

Analysing Stages of the Western Orientalists' Approach towards Islam

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Abstract

Majority of the orientalist adhere to the philosophy of logical empirical positivism, a belief that emphasizes on the total use of mind as a key approach to obtaining accurate scientific facts based on systematic and thorough method of research. This philosophy refuses to prove a fact using sources from the revelation because it is considered irrelevant in historical proof and has created biased and sceptical views about the Malay community in Malaya. This article focuses on the analysis of the orientalist approach in evaluating Islam, as well as the extent to which Islam influenced the lives of the people in Malaya. The author used historiography and comparative methods to analyse the orientalist's views. The results showed that the orientalist thinking approach in evaluating Islam and its followers especially the Malay community presented a sceptical viewpoint, which has made each of these writings biased on a one-sided judgment and deviated from the historical development of the great Islamic civilization. This false judgement had emerged due to the weakness of the orientalist to understand the Muslims, especially the Malay community due to the European-centric thinking known as Euro-centrism. This thought elevated Europe as a great and civilized nation over other nations, the so-called "ambassador of civilization", and the saviour of all need-to-be civilized nations.

Keywords: Orientalist, Islam, the Malaya, Logical Empirical Positivism

Introduction

Orientalism is derived from the word *orient* which has the addition of *al* and *ism*. The word *orient* is a French vocabulary which means east. Geographically, *orient* means the eastern world, while ethnologically it is defined as the peoples of the east (Joesoef, 1985). Whereas the word *oriental* in English means things related to the east and the word *ism* refers to something of a belief, doctrine, teaching, system, flow or attitude (Umar, 1978).

According to Hanafi (2000), orientalism is a political ideology that aims to colonize and destroy the Eastern culture, especially Islam, and to present Western civilization as the greatest and dominator of the world. As for Said (1977), orientalism is a way of understanding the Eastern world based on the Western's observations. This view of Said encompasses three different but interrelated matters:

- 1) The orientalist refers to individuals who teach, write a work or conduct series of researches on the Eastern world. This group consists of anthropologists, sociologists or philologists.
- 2) Orientalism is a method of thinking based on the ontological and epistemological differences between the Eastern and Western worlds.
- 3) Orientalism is a Western way of dominating, restructuring and dominating the Eastern society. They have interests of creating statements about the Eastern world particularly related to religion, teaching and mastering the Eastern world and changing it according to their needs.

Lughod (2001, 101-113) also echoes the same view about the orientalism. He mentioned:

The way in which the Orient has been represented in Europe through an imaginative geography that divides East and West, confirming Western superiority and enabling, if not actually constituting, European domination of those negatively portrayed regions known as East.

The three views above clearly indicated that the Western colonialists sought to dominate over the Eastern world in the fields of religion, culture and intellectual, and then introduced the ideologies of secularism into the minds of the colonised people. According to al-Attas (1978), the hostility of the tradition between Christianity and Islam which previously began during the territorial expansion and military attacks, now turning to 'intellectual warfare' which aims at the knowledge and thinking of Muslims as the main target to be defeated. He explained:

The confrontation between Western culture and civilization and Islam... has now moved on to the intellectual level and we must realize, then, that this confrontation is by nature a historically permanent one. Islam is seen by the West as posing a challenge to its very way of life.

(Al-Attas 1978, 99)

According to Baharuddin (2000), the heart of the orientalists lies on secularism which refers to a belief of separating religious matters from worldly affairs and considers Islam to be a religion created by the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) which is so false that it needs to be replaced with a more flexible, non-conforming and appropriate religion through the passage of time. Rahman (2016) explains that several approaches have been identified used by the orientalists to ensure smooth expansion of secularism, which include thorough research on Islam such as history, culture, legal sources and so on. Thus, the author will identify the orientalist approach in evaluating Islam and know the extent of the influence of Islam in the life of the Malay community in the Malaya

Stages of the Orientalists' Approach towards Islam

To identify the approach of the orientalist's researches about Islam, the authors have divided it into three stages, which are; during the Crusades, the Renaissance and the colonialism era. These three stages are the turning point in the development of secularism in the West. These developments have had a negative impact on the Muslim community especially in daily affairs.

