

An Application and Appraisal of Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi's Views about Orientalists' Stratagems and Contribution

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ABSTRACT

Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi is an eminent Muslim thinker and prolific writer who has produced invaluable literature on a variety of Islamic themes. The following research article deals with his views regarding orientalist's academic strategies and their contribution to Islamic studies. The article is split up into three parts: the first part deals with his views vis-à-vis orientalist's stratagems and contributions, the second part focuses on the application of his views to the works of some leading English writers and the third part consists of precious specimens of a few subcontinent Muslim writers who have adequately addressed the orientalist's criticism of Islam.

KEYWORDS: Muhammad (PBUH), Jesus (PBUH), Orientalists, Crusades, Hadith, Missionary, Islam, Christianity, Criticism.

INTRODUCTION

Orientalism as a "scientific discipline" encompasses a study of Eastern art, literature, history, philosophy and religion etc. Its emergence as an academic discipline can be traced back to *Ecole speciale des langues orientales*: an institute founded by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1795. It was succeeded by *Morgenlaendische Gesellschaft* in 1845. Shortly after this, a number of other such Institutes emerged in no time. According to Edward W. Said, a prominent critic of Orientalism, believes that Orientalism served the colonial cause. Wolf Lepenies, sociologist and recipient of German Publishers Association Peace Prize, opines that emerged as *Gegner for schung*: "Rivalry Studies". In other words, orientalism emerged with a view to "helping the friends and harming the enemies". It is patently obvious that orientalist's efforts are dovetailed with the desire for Western political and ideological dominance. Bernard Lewis can be cited as appropriate example. Before its emergence as a full-fledged academic discipline, Westerner took interest in the emergence of Islam and the life of the Prophet of Islam. Muhammad (SAW), being the most influential and effective man of history, has invariably attracted the intellectual attention of both friends and foes. The approach of the latter exhibits prejudices and insularity. The history of the orientalist's indubitably corroborates the fact the Judeo-Christian writers in the Western world have consistently produced and propagated biased notions about Islam and its prophet. The purpose behind the dissemination of such notions and accusations is to deter people from embracing Islam. However, it would be extremely unfair to overlook the positive contribution of some leading orientalist's whose academic endeavors merit honorable mention.

Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi's Views

Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi holds that the West should have allocated adequate financial and other resources for establishing institutes to pursue profound and sincere study of the Holy Quran and the life of Muhammad (SAW). Encouragement should have been given to an objective study of Islam, brushing aside all insular attitudes and prejudices arising out of the Crusades. In his opinion, political ambitions and religious bigotry are two major hindrances in the way of analyzing the intellectual heritage, religious dogmas and culture of subjugated people with disinterested outlook. He lays greater stress on deeper study with greater sincerity, breadth of vision and large-heartedness than mere schooling and training of students for acquiring economic and material benefits.

He upholds the same criteria when it comes to Muslim writers and honestly advocates objectivity in academic matters especially regarding those academic endeavors which have bearing on those writers who have

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generated discourse about Islam. He believes that adopting a bigoted and prejudiced approach runs counter to the vital principle of Quran:

O believers! Stand up firmly by the commandments of Allah, bearing witness with justice and let not the enmity of any people incite you that you should not do justice. Do justice that is nearer to piety and fear Allah, undoubtedly, Allah is aware of your doings.¹

Islam enjoys justice in judgment and evaluation on its followers:

Indeed, Allah commands you to render trusts to whom they are due and when you judge between people to judge with justice. Excellent is that which Allah instructs you. Indeed Allah is ever hearing and seeing.²

Moderate and unprejudiced criticism is absolutely necessary for taking serious account of Western academic endeavors related to Islamic Studies. Francis Bacon views appropriately apply here: "Read not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider".³

A true learner and a serious researcher eagerly derive benefits from the erudition and intellectual findings of other scholars irrespective of their cast, color and creed. A genuine researcher must always fix his academic gaze at both aspects: negative and positive, and approach the problem in a disinterested fashion. The Holy Quran cultivates a balanced and latitudinarian method of inquiry:

and keep up the weight with justice and shorten not the weight.⁴

Moreover, it will behave an impartial and unbiased scholar to inveigh against his opponents in non-academic and vituperative language. The Holy Quran refrains its followers from insulting and abusing the gods and deities of other faiths.

