



Orientalism, Misinformation and Islam

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In the Name of God, the All-Merciful,
the Compassionate

Any open-minded person embarking on a study of Islam, especially if using books written in European languages, should be aware of the seemingly inherent distortions that permeate almost all non-Muslim writings on Islam. At least since the Middle Ages, Islam has been much maligned and severely misunderstood in the West. In the last years of the Twentieth Century, it does not seem that much has changed even though most Muslims would agree that progress is being made. I feel that an elegant summary of the West's ignorance of Islam and the motives of Orientalism are the following words by the Swiss journalist and author, Roger Du Pasquier:

The West, whether Christian or dechristianised, has never really known Islam. Ever since they watched it appear on the world stage, Christians never ceased to insult and slander it in order to find justification for waging war on it. It has been subjected to grotesque distortions the traces of which still endure in the European mind. Even today there are many Westerners for whom Islam can be reduced to three ideas: fanaticism, fatalism and polygamy. Of course, there does exist a more cultivated public whose ideas about Islam are less deformed; there are still precious few who know that the word *Islam* signifies nothing other than 'submission to God'. One symptom of this ignorance is the fact that in the imagination of most Europeans, *Allah* refers to the divinity of the Muslims, not the God of the Christians and Jews; they are all surprised to hear, when one takes the trouble to explain things to them, that '*Allah*' means 'God', and that even Arab Christians know him by no other name.

Islam has of course been the object of studies by Western orientalists who, over the last two centuries, have

published an extensive learned literature on the subject. Nevertheless, however worthy their labours may have been, particularly in the historical and philological fields, they have contributed little to a better understanding of the Muslim religion in the Christian or post-Christian milieu, simply because they have failed to arouse much interest outside their specialised academic circles. **One is forced also to concede that Oriental studies in the West have not always been inspired by the purest spirit of scholarly impartiality, and it is hard to deny that some Islamicists and Arabists have worked with the clear intention of belittling Islam and its adherents.** This tendency was particularly marked for obvious reasons in the heyday of the colonial empires, but it would be an exaggeration to claim that it has vanished without trace.

These are some of the reasons why Islam remains even today so misjudged by the West, where curiously enough, Asiatic faiths such as Buddhism and Hinduism have for more than a century generated far more visible sympathy and interest, even though Islam is so close to Judaism and Christianity, having flowed from the same Abrahamic source. Despite this, however, for several years it has seemed that external conditions, particularly the growing importance of the Arab-Islamic countries in the world's great political and economic affairs, have served to arouse a growing interest of Islam in the West, resulting for some in the discovery of new and hitherto unsuspected horizons. (From [Unveiling Islam](#), by Roger Du Pasquier, pages 5-7)

The feeling that there is a general ignorance of Islam in the West is shared by Maurice Bucaille, a French doctor, who writes:

When one mentions Islam to the materialist atheist, he smiles with a complacency that is only equal to his ignorance of the subject. In common with the majority of Western intellectuals, of whatever religious persuasion, he has an **impressive collection of false notions about Islam.** One must, on this point, allow him one or two excuses. Firstly, apart from the newly-adopted attitudes prevailing among the highest Catholic authorities, Islam has always been subject in the West to a so-called 'secular slander'. Anyone in the West who has acquired a deep knowledge of Islam knows just to what extent its history, dogma and aims have been distorted. One must also take into account that fact that documents published in European languages on this subject (leaving aside highly specialised studies) do not make the work of a person willing to learn any easier. (From [The Bible, the Qur'an and Science](#), by Maurice Bucaille, page 118)

The phenomenon which is generally known as *Orientalism* is but one aspect of Western misrepresentations of Islam. Today, most Muslims in the West would probably agree that the majority of distortions about Islam come from the media, whether in newspapers, magazines or on television. In terms of the number of people who are reached by such information, the mass media certainly has more of a widespread impact on the West's view of Islam than do the academic publications of "*Orientalists*", "*Arabists*" or "*Islamicists*". In recent years, the academic field of what used to be called Orientalism has been renamed "Area Studies" or "Regional Studies". These politically correct terms have taken the place of the word "Orientalism" in scholarly circles since the latter word is now tainted with a negative imperialist connotation, in a large measure due to the Orientalists themselves. However, even though the works of scholars who pursue these fields do not reach the public at large, they do often fall into the hands of students and those who are personally interested in learning more about Islam. As such, any student of Islam especially those in the West need to be aware of the historical phenomenon of Orientalism, both as an academic pursuit and as a means of cultural exploitation. When used by Muslims, the word "Orientalist" generally refers to any Western scholar who studies Islam regardless of his or her motives and thus, inevitably, distorts it. As we shall see, however, the phenomenon of Orientalism is much more than an academic pursuit. Edward Said, a renowned Arab Christian scholar and author of several books exposing shortcomings of the Orientalist approach, defines "*Orientalism*" as follows:

