

*Book Review*

**Islam and Arabs in Early  
American Thought: The Roots  
of Orientalism in America**

*By Fuad Sha 'ban. Durham, N.C.: The Acorn Press, 1991,  
244 pp.*

The introduction to this book credits the author with clarifying the operative attitudes of Americans towards Islam by looking at the cause and result of the Muslim image in American literature. However, regret is expressed that Sha'ban had to be heroically selective about a subject radiating in many rich directions. Apparently, the book offers fresh insights and new possibilities for exploration and discovery, thereby contributing significantly to the enhancement of a literary tradition that came to the forefront with Said's *Orientalism*. Sha'ban studies orientalism in terms of America's exposure to and understanding of Islam by focusing on Muslims of nineteenth-century North Africa and the Middle East. Even though the book's thrust is political, Sha'ban challenges the reader

to review familiar American writers and trends from an unfamiliar perspective as he traces the historically biased approach of Americans in their dealings with the Muslim world.

In chapter one, "A Place for My People," the author explains how America's Puritan beginnings shaped its self-image and its attitude towards "the Arab world, its people and land." The Pilgrims saw themselves as the chosen people in a promised land. Under the umbrella of a providential plan and the divine covenant, they were heirs to the kingdom of God in the new world and therefore shared a common responsibility to execute the divine mission. Unlike European monarchs who relied on religion for personal privilege (i.e., the Divine Right theory), Puritans shifted away from emphasizing the personal and private aspects of Christianity to its communal or corporate nature. They constantly endorsed their national responsibility to share the benefits of their chosen status as citizens of God's kingdom with the rest of the world.

Chapter two, "The Star in the West," borrows its title from a poem by Ray (1816) and also signifies the new role assumed by Americans. The nation's rich resources and central location convinced the Pilgrims of their leading role in delivering those who had not experienced the benefits of the kingdom of God. The success of the American revolution and the nation's subsequent independence were further proofs of their chosen status. By joining Christian ideals of liberty and morality into a political system, America could serve as a model. America was thus committed to spreading the light of the gospel and expanding God's earthly kingdom.

In chapter three, "The Prophet's Progress," and chapter four, "The Shores of Tripoli," Sha'ban focuses on Americans' earliest contact with and reaction to Islam and Arabs. Although American writers attempted to pursue an innovative approach, their knowledge of Islam and Arabs was inherited from their European background and ancestry. The first American edition of a complete translation of the Qur'an (1806) by Ross was "inaccurate" and written in a biased tone. It was, moreover, translated into English from French. Major works in English had so far portrayed the Prophet as an "impostor." According to Sha'ban, the two American biographies of the Prophet by Irving and Bush, the former a narrative and the latter a religious history, are flawed by a lack of objectivity.

The earliest accounts of American contact with Muslims were written by American sailors who had been held captive by Muslim states located on the shores of North Africa. Immediately after independence, American ships came under attack by the Barbary states (i.e., Tripoli, Tunis, Algiers, Morocco, and Tunis). In accordance with prevailing maritime practice, these states demanded annual tribute for passage through the Mediterranean. Such entanglements with the North African nations encouraged

America to develop an international policy and establish diplomatic ties in order to protect its own interests in the region against its European rivals. These ties not only ensured free movement of Americans towards the East, but were also instrumental in opening up the gateway for American missionary enterprises in the Middle East.

Chapter five, "The Great Commission," illustrates how Americans accepted the divine commission and zealously assumed a savior role in the nineteenth century. Reports from the Middle East confirmed that the area's mingled population of Muslims, Jews, and Christians was in a state of "deplorable ignorance and degradation." The region needed American missionaries endowed with remedial powers, for oriental Christians were not "equal coreligionists." The *raison d'être* of the missionary enterprise was the unmistakable superiority of American culture, in which politics and religion intermingled. Instead of embracing the evangelical spirit of humility and service, the missionary spirit was defined in imperial terms of "we" and "they," the "saved" and the "lost." Recalling the rift between eastern and western Christian traditions, Jessup commented that just as the West needed the medium of Greek religion and Roman power to accept Christianity, the East needed Anglo-Saxon power and the Arabic language to Christianize. The highest priority was duly assigned to the Holy Land, and the American navy was authorized to protect the missionaries.

