

Islam and Positive Orientalism In the Age of Ideology Ernest Renan as an Example (1-2)

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Preface

This study is an attempt to analyse the stance which the positivist philosophy takes on religion in the context of modern philosophy. The adopted approach is basically a critique of Ernest Renan's criticism of Islam's relation to philosophy and science. Discussing his views expounded in his famous lecture will be extended to the wider circle of the modern Western philosophy in order to move beyond the confines of the older static circle. This will include comparisons with the stand taken by other positivist philosophers on religion, such as Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte among other modern philosophers who generally criticised religion (Hume, Voltaire, Nietzsche, etc.). Will be given as well is a critical analysis of Renan's views in relation to the French thought transformation of his time, in particular, and Orientalist views in general. The framework is the positivist trend and its conflict with the religious trend at the age of ideology.

In the 19th century, Friedrich Nietzsche declared, "God is dead", Auguste Comte announced the end of theology, and positivist science achieved great successes which made its confrontation with religion more vital, hence the importance acquired by positivism, the first axis of this study.

However, despite the status and development gained by positivism, religion stayed in the focus of interest for philosophy either as a subject of criticism or development and support. Some of the philosophers who rejected traditional religion called for a new religious thought, or in some cases, a new positivist humanistic religion. Renan followed suit; he rejected religious mysticism and every metaphysical aspect of religion and accepted only the facts which are scientifically verifiable. He asserted that building a positive science would not take place unless the mind is divorced from any supernatural belief.

It is ironical that Renan was oscillating between scientific positivism and a

romantic aspiration. Despite his near mystic worship of positive science, there are factors that reveal a spiritual inclination even in his opposition to religion. This conflict in his mind between positivism and romantic aspiration controlled his discriminatory stance on Christianity and Islam.

The second axis of the study, Orientalism, raises a number of issues, most important of which is: Was Renan, as a positivist philosopher, influenced by the Western view of the Orient and by the French philosophical and Orientalist transformations of the 19th century? Additionally, to what extent was he under the influence of the French imperialist attitude towards the East, considering that the most prominent characteristic of the European view of the East is imperialism, one aspect of the manifestations of Eurocentrism? How was the positivist view of the East, in general and Islam in particular, formulated? If this view was basically motivated by a scientific drive, is it free from all racist attitudes towards the peoples under study, hence non-Eurocentric?

In an attempt to find an answer for the posed questions, it is necessary to differentiate between two distinct trends of Orientalism: the missionary and the positivist. The positivist Orientalism rejects religious priesthood and is inspired by Voltaire. It is essential as well to direct the attention to philology, historical and comparative/contrastive linguistics, history of religions and physical anthropology since Ernest Renan, in the *L'Avenir de la science* (the Future of Science), argues that the founders of modern mind are philologists. His modern mind is rationalism, criticism and liberalism—all saw the light of day with the birth of philology which is the exact science of the mental objects. “Philology is for the sciences of humanity what physics and chemistry are to the philosophic sciences of the material bodies”

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This axis of Orientalism will also explore how the Western strategic circles formulated their inconsistent view of Islam in the last quarter of the 19th century. The study considers whether the 19th century should be described as the age of positivism or the age of ideology? It argues that Renan, loyal as he was to the positivist philosophy, could not free himself from the clutches of ideology.

The third axis of the study is the relation between Islam on the one hand and science and philosophy on the other in the context of the positivism and Orientalism of the 19th century. The Orientalism oscillated between comparison through analogy and mythical interpretation of the Semitic mind. Why did Renan not step out of this ideological circle? Why did he consider that Islam itself stands against positivist scientific thinking? What are the justifications for his dogmatic view that the true believer is doomed to be incapable intellectually, with an iron circle chaining his mind, rendering the believer incapable of learning anything and unable to see any new idea? Are there ideological reasons why he insisted to reduce Islam to this narrow-minded type which was practiced by some clerics, considering that any different type is necessarily not Islamic? Was Renan a victim of a mechanism of thinking that excludes and negates, exchanging places with the dogmatic thinking that sees Islam as a closed type which excludes all other types?

