

Problem of historical distortion – muhammad ibn abdul wahhab



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THE PROBLEM OF HISTORICAL DISTORTION: A Survey of Literature on Imam
Muhammad ibn `Abd al-Wahhab as viewed through the Western slant of
history By Kazi Zulkader Siddiqui The Problem of Historical Distortion

Of the past fourteen centuries of the Islamic civilization, its thought, its institutions and the personalities who have contributed to its development and glory, stagnation and disintegration, the historical perspective painted by the Judaeo-Christian West has been markedly distinctive from the picture presented by the Muslim scholars, varying from outright hostile and distorted versions to the recent sympathetic (and sometimes empathetic) accounts.

History is one of those branches of knowledge that can be used most effectively for the glorification and upliftment of one's own people at the expense of the traditions of others, leading eventually to a subversive imposition of one's own norms, values and way of life as the standard for others. Most, if not all of the people emanating from the Judaeo-Christian tradition who have penned their understanding of the Islamic civilization, have been prey to such underlying motives.

This is not unique though since the subjective bias and assumptions of the historian in question are an integral part of the writing of history. What becomes remarkable in this case is the effective use of the historical perspective of other people for the exploitation of the same. This becomes manifest then, for example, in the notorious 'Divide and Rule' policy of the post-renaissance British Empire. The Old Testament Hebraic heritage has a lot to offer in comprehending this attitude and mentality of the Western writer.

The Old Testament (in the Bible) was written primarily to identify the ancestry and heritage of the Jews and thereby declare their superiority over all other nations. The other nations mentioned in the Old Testament are merely for the sake of justification of the crimes of the Children of Israel. Likewise, the modern Western writer is not concerned about the absolute and relative truths. He is more concerned about justifying or explaining away the phenomena of other civilizations. Through this he either hopes to dominate over the other civilizations, or to convert them to his own ways.

We are well aware that our foregoing remarks are heavily loaded with our own assumptions; but there are certain assumptions, which are derived through the cognitive and perceptive processes using the facts of history as the starting point. Thus, in this case, the assumptions are elevated to the level of derived facts and axioms. To prove our point, we have chosen for this paper a survey of the literature in English produced by the West during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries on the famous and controversial imam Muhammad ibn `Abd al-Wahhab (1703-1789).

As a prominent figure in Islamic history, loved by many and hated by many others of the Muslims, he has managed to attract the attention of the Western colonialists, missionaries, and historians who were neither, right from his own lifetime to the present. Far greater than the Imam himself is the impact of his followers - the Muwahhidun or the so-called Wahhabis - on the Western literature about Islam. The schismatic element in the nature of the controversy between the followers of the Imam and other Muslims has held great interest for the very reasons we have outlined above.

The analysis will become far more categorical as we proceed with the survey itself. Besides, this analysis can be made much more precise, accurate and to the point if one were to attempt a similar exercise on the survey of the Western literature about the followers of the Imam. In this paper we shall limit ourselves to the Imam only. To begin with, it would be appropriate to narrate the salient features of the Imam's life briefly.

Page 2 The Problem of Historical Distortion Muhammad ibn `Abd al-Wahhab: A Brief Biography: Coming from a learned family, Muhammad ibn `Abd al-Wahhab was born in 1115/1703 at `Uyaynah, a small town roughly 30 Km northwest of Riyadh in Saudi Arabia. His ancestors had been steeped in the Hanbali tradition, and so was young Muhammad's education. As a young man, he left `Uyaynah for further studies. His search for learning took him to Makkah, Madinah and Damascus. He acquired great admiration for Ibn Taymiyah (d. 728/1328) through the shaykh `Abd Allah ibn Ibrahim al-Najdi at Madinah. Madinah also offered him a chance to teach for quite some time. Subsequently, he continued this occupation at the Umayyad mosque of Damascus.

His journeys took him east to Basrah as well, where, besides acquiring further knowledge of the traditional sciences, he got the chance of getting acquainted with Shi`i and Sufi circles, their ways and ideas. This period ascertained for him the formulation of a mission in his mind. According to the Lam` al-Shihab, 2 he stayed in Basrah for four years and then moved to Baghdad. There he married a wealthy lady and remained for five years. He next went to Hamadan and then to Isfahan in 1148/1736 to study philosophy and Sufism. His quest for knowledge led him to Cairo and Damascus as well.