. . . by Orientalism I mean several things, all of them, in my opinion, interdependent. The most readily accepted designation of for Orientalism is an academic one, and indeed, and indeed the label still serves in a number of academic institutions. Anyone who teaches, writes about, or researches the Orient and this applies whether the person is an anthropologist, sociologist, historian, or philologist either in its specific or its general aspects, is an Orientalist, and what he or she does is Orientalism. (From [Orientalism](#), by Edward W. Said, page 2)

To speak of Orientalism therefore is to speak mainly, although not exclusively, of a British and French cultural enterprise, a project whose dimensions take in such disparate realms as the imagination itself, the whole of India and the Levant, the Biblical texts and the Biblical lands, the spice trade, colonial armies and a long tradition of colonial administrators, a formidable scholarly corpus, innumerable Oriental "experts" and "hands", an Oriental professorate, a complex array of "Oriental" ideas (Oriental despotism, Oriental splendor, cruelty, sensuality), many Eastern sects, philosophies, and wisdoms domesticated for local European use the list can be extended more or less indefinitely. (From [Orientalism](#), by Edward W. Said, page 4)

As is the case with many things, being aware of the problem is half the battle. Once a sincere seeker of the Truth is aware of the long standing misunderstanding and hostility between Islam and the West and learns not to trust everything which they see in print authentic knowledge and information can be gained much more quickly. Certainly, not all Western writings on Islam have the same degree of bias

they run the range from willful distortion to simple ignorance and there are even a few that could be classified as sincere efforts by non-Muslims to portray Islam in a positive light. However, even most of these works are plagued by seemingly unintentional errors, however minor, due to the author's lack of Islamic knowledge. In the spirit of fairness, it should be said that even some contemporary books on Islam by Muslim authors suffer from these same shortcomings, usually due to a lack of knowledge, heretical ideas and or depending on non-Muslim sources.

This having been said, it should come as no surprise that learning about Islam in the West especially when relying on works in European languages has never been an easy task. Just a couple of decades ago, an English speaking person who was interested in Islam, and wishing to limit their reading to works by Muslim authors, might have been limited to reading a translation of the Qur'an, a few translated *hadeeth* books and a few dozen pamphlet-sized essays. However, in the past several years the widespread availability of Islamic books written by believing and committed Muslims and the advent of the Internet have made obtaining authentic information on almost any aspect of Islam much easier. Today, hardly a week goes by that a new English translation of a classic Islamic work is not announced. Keeping this in mind, I would encourage the reader to consult books written by Muslim authors when trying to learn about Islam. There are a wide range of [Islamic book distributors](#) that can be contacted through the Internet.

Moving on to a more detailed look at the West's distorted view of Islam, in general, and Orientalism in particular . . . Edward Said, the Arab Christian author of the monumental work [Orientalism](#), accurately referred to Orientalism a "*cultural enterprise*". This is certainly no distortion, since the academic study of the *Oriental* East by the *Occidental* West was often motivated and often co-operated hand-in-hand with the imperialistic aims of the European colonial powers. Without a doubt, the foundations of Orientalism are in the maxim "*Know thy enemy*". When the Christian Nations of Europe began their long campaign to colonize and conquer the rest of the world for their own benefit, they brought their academic and missionary resources to bear in order to help them with their task. Orientalists and missionaries whose ranks often overlapped were more often than not the servants of an imperialist government who was using their services as a way to subdue or weaken an enemy, however subtly.

With regard to Islam and the Islamic territories, for example, Britain felt that it had legitimate interests, as a Christian power, to safeguard. A complex apparatus for tending these interests developed. Such early organizations as the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (1698) and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (1701) were succeeded and later abetted by the Baptist Missionary Society (1792), the Church Missionary Society (1799), the British and Foreign Bible Society (1804), the London Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews (1808). **These missions "openly" joined the expansion of Europe.** (From [Orientalism](#), by Edward W. Said, page 100)

Anyone who has studied the subject knows that Christian missionaries were willing participants in European imperialism, regardless of the pure motives or naïveté of some of the individual missionaries. Actually, quite a few Orientalist scholars were Christian missionaries. One example is that of Sir William Muir, who was an active missionary and author of several books on Islam. Today, these books are viewed as very biased studies, even though they continue to be used as references for

those wishing to attack Islam to this very day. That Christians were the source of some of the worst lies and distortions about Islam should come as no surprise, since Islam was its main "competitor" on the stage of World Religions. Far from honouring the commandment not to bear false witness against one's neighbour, Christians distortions and outright lies about Islam were widespread, as the following shows:

The history of Orientalism is hardly one of unbiased examination of the sources of Islam especially when under the influence of the bigotry of Christianity. From the fanatical distortions of John of Damascus to the apologetic of later writers against Islam, that told their audiences that the Muslims worshipped three idols! Peter the Venerable (1084-1156) "*translated*" the Qur'an which was used throughout the Middle Ages and included **nine additional chapters**. Sale's infamously distorted translation followed that trend, and his, along with the likes of Rodwell, Muir and a multitude of others attacked the character and personality of Muhammed. Often they employed invented stories, or narration's which the Muslims themselves considered fabricated or weak, or else they distorted the facts by claiming Muslims held a position which they did not, or using the habits practised out of ignorance among the Muslims as the accurate portrayal of Islam. As Norman Daniel tell us in his work [Islam and the West](#): "**The use of false evidence to attack Islam was all but universal . . .**" (p. 267). (From [An Authoritative Exposition - Part 1](#), by cAbdur-Rahîm Green)

There is a great deal of proof that one could use to demonstrate that when it came to attacking Islam, even the Roman Catholic Church would readily embrace almost any untruth. Here's an example:

At a certain period in history, hostility to Islam, in whatever shape or form, even coming from declared enemies of the church, was received with the most heartfelt approbation by high dignitaries of the Catholic Church. Thus Pope Benedict XIV, who is reputed to have been the greatest Pontiff of the Eighteenth century, unhesitatingly sent his blessing to [Voltaire](#). This was in thanks for the dedication to him of the tragedy *Mohammed or Fanaticism* (Mahomet ou le Fanatisme) 1741, a coarse satire that any clever scribbler of bad faith could have written on any subject. In spite of a bad start, the play gained sufficient prestige to be included in the repertoire of the Comédie-Française." (From [The Bible, the Qur'an and Science](#), by Maurice Bucaille, page 118)

The dedicated enemy of the church, referred to above, was the French philosopher Voltaire. For an example of what he thought of at least one Christian doctrine, read his [Anti-Trinitarians](#) tract. Also, the above passage introduces a point that one should be well aware of: The distortions and lies about

Islam throughout the ages in Europe were not been limited to a small number of scholars and clergy. Far from it, they were part of the popular culture:

The European imagination was nourished extensively from this repertoire [of Oriental images]: between the Middle Ages and the eighteenth century such major authors as Ariosto, Milton, Marlowe, Tasso, Shakespeare, Cervantes, and the authors of the *Chanson de Roland* and the *Poema del Cid* drew on the Orient's riches for their productions, in ways that sharpened that outlines of imagery, ideas, and figures populating it. In addition, **a great deal of what was considered learned Orientalist scholarship in Europe pressed ideological myths into service, even as knowledge seemed genuinely to be advancing.** (From [Orientalism](#), by Edward Said, page 63)

The invariable tendency to neglect what the Qur'an meant, or what Muslims thought it meant, or what Muslims thought or did in any given circumstances, necessarily implies that Qur'anic and other Islamic doctrine was presented in a form that would convince Christians; and more and more extravagant forms would stand a chance of acceptance as the distance of the writers and public from the Islamic border increased. It was with very great reluctance that what Muslims said Muslims believed was accepted as what they did believe. There was a Christian picture in which the details (even under the pressure of facts) were abandoned as little as possible, and in which the general outline was never abandoned. There were shades of difference, but only with a common framework. All the corrections that were made in the interests of an increasing accuracy were only a defence of that what had newly realised to be vulnerable, a shoring up of a weakened structure. Christian opinion was an erection which could not be demolished, even to be rebuilt. (From [Islam and the West: The Making of an Image](#), by Norman Daniel, page 33)

Edward Said, in his classic work [Orientalism](#), referring to the above passage by Norman Daniel, says:

This rigorous Christian picture of Islam was intensified in innumerable ways, including during the Middle Ages and early Renaissance a large variety of poetry, learned controversy, and popular superstition. By this time the Near Orient had been all but incorporated in the common world-picture of Latin Christianity as in the *Chanson de Roland* the worship of Saracens is portrayed as embracing Mahomet and Apollo. By the middle of the fifteenth century, as R. W. Southern has brilliantly shown, it became

apparent to serious European thinkers "that something would have to be done about Islam," which had turned the situation around somewhat by itself arriving militarily in Eastern Europe. (From [Orientalism](#), by Edward W. Said, page 61)