Why did Renan make an exception for the Persians in consecrating this ignorant reactionary state to the Muslims? Is this related to his theory on the Aryan and Semitic races? What was the frame of reference he based his views on when he argued that the philosophy that resulted from the Arabic Islamic civilisation should not be described as Islamic? Why did he consider the progress in the East was the consequence of borrowing from the Greek? What drove him to say that the Western Renaissance took place when the West started to benefit from the Arabic translations of the Greeks in the 12th century through Syria, Baghdad, Cordova, Toledo while at the same time he asserts that they are poor confused translations which were barely able to contain the Greek thought? Why did he consider the Greek thought as the cause of the advance achieved in the Islamic World while he gave Arabness as one of the latent causes of the retardation of this world? Why does he insist to discriminate between the Aryans and the Semites? How is this discrimination related to his attitudes towards Arabness and science as revealed in his

¹Ernest Renan, *L'Avenir de la science : Pensées de 1848*, Paris : Calmann Lévy, Éditeur, 1890, p. 149.

lecture “L’Islamisme et la science”? Why did science achieve progress in the first phase of the Islamic history and stumbled and failed in second phase? Are the causes latent in Islam itself as Renan claims, or are they the consequences of social, political and economic circumstances? Or finally are the causes related to the inevitable civilisation cycle which all civilisations have gone through?

The present paper attempts to find answers for all these questions and ponders the influences of Renan’s stance on different levels of Orientalism on the one hand and on modern Arab thought on the other. The study gives special interest to Jamal ud-Deen Afghani’s response to Renan. The study gives a detailed analysis of Renan comment where he states that there is but one point on which the two thinkers really differ. Did Renan play down the tone of his criticism as a result of Afghani’s answer concerning certain points while he kept his strong attitude on other issues? Why did the researchers differ in their interpretations of the “Response to Renan”? And why did Renan’s lecture have all that influence?

Despite the surfeit of reactions Renan’s lecture has created since the late 19th century up to now, it is still possible to shed new light on it in the context of modern Western philosophy within a larger circle than the one to which it was confined at the time of the lecture. This will relate Renan’s stance to the context of the French transformations in addition to the 19th century Orientalism and within the framework of the historical and philosophical positivism surrounding Renan. To be considered as well is the effect of Renan’s positivist views concerning religion as a whole on his stance on the relation between Islam and science and philosophy on a backdrop of the attitude of the followers of positivism towards religion and positive science and the conflict between them in the context on modern philosophy.

Accordingly, this paper contributes to the understanding of an important controversy. Through a comparative study of Renan and other thinkers of his time, the study puts to use the analytic method to peruse Renan’s works in their English translation, and utilizes the historical method to establish Renan’s place in the context of his age, the 19th century, and its tie to the Orientalist movement on the one hand and the developments of the positivist trend confronting religion on the other in the shadow of the age of ideology.

Introduction

French Transformations and the conflict between the old and the new

Ernest Renan (1823-1892) appeared on the French intellectual scene in the 19th century, i.e., in the aftermath of the French Revolution, 1789, which ousted the monarchy with its divine right and absolute powers, and ended the feudal system.

The 19th century lived a turbulent time of several confrontations between the old and the new. The old had not yet died out; the new had not fully grown, hence the fervent struggle between the conservative wing, represented by a catholic royal faction, and the liberal wing, represented by a secular republican faction.

The conflict arose on a number of thorny issues, such as citizenship, freedom of belief, relation between religion and politics, political plurality, freedom of speech, rights of election and nomination, human rights and other issues.

In addition to the conflict between the rightists and leftists, bourgeois and capitalist powers on the one hand and labour and proletariat powers on the other, the basic dichotomy was not only between the catholic royalists and secular republicans; there was as well a new rift within the secular republican trend itself between the bourgeoisie and the socialists. This arose after the emergence of industrialisation in France in the 19th century which gave rise to the proletariat, culminating in socialist movements defending the workers and calling for reconciling justice and freedom. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, 1809-1865, for instance, called for these ideals in his books, *Of Justice in the Revolution and the Church*, 1958, and *What is Property*, 1840, where he expounded his theory of “mutualism” which abolishes capital profit, not capital itself. He called for fair exchange of goods among individual producers, rejecting large properties considering them as theft, and approved of small properties of working owners, rejecting both communism and capitalism².

As a result of these conflicts, France witnessed several political systems in the period between the Revolution in 1789, declaring the Third Republic after the defeat of Louis-Napoléon in 1870 and appointing Adolphe Thiers as its first president.

While the French revolution raised the slogan *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, its *raison d'être* was still disputed. Some argue it came as a result of the enlightenment movement, others maintain it was a revolution against despotism and corrupt feudal system. For some, it was a result of the industrial revolution while others say it was simply brought

² Simon Blackburn, *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 308.

about by a rebellion of members of the Estates-General against King Louis XVI when he declared a state of bankruptcy. Then they declared themselves the National Assembly, and forced the king to accept the constitution which the National Assembly passed. The monarchy met its end only after the declaration of the republic in 1792. In the period after executing the king Louis 16th and his queen Marie Antoinette in 1793, executions took the lives of every suspected antirevolutionary in the Reign of Terror from 1793 to 1794 when the instigator of that reign, Robespierre, was executed himself. In 1795 the Directory Government took over, declared by the National Constituent Assembly, but it was even more corrupt.