Reville not those unto whom they pray beside Allah lest they wrongfully revile Allah through ignorance. Thus unto every nation have we made their deed seem fair. Then unto their Lord is their return and He will tell them what they used to do.⁵

It is imperative to remain calm, collected and moderate and to painstakingly eschew overstepping the bounds of decent criticism.⁶ It is our moral obligation to recognize and admire the untiring efforts of the orientalist and their useful contribution to the discipline of Islamic studies. It would be insularity on our part not to appreciate the generosity and broad-mindedness of those Western writers who have exhibited a fair sense of objectivity in evaluating Islam. Needless to say, some prominent scholars thoroughly studied Islam without having any political, economic and missionary cause to promote. They embarked on investigating the teachings and sources of Islam purely out of immeasurable love and fervor for knowledge and research.⁷ It appears illogical and irrational to summarily reject all their works as missionary and proselytizing activities. It was by virtue of their great efforts that century old Islamic manuscripts appeared on the intellectual horizon. The edition and publication of these neglected manuscripts went a long way to acquaint Muslim scholars of the East with precious sources of Islamic scholarship and resultantly opened up new vistas of research for them.⁸

He makes honorable mention of writers and works such as : T.W. Arnold, the author of 'The Preaching of Islam', Stanley Lane-Poole, the author of 'Saladin' and 'Moors in Spain', and Dr. Aloys Springer who edited Hafiz Ibn Hajar Asqalani's *Al-Isaba Fi tamyeeze Al-Sahaba*. Abul Hassan appreciates Edward William Lane's Arabic English Lexicon and maintains that it provides the researcher with reliable explanation of Arabic lexical items and it is regarded as an authentic source for resolving linguistic complications. A. J Wensink, drawing on Hadith and prophetic biographies (*Seerah*), prepared a valuable index which is a trustworthy means for determining the source and authenticity of a Hadith. Moreover, his work deserves to be generously eulogized for being exceedingly useful in furnishing easy access to significant issues of Islamic jurisprudence, noteworthy events in the life of Muhammad (SAW) and names and reliability reports of narrators of Hadith. The salient feature of the lexicon is the presentation of all details in alphabetic order. It was translated into Arabic language by the eminent Egyptian scholar Fawad Abdul Baqi under the title "Miftahu Kunuzu Sunnah". In recognition of this magnum opus, great scholar like Sayyed Raza Shah Misri and Allama Ahmad Muhammad Shakir have added prefaces to Wensink's work. Besides this priceless contribution, Wensink supervised the preparation and compilation of "Al-Mojam Al-Mufahras Le-alfazil Hadith". A number of scholarly orientalist participated in accomplishing this rare work. It was, for the first time, published in 1936. This book is more user-friendly as compared to Wensink's work. It was published in seven volumes. In a similar way, G.B Strenge's book "Lands of the Eastern Caliphate" is a precious book which is an informed source of history. (Abul Hasan is confined to English sources as he does not have knowledge of other European languages such as German, French, and Dutch etc). In Abul Hasan's view, these orientalist left no stone unturned to discover the truth about Islam and, in the process, exhibited remarkable enthusiasm and admirable sincerity.⁹

It goes without saying that an overwhelming majority of the orientalist have purposely attempted to find flaws and defects in Islamic history, jurisprudence, culture and civilization, having preconceived political aims

and religious prejudices. They made mountain out of a mole hill. Their conduct is like that of a drain inspector who is incapable of seeing the natural beauty around him as his gaze is fixed on trash and garbage.¹⁰ It is very unfortunate that they have betrayed a malicious attitude towards Islamic history, society, literature and culture. After identifying the so called flaws in Islam, they exerted themselves to garb them in an exaggeratedly dramatic manner.

The books exercised a pernicious impact on the minds of those leaders of Islamic countries who have either received education at prestigious European universities or studied Islam in European languages. It engendered suspicions and doubts in the minds of these leaders and foreign graduates. Consequently, these foreign qualified graduates embarked upon a campaign to modernize Islamic law and civilization.¹¹

Some orientalist launch their academic venture with predetermined goals and laboring hard to achieve their set goals. After having set their goals, they do not hesitate to substantiate their arguments from inauthentic books of history and sometimes derive their desired conclusions from books of fiction, poetry and even anecdotes. Another oft-employed stratagem is to shower profuse praise on a character with a purpose to give an impression of objectivity. Such an abundant appreciation leads the reader to believe that the writer would deal with his subject in a fairly disinterested manner hence fails to notice the deep rooted malevolence under the facade of objectivity. For instance Michael Hart writes:

My choice of Muhammad to lead the list of the world's most influential persons may surprise some readers and may be questioned by, by he was the only man in history who was supremely successful on both the religious and secular levels. Of humble origins, Muhammad founded and promulgated one of the world's great religions, and became an immensely effective political leader. Today, thirteen centuries after his death, his influence is still powerful and pervasive.