Chapter six, "Eastward Ho," states that the number of American travelers had increased noticeably by the mid-nineteenth century. Travelogues became a source of information and common feelings were expressed towards the East. American visitors included people from all walks of life: David Dorr (a black slave from Tennessee), President Grant, and literary figures such as Emerson, Melville, and Twain. Although many travelers came with expectations of discovering the exotic beauty portrayed in novels as well as of having exciting experiences, their first-hand exposure to the Holy Land usually evoked religious sentiment. Writers reflected upon their experiences in the light of Biblical references and interpretations. As a result, most travelers echoed a note of disappointment at the realization that Palestine was occupied by alien Muslims.

Chapter seven's title, "The Vision of Zion," is derived from Pierpont's poem "Airs of Palestine," which was not inspired by classical literature but by the Holy Land. Attachment to the past and commitment to the future in the vision of Zion became a source of inspiration to the chosen people of the kingdom of God. The latent hope in this vision gave impetus to the American millenarian movement which encompassed a strong belief in the second coming of Christ and a new Jerusalem. Many Americans saw the weakening of the Ottoman Empire, the Arab revolt in Egypt, and sectarian conflicts in Syria as signs of Christ's approaching

return. The focus of the new vision was to track the path of the Israelites and rebuild a new Jerusalem. American settlements appeared in Palestine in anticipation of Christ's return.

This renewed sense of American identity as Israelites gave rise to a more sympathetic attitude towards the Jews. It appears that their unsympathetic images in English literature (i.e., *The Merchant of Venice's* Shylock) were no longer reflected in American literature. In contrast with the Arabs, who were still considered a "depraved" nation, the Jews were assigned a special status. For example, the Boston Female Society was formed to promote amelioration and reformation of the Jewish people's conditions with no strings attached for conversion. Americans and Jews seemed to share a common vision of Zion insofar as they were both waiting for the Messiah to assume the role of a temporal ruler.

In chapter eight, "The Dream of Baghdad," the author deviates from his political approach in order to examine the romantic appeal of the Orient for many Americans. He states that Irving's *Knickerbockers* sums up the popular concept of the "languid, alluring atmosphere." The veil of mystery around the Orient was baffling and inviting, but the Americans were unable to understand the spiritual and symbolic values attached to Arab customs and practices. Many American travelers were enchanted by the Muslim lifestyle and compared the Arabs' primitivism to that of the American Indians. They rarely interpreted the dream of Baghdad in terms of physical reality and human understanding.

In the conclusion, Sha'ban reiterates the American view of Islam as a rival and hostile religion accompanied by an unbalanced approach to Muslims and Arabs in American literature. Nevertheless, it would be a literary blunder to dismiss Sha'ban's scholarly treatise as an expression of anti-American sentiment, for he devotes large sections of his book to the sympathetic treatment of the Muslim world by several British and American writers. For example, he commends Sale for his accurate translation of the Qur'an and a balanced commentary that elucidates parallels between Islam and Christianity. Tyler's *The Algerine Captive* is described as the first American satire of missionary fanaticism. Carlyle's sympathetic portrayal of the Prophet in *Hero and Hero-Worship* as "the original man" is mentioned as a major success among Unitarians (this Christian sect does not believe in the Trinity). Prominent American transcendentalist writers who were especially inspired by Carlyle's work include Emerson and Thoreau. However, as the author points out, these sympathetic views and attitudes towards Islam were limited to small circles.

Sha'ban's book is a well-researched and excellent source of information on major trends of American thinking and ideology which, to a large extent, are still prevalent. The text includes numerous references to

literary, philosophical, theological, and feminist literature of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century America. I believe the book will serve as a valuable resource in analytical studies of orientalist literature in general and of the evolution of the Muslim image in America in particular.

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