Upon the settlement of his father in Huraymilah near Riyadh in Saudi Arabia, Muhammad ibn `Abd al-Wahhab joined him, and it was here that the Imam composed his first work on *taw`id*, and also gathered disciples. After the death of his father in 1153/1740, he left Huraymilah for `Uyaynah where he spent four years. During his stay there, the governor `Uthman ibn Bishr of the Banu Mu`ammar became his follower. This became a cause for consternation among the powerful Banu Khalid. His preaching against *shirk* (associating partners with Allah) that was practiced by the masses, and against their moral laxity shook the roots of the society.

As a result, the Imam was forced to leave `Uyaynah and seek refuge in Dir`iyah (which is around 10-15 Km from `Uyaynah in the direction of Riyadh), where he found followers among the amir Muhammad ibn Sa`ud's brothers and son. Eventually the Amir also supported him. The Amir and the Imam took a *bay`ah* (an oath of mutualloyalty), " to strive, by force if necessary, to make the kingdom of God's word prevail".³ This was the beginning of the religio-political reality that was to engulf the whole of Najd and its neighbouring territories during the decades to come, first under the amir Muhammad ibn Sa`ud (d. 1178/1765), then under his son `Abd al-`Aziz (d. 1218/1803) and his grandson Sa`ud (d. 1229/1814). We leave the story of the Al Sa`ud for other historians to narrate, and return to the man who called for the return to *taw`id* (God's unity) and a true practice of Islam. Muhammad ibn `Abd al-Wahhab continued his role as teacher in the mosque of Dir`iyah, as political counselor of the Amir, and as a preacher writing theological works and extending his *da`wah* to the neighbouring areas until his death in 1204/1789.⁴ Bearing this brief picture of the Imam in mind, we

ow turn to his Western biographers and their accounts. " His grandfather Sulayman b. Mu? ammad had been mufti of the Nadjd. His father `Abd al-Wahhab was kadi at `Uyayna during the emirate of `Abd Allah b. Mu? ammad b. Mu` ammar; he taught ? adith and fikh in the mosques of the town and left several works of ? anbali inspiration, which in part survive". Laoust, EI2, III: 677, col. 2. 2 Abu Hakima, Ahmad A. , ed. , Lam` al-Shihab fi ta'rikh Mu? ammad ibn `Abd al-Wahhab, Beirut, 1967 3 Laoust, EI2, III: 678, col. 2. Most of the facts have been taken from this same source. Most historians give the year of death as 1206/1792. See Mu`inuddin A? mad Khan, " A Diplomat's Report on Wahhabism of Arabia", Islamic Studies 7 (1968), p. 38, for the argument in favour of 1204/1789 as the correct date. Page 3 1 The Problem of Historical Distortion WESTERN ACCOUNTS ABOUT THE IM M: M. Carsten Niebuhr (1733-1815): The first European to mention the Imam in his writings was M. Carsten Niebuhr who visited the peninsula in 1761-1764, that is within four years of the bay`ah taken between the Imam and ibn Sa`ud. He published his reports in German in 1772 and 1778.

An abridged English version of his writings appeared first in 1792 entitled Travels Through Arabia and Other Countries in the East. 5 Niebuhr and his companions had embarked upon an ecclesiastical mission to gather some information about this ancient land of Arabia, which had been the cradle of Christianity just as it had been for Judaism and Islam. Many people have noted the false and misleading remarks of Niebuhr with regards to the Imam. In the drama depicted by Niebuhr, there are two important characters in the founding of " the New Religion of a Part of Nedsjed", 6 namely one " Abd ul Wahheb" and his son " Mahomet". His description of ibn `Abd al-Wahhab's

youth seems to tally with the facts of the Imam's life. Now this " Abd ul Wahheb", having founded his religion, converts several Schiechs (i. e. shaykhs) to his faith, and virtually becomes their ruler. He reduces a great part of " El Ared", thus seemingly also performing the role of ibn Sa`ud. After the father's death, the son " Mahomet" takes over the small empire built by his father, sustaining " the supreme ecclesiastical character in El Ared". Among his beliefs cited are that " he considered Mahomet, Jesus Christ, Moses, and many others, respected by the Sunnites in the character of prophets, as merely great men, whose history might be read with improvement; denying that any book had ever been written by divine inspiration, or brought down from the heaven by the angel Gabriel. " 9 Against the beliefs of " Abd ul Wahheb", he contrasts the Sunnites as a " superstitious sect" whose opinions are false, depending on " their own whimsies" to explain the " Alcoran", acknowledging saints " to whom many absurd miracles are ascribed", etc. 0 Finally, he concludes that 'The new religion of Abd ul Wahheb deserves therefore to be regarded as a reformation of Mahometism, reducing it back to its original simplicity". 11