But the same writer presents Muhammad as the author of the Holy Quran, an opinion which runs absolutely counter to the fact. Michael Hart states:

Moreover, he is the author of the Muslims Holy scriptures, the Quran, a collection of certain of Muhammad's insights (that he believed had been directly revealed to him by Allah)¹²

Professor Montgomery Watt describes his claim at the outset of his book entitled Muhammad at Mecca:

On the theological questions at issue between Christianity and Islam an attempt has been made to preserve neutrality.¹³ Muhammad's original belief may have been in Allah as high God or supreme deity, combined with lesser local deities whom he may have come to regard as angel who could intercede with the supreme being.¹⁴

Thus whether Muhammad incited his followers to action and then used their wrongs to justify it or whether he yielded to pressure from them to allow such action, the normal Arab practice of the Razzia was taken over by the Islamic community. In being taken over, however, it was transformed. It became an activity of believers against unbelievers, and therefore took place within religious context.¹⁵

Watt recognizes the great moral stature of the prophet and eulogizes him: He gained men's respect and confidence by religious basis of his activity and by qualities such as courage, resoluteness, impartiality and firmness inclining to severity but tempered by generosity. In addition to these he had a charm of manner which won their affection and secured their devotion.¹⁶

Tor Andrae, another renowned orientalist, expresses his views about Muhammad (SAW) thus:

The method, then, which the prophet employed in order to provide sustenance for himself and all his companions, was that of plundering the caravans which passed Medina on the way to or from Syria.¹⁷ ... shortly after the battle of Badar, the principle is formulated which for a reason made the sword the principal missionary instrument of Islam.

In spite of everything that can be said in defense of Muhammad's religious integrity and his loyalty to his call, his endurance, his liberality, and his generosity, we are not doing the prophet of Islam and injustice when we conclude that his other endowments are not even upon the same level with his religious endowments.¹⁸

He opines that every character, no matter how great, dwarfs into insignificance when it is compared with that of Jesus (PBUH). he observes:

"..... but if we would be fair to him we must not forget that, consciously or unconsciously, we the Christians are inclined to compare Muhammad with the unsurpassed and exalted figure whom we meet in the Gospels, and that we cannot avoid seeing his historical personality against the background of the perfect moral ideal to which the faith of his followers tried to exalt him.... and when it is measured by such a standard, what personality is not found wanting.¹⁹

According to Abul Hasan, some of them tactfully maintain a precisely calculated quantity of ideological and doctrinal venom so as not to shock and startle the reader. They know for sure that a little increase of the

venom is likely to jeopardize the writer's credibility and sense of justice. Abul Hasan holds that overt animosity is less hazardous than clandestine and veiled antagonism. It is indubitably true that such surreptitious assaults are menacing to the minds of less educated readers.²⁰

Karen Armstrong appreciates the confidence, valor and ultimate success of the Prophet (PBUH) in the teeth of opposition thus:

Indeed Muhammad was frequently in deadly peril and his survival was a near miracle. But he did succeed. By the end of his life he had laid an axe to the root of the chronic cycle of tribal violence that afflicted the region and paganism was no longer a going concern. The Arabs were ready to embark on a new phase of their history.

In spite of the praise and appreciation that Karen showers on the magnificent personality of the Prophet, she has the audacity to remark about the authorship of the holy Quran:

"Like all creativity it was a difficult process. Muhammad used to enter a tranced state and sometimes seemed to lose conscience; he used to sweat profusely, even on a cold day and often felt an interior heaviness like grief that impelled to lower his head between, a position adopted by some contemporary Jewish mystics when they enter an alternative state of consciousness."²¹

She attributes the composition of the holy Quran the prophet (SAW)

"..... not only was he working through to an entirely new political solution for his people, but he was composing one of the great spiritual and literary classic of all times. He believed that he was putting the ineffable word of God into arabic, for the koran is as central to the spirituality of Islam as Jesus, the Logos, is to Christianity."²²

According to Abul Hasan, Eastern Universities have treated Orientalists' works as trustworthy sources. In his view, the political decline of the Muslim world resulted in its intellectual regression and consequently they began to have recourse to orientalists' works as the only reliable sources of knowledge. According to Abul Hassan, these works were prized and valued as gospels. A few of these books are listed as follows:²³

A Literary History of Arabs by R. A Nicholson, History of the Arabs by P.K. Hitti, Cesch Irder arabichen Literature by Carl Brocklememann, Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law by Goldziher, The origins of the Muhammadan Jurisprudence by Joseph Schacht, Islam in the Modern History by W.C. Smith, Wither Islam by A.R. Gibb, Muhammad in Mecca, Muhammad in Madina, Muhammad Prophet and statesman by Montgomery Watt.