Most conspicuous to us is the inability of any of these systems of thought [European Christian] to provide a fully satisfying explanation of the phenomenon they had set out to explain [Islam] still less to influence the course of practical events in a decisive way. At a practical level, events never turned out either so well or so ill as the most intelligent observers predicted: and it is perhaps worth noticing that they never turned out better than when the best judges confidently expected a happy ending. Was there any progress [in Christian knowledge of Islam]? I must express my conviction that there was. Even if the solutions of the problem remained obstinately hidden from sight, the statement of the problem became more complex, more rational, and more related to experience. (From [Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages](#), by R. W. Southern, pages 91-92)

Regardless of the flawed, biased and even devious approach of many Orientalists, they too can have their moments of candour, as Roger Du Pasquier points out:

In general one must unhappily concur with an Orientalist like Montgomery Watt when he writes that **'of all the great men of the world, no-one has had as many detractors as Muhammad.'** Having engaged in a lengthy study of the life and work of the Prophet, the British Arabist adds that **'it is hard to understand why this has been the case'**, finding the only plausible explanation in the fact that for centuries Christianity treated Islam as its worst enemy. And although Europeans today look at Islam and its founder in a somewhat more objective light, **'many ancient prejudices still remain.'** (From [Unveiling Islam](#), by Roger Du Pasquier, page 47 - quoting from W M Watt's [Muhammad at Medina](#), Oxford University Press)

In conclusion, I would like to turn to a description of Orientalism by an American convert to Islam who is now a well known Muslim scholar. What he has to say about the objectives and methods of Orientalism, especially how it is flawed from an Islamic perspective, is quite enlightening:

. . . (t)he book accurately reports the names and dates of the events it discusses, though its explanations of Muslim figures, their motives, and their place within the Islamic world are observed through the looking glass of unbelief (kufr), giving a reverse-image of many of the realities it reflects, and perhaps calling for a word here on the literature that has been termed ***Orientalism***, or in the contemporary idiom, **"area studies"**.

It is a viewpoint requiring that scholarly description of something like "African Islam" be first and foremost *objective*. The premises of this objectivity conform closely, upon reflection, to the lived and felt experience of a post-religious, Western intellectual tradition in understanding religion; namely, that comparing human cultural systems and societies in their historical succession and multiplicity leads the open-minded observer to moral relativism, since no moral value can be discovered which on its own merits is transculturally valid. Here, human civilizations, with their cultural forms, religions, hopes, aims, beliefs, prophets, sacred scriptures, and deities, are essentially plants that grow out of the earth, springing from their various seeds and soils, thriving for a time, and then withering away. The scholar's concern is only to record these elements and propose a plausible relation between them.

Such a point of departure, *de rigueur* for serious academic work . . . is of course non-Islamic and anti-Islamic. As a fundamental incomprehension of Islam, **it naturally distorts what it seeks to explain**, yet with an observable disparity in the *degree* of distortion in any given description that seems to correspond roughly to how close the object of explanation is to the core of Islam. In dealing with central issues like Allah, the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace), the Koran, or hadith, it is at its worst; while the further it proceeds to the periphery, such as historical details of trade concessions, treaties names of rulers, weights of coins, etc., the less distorted it becomes. In either case, it is plainly superior for Muslims to rely on fellow Muslims when Islamic sources are available on a subject . . . if only to avoid the subtle and not-so-subtle distortions of non-Islamic works about Islam. One cannot help but feel that nothing bad would happen to us if we were to abandon the trend of many contemporary Muslim writers of faithfully annotating our works with quotes from the founding fathers of Orientalism, if only because to sleep with the dogs is generally to rise with the fleas. (From **The Reliance of the Traveller**, Edited and Translated by Noah Ha Mim Keller, page 1042)

RECOMMENDED LINKS

[Understanding Islamists in the Middle East and North Africa](#) - by Randal K. James

This article, from the [Institute for National Strategic Studies](#), is just one of many examples which prove that the West's motives for studying Islam are in the maxim "*Know thy enemy*".

RECOMMENDED BOOKS

[**Orientalism**](#) - by Edward W. Said

[**Islam and the West: The Making of an Image**](#) - by Norman Daniel

[**Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages**](#) - by R. W. Southern

[**Islam in European Thought**](#) - by Albert Hourani

[**Culture and Imperialism**](#) - by Edward W. Said

[**Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World**](#)

- by Edward W. Said

[**The Sublime Qur'an and Orientalism**](#) - by Mohammad Khalifa

[**Islam and Romantic Orientalism: Literary Encounters With the Orient**](#) - by Mohammed Sharafuddin

[**Islam and Arabs in Early American Thought: Roots of Orientalism in America**](#) - by Fuad, Shaban

[**Orientalism, Islam, and Islamists**](#) - by by Asaf Hussain, Robert Olson, Jamil Qureshi

[**Orientalism, Postmodernism and Globalism**](#) - by Bryan S. Turner

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