The inaccuracies of Niebuhr's reporting continued in the Western understanding for many decades as we shall see. Sir Harford Jones Brydges: Far more accurate in his reporting was the civil servant of the colonialist British, Sir Harford Jones Brydges, who sent his first report on the Wahhabis from Baghdad to the British Foreign Office in C. M. Niebuhr, *Travels Through Arabia and Other Countries in the East*, trans. into English by Robert Heron, vol. 2, Edinburgh, R. Morrison & Son, 1792. Cf. also Mu`inuddin A?mad Khan, *op. cit.* , p. 33 and a review of Niebuhr's life in *IslamicCulture*7 (1933), pp. 502-505 by V. B. Mehta. 6 Niebuhr, II: 130. Note that Nedsjed is Najd. 7 *Ibid.* , <https://assignbuster.com/problem-of-historical-distortion-muhammad-ibn-abdul-wahhab/>

II: 131-3. 8 Ibid. , II: 133. 9 Ibid. , II: 134. 10 Ibid. , II: 135. 11 Ibid. , II: 135.

Page 4 5 The Problem of Historical Distortion 1799, that is within a decade of the death of the Imam. 12 The weakest part of his report is the following anecdote: " Shaik Ibn Mahamer 13 proud of possessing this new Sectuary gave Moolah Mohammed 14 his own Sister in

Marriage and Moolah Mohammed sometime after, under pretense, that his Brother in Law Mahamer perverted Justice and oppressed the Tribe, murdered him with his own hands in the Mosque as he was at prayers meaning thereby, as he declared, to give to the People of Ayenah 15 a proof that his love for Justice was so great, that neither the obligations which he had to, nor alliance he had with Shaik Mahamer could withhold him from punishing even in him that he conceived to be a deviation from it. The People of Ayenah however appear to have had too much good Sense, to esteem as meritorious, so horrible a Transaction, and they obliged Moolah Mohammed, to abandon Ayenah, and he fled to Dereah 16 where he found an Asylum and Protector in Shaik Ibn Soud, the Governor of that place, who also embraced his Doctrines". 17 Historically we know that `Uthman ibn Mu`ammar died a natural death after the Imam had left for Dir`iyah, and that his expulsion from `Uyaynah was due to the pressures from various parts of that area against his teachings.

Other than this error, Brydges' report to his masters in London faithfully depicted the doctrines taught by the Imam. He says, " The Religion they possess is Mohammedan according to the literal meaning of the Koran, following the Interpretations of Hambelly". 18 Thirty-five years later, in 1834, Sir Harford Jones Brydges produced a far greater authoritative account of the

Muwaḥḥidun in his *A Brief History of the Wahabys*.¹⁹ We shall return to this document after looking at other developments during these thirty-five years.

de Sacy: In 1805, we find the Frenchman de Sacy writing in his paper *Observations sur les Wahhabites* that the Muwaḥḥidun are "enemies of Islam". He considered them to be an offshoot of the Qarmatians.²⁰

Rousseau: Four years later in 1809, another Frenchman by the name of Rousseau produced two short treatises²¹ in which "it was positively asserted, that the Wahabys have a new religion, and that Muḥammad Khan, op. cit. , pp. 33-46. i. e. Ḥuthman ibn Muḥammad, the governor of Ḥuyaynah. 14 i. e. Muḥammad ibn Ḥab al-Wahhab 15 i. e. Ḥuyaynah. 16 i. e. Dirḥiyah, the first Saudi capital in the eighteenth century. It is now a ruin, lying on the outskirts of present day Riyadh¹⁷ Muḥammad Khan, op. cit. , p. 41. 18 Ibid. , p. 42. By "Hambelly" he means the Ḥanbali School of Fiqh. 19 Harford Jones Brydges, *An Account of the Transactions of His Majesty's Mission to the Court of Persia in the years 1807-11*, to which is appended *A Brief History of the Wahabys*: London, James Bohn, 1834. 20 M. A. Bari, "The early Wahhabis, some contemporary assessments". *Proceedings of the 27th International Congress of Orientalists*: Ann Arbor, Mich. , 1967.