These books were rated high in the departments of Islamic Studies and Arabic language and literature in the Islamic East. For instance, Encyclopedia of Islam compiled by orientalists—except for a few articles contributed by Muslim writers—was used by Muslim academician as a basic source of information on Islam. A literal translation of the same was published in Egypt but Abul Hassan while lamenting the fact maintains that it was expected that the Egyptian religious scholars and specialists would produce their own books on Islamic history, jurisprudence and civilization.²⁴

The Muslim world stands in dire need of producing original research in Islamic studies which would eventually efface the negative effect of works produced by the orientalists. It is imperative that Islamic scholars present Islamic teachings with cogent and convincing argumentation.²⁵ It is one of the prime responsibilities of Muslim scholars to critique the books and research works of the orientalists and single out those passages which have highlighted weakness in Islam. It would help the readers understand the fact that some of the orientalists have intentionally misrepresented or deliberately misinterpreted Arabic passages from the original in order to substantiate their antagonistic theories. A serious academic endeavor on the part Muslim scholars would unveil their machinations and expose their missionary designs.²⁶

Abul Hassan believes that negative works would not suffice. Positive and constructive effort is indispensable. Profound and thought provoking research work should be couched in an elegant style avoiding involved sentences and futile digressions. In addition, the researches and scholars are well advised to steer clear of establishing uncalled-for hypotheses. Similarly, it is necessary to avoid sarcastic language as sarcasm detracts from the value of true research. In his opinion, this is the only way to safeguard the mind of the Muslims who are either receiving their education in European or American universities or studying Islam in European languages.

Abul Hassan tends to takes a sanguine view of the phenomenon and believes in emergence of worthy Islamic books in European languages. He believes that such an era is not distant when precious books would appear on the global intellectual horizon which, by virtue of their diction and arguments, would have the magic to leave indelible imprints on the minds of Western scholars. His optimism is based on some remarkable English works produced by Indian Muslims. In the last part of the 19th century and in the beginning of the 20th century there appeared some meritorious Muslim writers who penned valuable books on Islam persuasively exonerating it from false allegations. Abul Hassan counts 'The Spirit of Islam' by Justice Amir Ali as an exceedingly commendable accomplishment in this regard and goes to the farthest extent in admiring its

linguistic sublimity and logical presentation and defense of Islam. Though he is all praise for the awesome style and logical arguments of the book, he believes that it is hard to agree with the entire content of the book. The book exercised tremendous influence on English minds as borne out by Osborn views: the book deserves genuine appreciation. Its diction exhibits great command of English language. Only few would be able to compete the writer's style as it is free from those defects which generally found in the writings of educated Indians. Indian should be congratulated for having such people who are capable of scaling such fabulous heights. It is impossible that such books won't affect minds; however, we disagree with a number of his ideas.²⁷

He instances a few writers of the subcontinent as the academic role models for the future research works. He maintains that 'A Short History of the Saracens' by Amir Ali also gained considerable popularity due to its sublime style and moderate.

Abul Hassan examples Salahuddin Khuda Bakhsh as another great scholar whose works crossed Indian borders and earned incredible recognition abroad. Salahuddin translated a lot books from German into English. To Abul Hassan, some of his views are prominently colored by modernism and western thought; therefore, those who have firsthand knowledge of Islam would be reluctant to agree with certain points. Needless to say, he invoked abundant praise and appreciation from the British scholarly circles.

Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam—a series of lectures by Allama Iqbal—is another instance of such fruitful intellectual attempts which fascinated the attention of Western intelligentsia and engendered admiration for the grandeur of Islam. But Abu Hassan maintains that it is impossible to agree with Iqbal's philosophically exaggerated interpretations of some religious truths and Islamic beliefs.

Abdullah Yousuf Ali is yet another scholar of prominent stature whose translation of Quran, marked as it is by beauty of language and sonorous tone, attracted wide readership in Europe and America. A number of editions of the same translation have been published in Pakistan and India.

Abul Hasan Ali Nadwi considers it the prime responsibility of Muslim intellectuals to work along the same lines as the aforesaid authors have done in order to present the immaculate image of Islam which has been ruthlessly tarnished by the religious adversaries.

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