The Orientalists' Approach During The Crusades

According to Fadzil (2012), during the outbreak of the Crusades from 1096 to 1291, Muslims were associated with bad behaviour such as violent and ferocious by the orientalist for the purpose of spreading Christianity. They spread out negative picture of the Muslims based on fairy tales, fantasies and myths that undermine Islam without any solid evidence. Said (1977) explained that this problem stemmed from the misappropriation of Islamic works, especially the translation of the Quran by Western scholars during their studies in Cordova before the outbreak of the Crusades. The orientalist were unable to master the Arabic language, then they have misinterpreted the translated based on common sense. In fact, they also expressed their own views even though they were contradicted to the facts of the Quran, the works of scholars and the historical relics. Among these views are:

- 1) The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was labelled as an ordinary human being, not as a messenger of Allah The Almighty as mentioned in the Islamic history (Margoliouth, 1975). The Prophet was also labelled as a despicable man, being cunning in spreading the religion he has created and the act of using the book of his creation, the Quran, which was copied from the scriptures of the Jewish and Christian (Bell, 1926).
- 2) Islam was considered to be a cultural religion created by the Arab communities in the Middle East based on the environment under the influence of hot climate that influences one's behaviour to become violent and ferocious (Watt, 1954).
- 3) Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) spread Islam on the basis of economy and the desire to dominate resources from every colonized area. These actions indirectly portrayed Islam as a religion that promoted violence for the sake of something and was feared by other nations (Turner, 1983).

The Orientalists' Approach During The Renaissance

According to Zakaria (1999) and Rahman (2016), Western scholars have been greatly influenced by secularism's approach to reject religion as a guidance in human life. Instead, religion was said to be the cause of human suffering. Hassan (1986) argued that the philosophy of mastering knowledge based on the orientalist's approach was closely related to the philosophy of Humanism. This philosophy regarded the affairs of human development solely for personal fulfilment without any religious consideration. In order to progress, humans must rely entirely on the use of reason. As a result, this philosophy has produced a large number of multidisciplinary paradigms to establish a materialistic-centered civilization, which are:

- 1) The paradigm must be independent in evaluating a scientific study. An orientalist has to make himself free from religious holdings while conducting research through various fields of knowledge. Religious approach makes one bound to give a critical view of his religion.
- 2) The philosophy of logical empirical positivism; is a scientific study used by oriental scholars to obtain accurate and precise scientific facts based on a systematic and

thorough method of research (Mahmud, 1997). Abdullah (2000) explained that this approach emerged primarily due to the attitude of those who reject religion and things they cannot see (the *ghaibāt*) and handled by the senses.

- 3) The philosophy of historicism; it highlights the development of history as an important aspect of human existence. This philosophy considers religion to be out-dated and rejected as proof of academic facts. According to Meinecke (1956), in order to understand a historical fact, researchers need to do a thorough study of the event. The study should be based on a sceptical point of view and reject any religious belief, particularly Islam.

Goldziher (1981) argued that any study based on religion is considered to be of poor quality and has no academic value. Any study related to Islam should neither refer to the Quran nor the work of Islamic scholars, but it must originate from the historical reality of Muslims to know the true picture of Islam. Any critical analysis of Islam should be made using a higher criticism approach. This approach was initially used to prove errors in Christianity, and then extended its application to Islam. It aims to prove the faults in the Qur'an and the Sunnah, thus presenting Islam as a heresy. The elements of secularism in this approach clearly stated that any historical event that takes place in the Muslim community must be sceptically evaluated in order to obtain facts.

The Orientalists' Approach during the Era of Colonisation

At this stage, al-Attas (1969) has divided the process of development and collapse of Islamic civilization in the Malay World into three stages:

- 1) Early stage; the process of acceptance of Islam by the community in the Malay World, followed by the method of internalizing and practicing Islamic teachings in every aspect of life.
- 2) The glory stage; the development of Islamic knowledge during the Malay Sultanate of Malacca, which brought into the establishment of the *pondok* system.
- 3) The decline: internal problems began to emerge in the administration of the Malay Sultanate. The act of welcoming the Western invaders to solve the problems had led to colonisation.

The occupation began with the conquest of the Portuguese (1511-1641), the Dutch (1641-1824) and the British (1824-1957). According to Rahman (2017), history has proven that people in Malaya have experience interacting with various multiracial societies such as India, China, Java, Persia and Arabs without any problems. This changed after the advent of Western colonizers, beginning with the establishment of large companies like the East India Company that introduced the approach to capitalism regardless to the welfare of other peoples. Western colonists especially the British took the opportunity to spread Christianity through the colonial process.