It may be recalled here that the Qarmatians were a 9th - 12th century Ismaʿili sect that sprang up in southern ḤIraq and al-Ḥasa'.²¹ J. B. L. J. Rousseau, *Descriptions du pashalic de Baghdad suivie d'une notice historique sur les Wahabis, et de quelques autres pieces relatives l'histoire et la litterature de l'Orient*, Paris, Trouttel et Wurtz, 1809, pp. 125-182. Idem. , "Notice sur la secte des Wahabis", *Fundgruben des Orients*, Vol. I, Wien, 1809,

pp. 191-198. 13 12 Page 5 The Problem of Historical Distortion although they acknowledge the Koran, yet they have entirely abolished the pilgrimage to Mekka". 2 He claimed to derive part of his information from " le Chapelain de Saoud". 23 Burckhardt, Brydges, 24 and other later Western writers reprimanded Rousseau for his obvious misinformation, the indignation arising over his claim to an authentic source of information. Corancez: The following year, i. e. in 1810, Corancez published his work in French. 25 Nashshabah says that after Burckhardt, " the next best Western account of the early history of the Wahhabis is Corancez's *Histoire des Wahhabis, depuis leur origine jusqu'a la fin de 1809*.

Corancez, who was the French consul in Aleppo from 1800 to 1808, carefully checked the information he had been able to gather, and his informants were often first-hand observers; but his account of the life of the founder of the Wahhabi movement is inadequate. He ascribes Wahhabi expansion solely to the weakness and misrule of the Ottomans (whose authority in most of Arabia was at times merely nominal) and ignores the fervour stirred up by (ibn) `Abd al-Wahhab which, combined with the leadership of Mu? ammad ibn Sa`ud, must surely have been the main reason for their astonishing victories". 6 Vincenzo Maurizi: During the following years, we find the writings of another Niebuhrian, 27 an Italian by the name of Vincenzo Maurizi alias Shaik Mansur. He amused his European audience with his *History of Seyd Said, Sultan of Muscat in 1819*, which also devoted a considerable section to the Muwa?? idun. Maurizi, in his zeal to discredit the movement, overstepped even the limits of Niebuhr and painted a completely erroneous picture. To give a full flavour of his deliberate misreporting, we quote part of

his narrative below. " About the middle of the last century (i. e. eighteenth century), a man named Abdulwahab, or Abdulvaab, a native of Hellah, or Ellaa, 28 on the banks of the Euphrates, pretended to have a vision, in which a flame appeared to issue from his body and burn to ashes all the neighbouring country; he confided the extraordinary circumstances which had befallen him to a Mullah, or Mulla, and the interpreter of the will of heaven declared that this sign portended the birth of a son, who should become the founder of a new religion, and perform extraordinary actions. Soon afterwards the wife of Abdulvaab really became pregnant, and bore him a son, who was named Maam? . 29 [footnote in the text reads: This happened about the year 1757.]. " The tribe of Neshdee, or Nescedo, 30 to which the family belonged, soon imbibed the doctrines which appeared to be sanctioned by divine authority, and Abdulvaab, as general of J. L. Burckhardt, Notes on the Bedouins and Wahabys, vol. 2: London, Henry Colburn & Richard Bentley, 1831, p. II: 103. 23 Ibid. , p. 103. 24 cf. ibid. , and Brydges, The Wahauby, p. 109, 112. 25 L. A. O. de Corancez, Histoire des Wahhabis, depuis leur origine jusqu' la fin de 1809, Paris, Grapelet, 1810. 26 Hisham A. Nashshabah, Islam and Nationalism in the Arab World: A Selected and Annotated Bibliography: Montreal, Institute of Islamic Studies, McGill University, 1955. Unpublished M. A. thesis. p. 11. 27 About Niebuhr, Maurizi remarks " where the accurate and indefatigable Niebuhr could afford me any assistance, I have not hesitated to avail myself of it, and on the other hand I have occasionally remarked any alterations which have taken place since his days". 17th page of his " Preface" to the History of Seyd Said, Sultan of

Muscat, 1819. 28 He probably means al-? illah in `Iraq. 29 i. e. Muhammad 30 i. e.

