

Revisiting Pro-Muslim British Orientalists

Since Edward Said's *Orientalism* was published in 1978 a great deal of controversy and debate has resulted from his central thesis, the existence of a western Orientalist discourse. Said's deconstruction of the politically motivated denigration of Islamic faith and culture by the likes of Cromer, Balfour, and Curzon remains central to any discussion of Victorian imperialism. Yet the official Orientalist discourse was not as dominant as Said suggested. Rana Kabbani and Ali Behdad have written on the predisposition of an establishment renegade like Wilfrid Scawen Blunt—toward eastern culture and political freedom.¹ Blunt—who only receives passing mention in Said's work—is an obvious figure in the development of a new perspective on Orientalism and Islam in the age of imperialism. Locating such figures within the frame of colonial and postcolonial discourse allows for a continuing debate about the West's relations with the Islamic world.

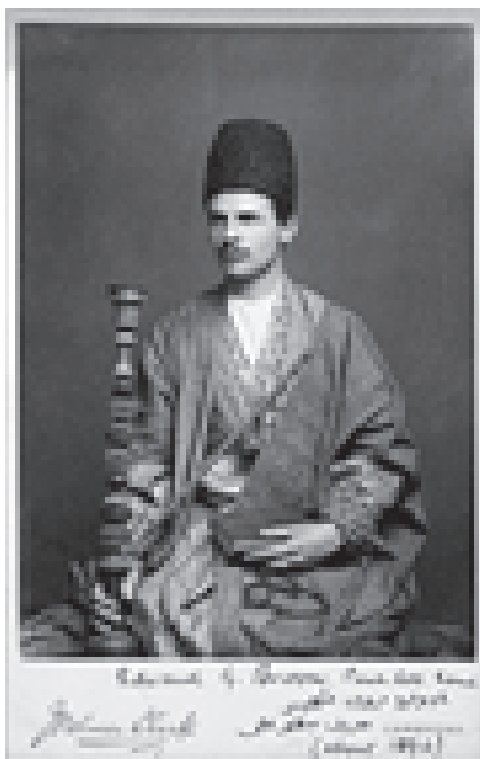
Other equally important figures whose writings and activities might be used to demonstrate a tolerant, even radically favourable, disposition toward Islam during a period when the East appeared increasingly vulnerable to western encroachment have been misinterpreted or neglected. From the 1830s to the late 1850s, David Urquhart, traveller, M.P., and Turcophile, became a foundation figure for discourse(s) that developed later in the nineteenth century arguing that Muslim practice should be the basis of reform in the East. Urquhart's role in the promotion of Ottoman Turkey as a fit, and in some ways, superior partner to Christian Europe has long been known by historians, though rarely rehearsed today. Yet Urquhart had begun a pro-Turkish trend in politics that continued well into the twentieth century, and from which developed a narrative of western betrayal of eastern "awakenings."

Arguably this narrative, which attempted to re-set the record straight vis-à-vis Turkish "atrocities" against Balkan and Armenian Christians by laying a fair (and perhaps sometimes rather more than fair) share of blame on the latter and their western European allies, has been eclipsed by the anti-Islamic narratives of our own time. So deeply was pro-Turkism ingested by one British gentleman, Marmaduke Pickthall, that he went a step beyond Blunt and Urquhart and converted to Islam. Where Blunt had favoured the Arabs, Pickthall saw the Turks as the agency best suited for piloting modernist Islam. Curiously, he anticipated the Young Turk programme's potential as a force of revolutionary Islamic modernism, rather than a secular nationalism, later to be subsumed in Attaturkism.

Variegated discourse

Confirmation that Orientalism was not a monolithic and stable discourse emerges from investigating the pro-Muslim writings and agitations of figures like Urquhart, Blunt, and Pickthall. Moreover, new readings of well-established contributors to Orientalist discourse can also yield less rigid interpretations. The half-Jewish, quondam

New readings of well known Orientalists and of lesser known challengers can yield more flexible interpretations of western imperialism. A pro-Muslim trend begun by the Scotsman David Urquhart in the early nineteenth century was later expanded upon by the anti-imperialist travellers and Orientalists, W.S. Blunt and E.G. Browne. While some wished to preserve an authentic and picturesque Orient under the auspice of imperialism, by the late colonial age Marmaduke Pickthall had gone so far as to promote Young Turkism as the vehicle for Islamic modernism.



Jesuit traveller to Arabia, William Gifford Palgrave, is reputedly a bitterly anti-Islamic polemicist. But this view is founded on readings of his canonical travelogue, *A Narrative of a Year's Journey to Central and Eastern Arabia* alone. Palgrave's later sojourns as British Consul in Trebizond and Abkhazia gained him an expertise in new developments in Ottoman Islam and its peripheries which he articulated in much more sympathetic terms in essays for *MacMillan's* and *Fraser's* magazines in the late 1860s and early 1870s. Even arch-imperialist establishment figures like Curzon and Mark Sykes allowed Muslim structures, albeit conservative patriarchal ones, to impact in their travel writings of the period 1893-1915. Curzon proposed a dichotomy, in his travel philosophy, between a political and an aesthetic Orientalism, the latter shaping his representations of Muslim societies in terms of past glories and present decay. Sykes, likewise, wished to preserve authentic Muslim expression within the diverse racial constituents of the Ottoman empire (before the outbreak of hostilities in 1914 impressed upon him the fatality of the Ottomanist project).

The Cambridge Orientalist, Edward Granville Browne's propagandist endeavours on behalf of the first Iranian revolution of 1906-1911 have been expounded by the Iranian scholars, Mansour Bonakdarian and Abbas Amanat. His polemical argument with expounders of the Saidean type of Orientalism, such as Curzon and the *London Times* foreign affairs journalists of the early 1900s, lends evidence to the existence of diverse, sometimes contradictory discourses within Orientalism.

By re-phrasing and re-positing the different writings of Orientalist travellers and imperialists within the hundred years between the end of the Greek revolt and the final eclipse of the Ottoman empire by Attaturk, it is possible to observe more complexity in British writing on Islam and the East than the mainly hostile corpus proposed by Said. One of the beneficial effects of so doing should be to demonstrate that pro-Islamic western voices able to challenge the negative and chauvinistic pronouncements of those who denigrated Islam as part of their project to rule over the East did, in fact, exist.

Note

1. See Rana Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of Orient* (London: Longman, 1986); Ali Behdad, *Belated Travelers: Orientalism in the Age of Colonial Dissolution* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994).

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E.G. Browne in Persian dress, courtesy of University of Cambridge Library Syndics