During the colonial period in Malaya, the expertise of the oriental scholars was fully utilized in the efforts to colonize and control the colonised community. This group emphasized on the importance of every member of the society to give up the practice of religious traditions and believes in order to succeed in life (Rahman, 2019). These orientalist philosophies were applied to the thinking of Western invaders through several forms, which were;

First, to study the culture of Eastern society in all positive and negative aspects. This study indirectly served as a tool for the Western colonialists especially the British in completely explaining the strengths and weaknesses of the Eastern society. It was subsequently studied to strengthen the control of these groups over the colonised community (Hussain, 1984). The works of A. Wright and T.H. Reid; *The Malay Peninsula* (Wright & Reid, 1912), T.S. Raffles; *Memoir of the Life and Public Services of Sir Stamford Raffles* (Raffles, 1830), L.R. Wheelar; *The Modern Malay* (Wheelar, 1928) and F. Swettenham; *Malay Sketches* (Swettenham, 2005) illustrated the act of the orientalist in labelling the Malay community with negative depictions such as lazy, stubborn, dissipated, indebted and so on. To overcome all the weaknesses, these people had promoted British as the saviour to the Malay community by introducing Western education system that conceptualized secularism, separating the knowledge of the world from religious knowledge (Winstedt, 1934). However, such education was restricted to the feudal Malays only (Wheelar, 1928). According to Skeat (1967), these Malay feudalists were trained to serve as drudges to the British colonialists in strengthening their power in Malaya. Rahman (2017) also considered this group to be the best intermediary to dominate the Malays who traditionally respected the feudal community.

Second, the evolutionary approaches which are described as self-truth claims and Euro-centric extreme racism. According to Said (1981), this kind of approach had elevated Western Civilization as greater and more superior than the Eastern. This approach was clearly demonstrated by the orientalist through the Darwinian theory of evolution which proposed Western civilization as the most advanced civilization based on the level of intelligence and the approach that rejected any form of religious teaching. Swettenham (1893) explained that this great achievement was resulted from the belief of secularism to reject religion as an important aspect in human life. Eastern people who remained to hold onto religion were labelled as a nation which rejected progress and needed to be civilized through the colonial process.

The orientalist also marked the Islamic law as cruel, static and only suitable to be practiced in the Middle East. In fact, as Swettenham (2005) added, the overall negative attitude of the Malay community stemmed from their strong commitment to Islam such as giving up on destiny, wasting time and rejecting modernity. Therefore, these attitudes needed to be change by introducing the Western system of thinking, especially through legislation that is more relevant and flexible for the present day.

Third, the use of diffusion approach. According to Kling (1994), this approach determines that the development of the Malay community was not due to their original nature, but because of factors influenced by the foreign culture that are selectively replicated by the Malay community such as the Arabs and the Indians. This approach denies the existence of local genius in building a great civilization. Meanwhile, Landon (1949) believes that the Malay community couldn't be considered as true Muslims as they were still influenced by animism and Hinduism. Shalaby (1966) argues that this diffusion approach is created based on the anti-Islamic stance arising from the experience during The Crusades and the resistance of the Muslim community to the colonies during the previous colonial rule.

The Influence of Islam upon the Malays in Malaya

Throughout the involvement of the orientalist in Malaya, the colonialists took an approach to intervene in the administrative affairs on minimizing and removing religious roles in all aspects of life. Rahman (2017) explained that if the indigenous people insisted in making

religion as guidance of their faith especially Islam, they would remain downgraded, anti-modernization, and uncivilized as they believe in the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

The British colonialists realized that Islam was a supreme belief in the Malay community and that any contempt for religion would enflame the opposition among Malays toward the colonists (Abdullah, 2005). According to Abdullah (2005), despite being anti-Muslim, the British colonialists had never done any provocation against Islam, instead, the British deviously degraded the religion through Pangkor Treaty of 1874, resulting in Islam being isolated from politics; The Malay king was appointed as the head of religion but the area of Islamic law was limited only to marriage and the matters of *furu'* only.

According to Wilkinson (1922), Islamic law did not have a profound effect on the Malay community, but rather it was an additional law for inclusion in customary law. He said:

Notwithstanding the influence of Muslim law in Malaya, it had not supplanted the local adat in its entirety. It was accepted in the religious matters, in family law and the law of succession, but in order matters the adat prevailed with only some Muslim additions incorporated in it in the course of centuries.

(Wilkinson 1922, 48)

For the author, this Wilkinson's point of view, it is proven that Islamic law based on the orientalist view was not entirely affected the way of life for the people in Malaya. This proposition is then strongly supported by the view of Elias. He listed out the reasons which had brought to the colonialist's negative evaluation upon Islam, including its legality, which are:

Pengalaman beragama yang pahit dalam sejarah kebudayaan Barat serta pertembungan dengan agama serta kebudayaan Islam dalam sejarah dunia telah mencorakkan penilaian umum orientalis terhadap agama Islam. Keraguan yang terbit akibat dari sifat dan pembawaan agama mereka sendiri serta prasangka yang menebal terhadap hakikat risalah Islam serta pembawanya, akhirnya menjadikan kebenaran semua agama dilihat tidak lebih dari kebenaran falsafah. Agama yang ditanggapi dalam telaah sejarah penulis orientalis ini adalah agama yang mesti berubah mengikut peredaran zaman hingga mampu menjadi batu loncatan mencapai cita-cita pembangunan atau sebaliknya, agama yang jumud, yang layak dicerca sebagai batu penghalang. [The unpleasant religious experience in the history of the Western culture and the clash with Islamic religion and culture in the world history have shaped general orientation of the orientalis towards Islam. Doubts arising from the nature and practice of their own religion and the feeling of prejudice against the reality of the revelation and the Messengers have finally made the truth of all religions appear to be nothing more than philosophical truth. The religion that is considered in the historical context of this oriental writer is the religion that must change with the passing of time in order to become the stepping stone to achieve ideal development or, rather, an old-fashioned religion, which is worthy of to be criticised as an impediment.]

(Elias 2012, 612)

This view of Elias clearly shows that the views of the orientalist were influenced by negative prejudice arising from the religious and cultural clashes of two great civilizations until Islam was judged to be incapable of meeting the needs of the people because of its unsuitability with the time and circumstances.

The Implication of the Orientalists' Sceptical Approach towards Islam

Secularism inherent within the orientalist's approach clearly denies Islam as a religion of revelation and has no privilege including its legality. Some of the implications of such approach are:

First, Islam is a religion which had deceived mankind through the history of human creation (Said, 1977). According to Southern (1962), Europeans adhered to Darwin's theory of evolution which regarded Western civilization as the greatest and most advanced civilization of any civilization. According to this theory, people who were strongly hold on to the religion, especially those in the East, were belonged to the primitive society. Schacht (1950) argued that people had fallen into the trick of the religion which finally made them suffer. In fact, Jeffery (1926) had labelled the Prophet Muhammad as the chief robber.

Second, Islam is considered as a cultural religion created by the Arab communities in the Middle East based on hot climatic environment that influences one's behaviour to become harsh and violent (Said, 1977). Goldziher (1981) justified that Islam is no longer relevant to provide rules for living in the present day and must to be replaced by a form of secularist thought that must be free from any religious beliefs and applying thinking as the main reference to life, which at the end, denied any valuable contribution that Islam had made towards the construction of a great civilization.

Third, a Muslim researcher should either make himself free or leave the religion if he wants to do anthropological research especially in the field of religion (Goldziher, 1981). Goldziher believed that a religious approach would make a person feel difficult to conduct critical studies of his religion. Among the methods adopted in the approach were:

- 1) Any study based on religion should not be acknowledged as having good academic value. According to Jeffery (1926), a researcher should disregard Islam as a religion created by Allah SWT but as a false religion of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).
- 2) Any study related to Islam should not be referred using Islamic sources such as the Quran or the ideas/ judgement from the Islamic scholars, but it must be referred using external sources based on the historical reality of Muslims at getting to know the true picture of Islam.

Fourth, when human beings strive for success, they need to use their full understanding based on the philosophy of Humanism (Hassan, 1986). This philosophy regards the development of human affairs in personal satisfaction and unlimited wants which disregard any religious consideration.

Conclusion

The orientalist's approach to Islam represent sceptical point of views. Each of these writings about Islam and its people were created based on one-sided judgment and distorted from the history of the development of the great Islamic civilization. These views emerged based on the paradigm of evolution and diffusion found in this approach. This approach elevates logical thinking at the highest which finally leave alone traditions, cultures, characters, rules of conduct and Islamic jurisprudence that its truth can be questioned.

The breakdown of these three stages shows how the orientalist's approach applies to the Muslim community, especially in the Middle East and Malaya in general. This biased and sceptical orientalist approach has indirectly shown its own weaknesses to the outside community; how an inaccurate assessment of Islam is clearly contrary to the discipline of knowledge. The history of the Malay civilization is not displayed correctly but is manipulated by highlighting the role and influence of the West that has brought progress to the Malays.

The contribution of this article in explaining the influence of Islam in the Malay community is very clear. The authors believe that it is unfair to highlight the weaknesses of a race without having to explore the positive side of it. Islam somehow has developed a strong sense of identity in the community wherever Islam resides, which finally resulting in building a great new civilization. In Malaya for example, the presence of Islam has created a new civilization and culture that was based on Islam and free the community from the shackles of delusion and superstition. The authors suggest that any researcher who wishes to study Islam and its followers need to be more critical on the influence and the orientalist's thinking towards Islam. Researchers also need to evaluate each of the orientalist's views thoroughly and conduct research to confirm the validity of the facts presented.

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