Najdi. Page 6 22 The Problem of Historical Distortion an army and prophet of a rising sect, had an opportunity of spreading his political power, and the opinions of the new faith, which he considered himself commissioned to promulgate; while his son accompanied him, and was shown to all as the precious pledge of Almighty approbation towards the Vaabi religion. After Abdulvaabs death Maam? t succeeded in his command, but being blind, was obliged to employ, as his deputy, in all affairs of state except those relating to religion, a person named Abdullazis, 31 an adopted brother of his father's. This minister followed up the victories of the deceased prophet with the greatest facility. As the first barriers of opposition had been already overthrown, it would be very difficult, and perhaps useless to name all the Seek 32 who resisted in arms the aggrandisement of the Vaabi, or the particular periods of their several conquests; but at the death of the chief last mentioned, 33 almost all the interior of the Arabian peninsula acknowledged their political and religious sway.

Abdullazis succeeded to the supreme authority, and greatly extended the limits of their power, having sacked Mecca and Medina and destroyed the tomb of Mahomet, whom he declared to be a deceiver, and not a messenger of heaven; he also penetrated to the gates of Aleppo and Baghdad, massacred a caravan of Persian pilgrims on their route to visit the burial place of Alle, or Eli, 34 at Ellaa, 35 and plundered that depository of the accumulated wealth of ages". 36 The historical errors are far too many to

comment on in detail; but we shall make observations on some salient distortions.

The dichotomy between `Abd al-Wahhab and Muḥammad ibn `Abd al-Wahhab is carried on from Niebuhr, but Maurizi goes a step further in proclaiming `Abd al-Wahhab to be a prophet, and giving Muḥammad ibn `Abd al-Wahhab almost the position of a demi-god. Besides, he transfers the hometown of the family to al-Ḥillah in `Iraq and moves the year of birth of Muḥammad ibn `Abd al-Wahhab to 1757, the year when he contracted the bay`ah with ibn Sa`ud. The fallacy of a tribe called Najdi, of the existence of `Ali's tomb at al-Ḥillah, of `Abd al-`Aziz being the adopted brother of the Imam's father, etc. need hardly be commented upon. But the interesting development that must be noted is the so-called declaration by `Abd al-`Aziz of the Prophet Muḥammad (p) being an impostor. Maurizi elaborates on this and other supposed beliefs of the "Vaabi" by quoting an answer which he claims to have been given to him by an envoy of Sa`ud ibn `Abd al-`Aziz. It reads: " We do not differ from other Musaleems, or Muselims (Musselmen) 37 except in thinking that Mahomet arrogated to himself too much authority; and, that the Koran was sent to the earth by the hands of angels, and not of that man, who has even dared to falsify many of its doctrines; we also consider that the prophets, and especially Maamet iben Abdulvaab were beings like ourselves; and, therefore, not worthy of being addressed in prayer, although deserving of admiration and imitation for their piety and moral conduct... " 38 Obviously, Maurizi could not have known more than a few words or phrases in Arabic, or else he would have rendered the envoy's answer truthfully. Instead, he has imposed hearsay and his own 31 32

Presumably `Abd al-`Aziz ibn Mu? ammad ibn Sa`ud. . e. shaykhs. 33 i. e. Maamet, the son of Abdulva b. 34 i. e. `Ali ibn Abi Talib. 35 i. e. al-? illah in `Iraq. 36 Maurizi, , op. cit. , pp. 36-38. 37 i. e. Muslims. 38 Maurizi, op. cit. , p. 40. Page 7 The Problem of Historical Distortion assumptions into the mouth of the envoy. His lack of knowledge of Arabic is reflected also in the fact that he misconstrues `Abd Allah ibn Sa`ud, the Sa`udi amir after Sa`ud ibn `Abd al-`Aziz as " Abdullahazis" (`Abd al-`Aziz). Similarly, in the last passage cited, the envoy must have said " the prophets, and especially Mu? ammad ibn `Abd Allah were beings like ourselves ... " which Maurizi took to mean Maamet iben Abdulvaab. Maurizi's account even disgraces fiction. J. L. Burckhardt: John Lewis Burckhardt was the first to bring a balanced view of the movement to the European audience. The epistle of Brydges in 1799 was not a public document. Thus Burckhardt's Notes on the Bedouins and Wahabys published in 1831 was a turning point in the Western understanding of the Imam and his followers. This work goes into fair amount of detail about the movement.

