessons have been learnt from the past two World Wars, especially the nuclear holocaust of 1945, and the third War still looms large on the horizon. Iqbal warned:

رکھتا ہے اب تک میخانہ شرق وہ مے کہ روشن جس سے ہو ادراک
اہل نظر ہیں یورپ سے نومید ان امتوں کے باطن نہیں پاک

(Iqbal 1975:575-76).

The tavern of the East is still in possession
Of the liquor that lights up the mind and the heart.
Men of vision are despaired of Europe—
These peoples' souls are dark and impure.

If mankind is to be saved the East-West gulf is to be bridged. That was the cherished dream of two of the greatest sage-poets of the West and the East— Goethe and Iqbal. In the conclusion of one of his poems, Goethe wrote:

The East and the West
Can no long remain apart. (Goethe 1949:179).

And Iqbal wrote in his great *Javid Namah*:

غربیاں را زیر کی سازِ حیات شرقیاں را عشق را ز کائنات
خیز و نقش عالم دیگر بنه عشق را با زیر کی آمیزدہ

(Iqbal 1973:653).

For the Westerners Reason is the proper equipment of life
While for the Easterners Love is the secret of the Universe.
Arise and lay the foundations of a new world order
By combining Reason with Love.

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