Burckhardt dispelled many of the misunderstandings that had been current in the West as a result of the earlier writings. The very first thing he set out to correct was that: " The doctrines of Abd el Wahab were not those of a new religion; his efforts were directed only to reform abuses in the followers of Islam, and to disseminate the pure faith among Bedouins; who although Muselmans, were equally ignorant of religion, as indifferent about all the duties which it prescribed". 39 Comparing the Muwa?? idun to the Ottoman Turks, he says: " Not a single new precept was to be found in the Wahaby ode. Abd el Wahab took as his sole guide the Koran and the Sunne (or the

laws formed upon the traditions of Mohammed); and the only difference between this sect and the orthodox Turks, however improperly so termed, is, that the Wahabys rigidly follow the same laws which the others neglect, or have ceased altogether to observe. To describe, therefore, the Wahaby religion, would be to recapitulate the Muselman faith; and to show in what points this sect differs from the Turks, would be to give a list of all the abuses of which the latter are guilty".⁴⁰ One can quote Burckhardt at length to show his positive attitude which led him to a fairly objective analysis of the creed and practice of the Muwaḥḥidun, and the reasons why Muḥammad ibn `Abd al-Wahhab " was misunderstood both by his friends and his enemies".⁴¹ The former took offense at his seeming attacks on the Prophet (p) and the latter saw a political threat in his preaching; thus leading to an intentional distortion of the facts. Despite this objectivity in Burckhardt, one cannot but comment on the Western slant of his perception.

The usage of words often has a psychological effect on the reader. For instance, Burckhardt, writing about the Imam says that " being convinced by what he observed during his (b. `Abd al-Wahhab's) travels, that the primitive (emphasis ours) faith of Islam, or Mohammedanism, had become totally corrupted and obscured by abuses,... ".⁴² The value judgment involved in his use of the word " primitive" is apparent. The Western notion that the progression of thought and ideas essentially leads to the advancement of civilization is a result of their philosophical heritage.

The Islamic notion, that the absolute is derived solely through the process of divine revelation in history and not through cognitive, intuitive or perceptive processes which are bound by the limitations of the human mind, stands

markedly in contradistinction to the Western assumptions. Thus, while the 39
40 Burckhardt, op. cit. , II: 99. Ibid. , II: 112 41 Ibid. , II: 99. 42 Ibid. , II: 96.

Page 8 The Problem of Historical Distortion Muslim (including Mu? ammad
ibn `Abd al-Wahhab) would view the life of the

Prophet as a supreme achievement in the history of man, the Western
thinker would regard it as a 'primitive' stage in the life of man. However, it is
remarkable that if one is to compare Burckhardt with the later Orientalists,
he was far ahead of his own time in this respect. His value judgements are
very limited. Hitti, a century later, echoes the same words that " he (b. `Abd
al-Wahhab) himself determined to purge it (Islam) and restore it to its
primitive strictness". 43 Hitti goes further though in regarding the bay`ah of
1757 as " another case of marriage between religion and the sword". 4 The
subtle intrusion of value judgements are scattered profusely throughout the
writings even of the so-called 'sympathetic' Western Orientalists like
Nicholson, 45 Wilfrid Cantwell Smith (d. 2000), 46 von Grunebaum (1909-
1972), 47 and H. A. R. Gibb (d. 1971) 48 not to speak of the others. Andrew
Crichton: The next stage in the history of the Western biographies of the
Imam was set by Andrew Crichton with his publication of History of Arabia:
Ancient and Modern in 1833. This is the first time that we see a Western
writer composing a secondary work on the Muwa?? dun based solely on
other Western writings. Having noted Burckhardt's caution against the
misconceptions floating around, Crichton relied primarily on Burckhardt,
Corancez and Mengin in particular. 49 Since he has nothing original to offer,
we turn to his usage of some of the material at hand. For example, after
outlining the beliefs and practices of the Muwa?? idun, he states " They did

not, however, so far outstrip themselves of all superstition as to abolish the ceremonies of ablution and the Meccan pilgrimage, or even those of kissing the black stone and throwing stones at the devil".⁰ To start with, this reveals the author's ignorance about Islam, its beliefs, practices and rituals. Secondly, it is surprising that the author cannot even conceive of non-Christian rituals that reflect and lead to cleanliness, unity of man, and submission and commitment to God. By calling these rituals "superstition", the author has obviously passed a normative judgment that is reflective of the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Sir Harford Jones Brydges re-visited: Chronologically, this brings us once again to Sir Harford Jones Brydges.

This worthy civil servant of the colonialist British Empire had little that was new to add to the known facts of the Imam's life as described by Burckhardt. He published his *Brief History of the Wahaby*, in 1834 after perusal of Burckhardt's work. The only point on which the two disagreed was whether Muhammad ibn al-Wahhab was the father-in-law or the son-in-law of Muhammad ibn Sa'ud. Regardless of this dispute, what Brydges has to offer as an interpretation of this relationship between the two is as follows: P. K. Hitti, *History of the Arabs*: Edinburgh, 1939, 1972, p. 40. Ibid. 45 R. A. Nicholson, *Literary History of the Arabs*, Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1907, 1969, p. 466. 46 W. C. Smith, *Islam in Modern History*: N. Y. , Mentor, 1957, pp. 48-51. 47 G. von Grunebaum, "Attempts at Self-Interpretation in Contemporary Islam", *Islam: Essays in the nature and growth of a cultural tradition*, London, 1955, pp. 185-236. 48 H. A. R. Gibb, *Modern Trends in Islam*, Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1947, 1972, pp. 26-32. 49 Andrew Crichton, *History of*

Arabia: Ancient and Modern, vol. 2: Edinburgh, Oliver & Boyd, 1833, p. II: 190.

See footnote. 50 Ibid. , II: 290. 44 43 Page 9 The Problem of Historical Distortion "... and that in consequence of this connexion, though Abdulwahaub remained the book, Mahommed Ibn Saoud became the sword of the sect". 51 This is the prelude to what we have been hearing from Orientalists like Hitti and others mentioned earlier. The only difference is that while Brydges was a part of the colonialist establishment and had a political axe to grind, the Orientalists are a part of the neo-colonialist imperialism that breeds Orientalist research. In other respects, i. . those that cover other aspects of the history of the Muwa?? idun, their administration, etc. , Brydges' book complements the work of Burckhardt. W. G. Palgrave: Moving beyond the middle of the nineteenth century, we come to William Gifford Palgrave, a servant of the British crown in India, steeped in the Christian tradition. By his time, the facts of the movement were well known; it was now the time for the growth of interpretation of these facts. Palgrave published two works, namely Eastern and Central Arabia (1866) and Essays on Eastern Questions (1872).

Wahhabism had by this time become a great threat to the British Empire in India and elsewhere, and the crown was out to discredit the movement not only in the British public eye, but also among the Muslims residing in the British colonies. The latter purpose was not difficult to achieve due to the existing propaganda against the Muwa?? idun by the Ottoman Turks. Thus, in true service of British colonialism and displaying his loyalty to the missionary

cause, Palgrave tried to paint the movement as a reaction to the pressure of the Christian West.

He says " The great reactionary movement, the 'Revival', originated where scarce a spark of life had been left, by the too-famous 'Abd-el-Wahhab, in the land of Nejd, has gradually but surely extended itself over the entire surface and through all the length and depth of Islam; while the ever increasing pressures of the Christian, or, at least, non-Mahometan, West, has intensified the 'fanatical' tendency, even where it has modified its special direction.

For 'Islam' is a political not less than a religious whole;... " 52 This was a rejoinder to the alarm sounded by W. W. Hunter (who was in Her Majesty's Bengal Civil Service) in his book *The Indian Musalmans*. 53 By this time, the British had already successfully faced Sayyid Ahmad Shahid (d. 1831), Titu Mir and the War of 1857. With these major setbacks, a wave of strong ' Wahhabi' feelings had swept the Muslims of Bengal and Northern India, hoping to regain their lost position.

Therefore, it was essential for the British cause to subvert this obvious threat. Apart from the political motivations for his analysis, his Christian missionary zeal and hatred for Islam drove Palgrave to write as follows: " The Wahabee reformer formed the design of putting back the hour-hand of Islam to its starting-point; and so far he did well, for that hand was from the first meant to be fixed. Islam is in its essence stationary, and was framed thus to remain.

Sterile like its God, lifeless like its first Principle and supreme Original in all that constitutes true life - for life is love, participation, and progress, and of

these the Coranic Deity has none - it justly repudiates all change, all advance, all development. To borrow the forcible words of Lord Houghton, the 51 52 Brydges, *The Wahauby*, p. 107. W. G. Palgrave, *Essays on Eastern Questions*: London, MacMillan & Co. , 1872, p. 115. 53 W. W. Hunter, *The Indian Musalmans*, 1871. Page 10 *The Problem of Historical Distortion* written book" is there the " dead man's hand", stiff and motionless; whatever savours of vitality is by that alone convicted of heresy and defection. " But Christianity with its living and loving God, Begetter and Begotten, Spirit and Movement, nay more, a Creator made creature, the Maker and the made existing in One, a Divinity communicating itself by uninterrupted gradation and degree from the most intimate union far off to the faintest irradiation, though all that It has made for love and governs in love;... " 54 Mu? mmad ibn `Abd al-Wahhab is the example for him par excellence of the true image of Islam, stagnant against a dynamic Christianity, backward looking against the advancing Christianity, lifeless against the living Christianity, and with a Sterile God against a living and loving Christian God who begets his only begotten Son becoming the Creator and creature, the Maker and the made all in One. Palgrave combined the missionary and the colonialist mentality in a perfect blend that was to reflect in the Orientalist attitude during the century to follow. He becomes the precursor to the likes of Samuel Zwemer, 55 E. Calverley, C. M.

Doughty (1843-1926), 56 T. E. Lawrence (1888-1935), 57 and others. We end our analysis with Palgrave. Doubtless, the approach of the Orientalist has improved vastly during this century, as we see in the writings of George Rentz, for example. 58 However, the Orientalists of the latter portion of the

nineteenth century, and until recently, those of the twentieth century have faithfully followed the tradition of the likes of Palgrave. CONCLUSION: For the sake of betterment and advancement of the civilization of man, we go back to our opening remarks and question the Western Judaeo-Christian approach towards the civilizations of the East.

Rejecting the self-centeredness and particularity practiced by the Judaeo-Christian West, and in order to approximate the Islamic universality, we must shed our feathers and appreciate the traditions and civilizations of others within their own framework and assumptions. The plurality of this small world, shrunk by the advance of technology, necessitates a renunciation of selfishness and oppression of the weak, at least in intellectual exercises. In the present context, that is of our approach towards history, we are now bound to accept the facts as such and interpret them for the betterment of mankind.

It is obvious that personal biases cannot be eliminated in their totality. The basic assumptions must remain. Regardless, this should not lead us to a distortion of facts. Muhammad ibn `Abd al-Wahhab served an important purpose to a significant population of mankind, and has also caused grievance to many. In light of this we cannot justify either veneration or denunciation of this man, who devoted his life for a simple cause. W. G. Palgrave, *Narrative of a Year's Journey Through Eastern and Central Arabia* (1862-63), 2 Vols. : London, MacMillan & Co. , 1866, p. I: 372. 5 Samuel M. Zwemer, *Arabia the Cradle of Islam and The Mohammedan World of Today*: N. Y. , Fleming H. Revell Co. , 1906. 56 Charles Montagu Doughty, *Travels in Arabia Deserta*: London, N. Y. , 1906. 57 T. E. Lawrence, *Seven Pillars of*

Wisdom: London, Jonathan Cape, 1926, 1935, 1940 Idem. , Revolt in the Desert: N. Y. , George H. Doran Co. , 1927 58 George Rentz, Mu? ammad ibn `Abd al-Wahhab and the Unitarian Movement in Arabia, Ph. D. Thesis, McGill University, Montreal, Canada. Cf. also Idem. , " Wahhabism and Saudi Arabia" in The Arabian Peninsula: Society and Politics, ed. y Derek Hopwood: London, George Allen Unwin, 1972, pp. 54-66. And Idem. , " The Wahhabis" in Religion in the Middle East ed. by A. J. Arberry: Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, 1969, pp. 270- 284. Page 11 54 The Problem of Historical Distortion Instead, his contribution to the development of civilization must be appreciated in its true perspective. The most important conclusion is the recognition of the distortion of facts, deliberate or otherwise, by the Western colonialists, their functionaries, their missionaries, and the Orientalists who were none of these.

Their aims were multifarious. While the colonialists and their functionaries strove to maintain their political supremacy and to keep the Muslim population subdued within the colonies, the missionaries tried their utmost to distort Islam to the extent possible hoping to gain converts. It was often that the aims of the colonialists and the missionaries though seemingly different were in fact the same. Hence, they worked hand in glove throughout and distorted the facts of history to make their own ends meet.

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