After his return from Egypt, Napoleon Bonaparte overthrew the Directory Government and replaced it with the Consulate, instating himself the first Consul for life in 1802. He waged a number of wars in Europe extending his empire to practically cover the area from the North Sea to the Adriatic. Napoleon obstructed freedom which ironically was the first motto of the Revolution: *la liberté*. However, in his age, writers enjoyed greater freedom compared to what they had under the monarchy.

Therefore, there was a rebellion against the reactionary regime of the restored monarchy of Louis XVIII in 1815 after the defeat of Napoleon in Waterloo and his exile to Saint Helena³.

In the meantime, Renan had been born in 1823 under the monarchy. When he was seven, the 1830 revolution erupted against the reactionary Charles X who tried to tighten censorship on newspapers and other publications. Louis-Philippe came to power and attempted to create balance among the different currents, most important among which are the Bonapartians, the republicans and the followers of the former king⁴.

The monarchy stayed until 1848 when a bourgeois liberal revolution overthrew Louis-Philippe and declared the Second Republic (1848-1851). A republican government was formed including among its members the writer Alphonse de Lamartine and the social reformer Louis Blanc. It took many republican and social measures such as universal adult (male) suffrage, reinstating the freedom of the press, abolishing the death penalty and slavery, and to protect the rights of workers it established a government committee which solved disputes between workers and employers, and reduced the

³ Donald J. Harvey, "History of France", in: *Academic American Encyclopaedia*, New Jersey, Arete, 1980, Vol. 8, p. 271.

⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 271-2.

working hours. However, this trend of reform did not continue for long⁵.

Napoleon III, nephew of Napoleon Bonaparte, was elected president in 1858, but he staged a coup d'état in 1851 against the reformatory government, suppressed the acquired freedoms, drove off the republicans and socialists and dissolved the National Assembly. In 1852 he established the second empire—an expansive, despotic imperial regime which was based on a strong bond between the imperial power and the religious one. He thus tried to gain the support of the Catholic Church since he was aware of the influence it had on the popular classes⁶. Renan himself suffered harm as a result of the resurgence of the power of the Catholics.

Renan was inclined to support the common people, rejecting the bourgeois and feudal mentality which he considered as materialistic and selfish. On the other hand, he was optimistic, dreaming of a new dawn following the steps of Saint-Simon and maintaining that the popular social thinkers work for the good of the people. Defenders of the rights of the people reminded him of the Hebraic prophets and the aspirations of the authentic—not the priestly—Christianity, to change the world. Renan was one of the supporters of Alphonse de Lamartine in the presidential elections and at first he was an opponent of Napoleon III. However, his relation with the liberal Bonaparteans brought him closer to Napoleon III who appointed him chief of a scientific mission to Syria, Lebanon and Palestine. The mission was organized under the protection of the troops of Napoleon III, who intervened there in 1860 mirroring what Napoleon I did in Egypt. Renan took the opportunity to collect material about the environment where Jesus Christ had lived. Back in France, he was appointed a professor in the Collège de France, and wrote *Vie de Jésus* (Life of Jesus, 1863), which was received with both great admiration and vehement indignation. It raised the rage of the catholic fundamentalists in particular. They managed to eventually get him dismissed from the Collège de France with the pressures which they exercised and to which Napoleon III succumbed. Renan, however, regained his distinguished status when the Republicans came to power under the Third Republic which took measures to support secular liberal thought and to rid the country of the remnants of the imperial and ecclesiastic influences.

⁵Abdel Wahhab Al-Kayyali et alia, *Encyclopaedia of Politics*, Beirut, Arab Corporation of Studies and Publishing, 3rd ed., 1986, Vol. 4, p. 611.

⁶In this year, Renan obtain his Ph. D. with a dissertation on Averroes, married Cornélie Henriette Scheffer, and started writing articles to be published in *Revue des Deux Mondes* and *Le Journal des Débats*, in which he would later publish the transcript of his lecture “L’Islam et la science”.

Following the tragic defeat of Louis-Napoleon in the Franco-Prussian war in 1870, the bourgeois Republicans declared the Third Republic and the National Assembly elected Adolphe Thiers head of the government. Attempts to restore the monarchy failed and the republican system acquired more strength. In 1879 Jules Grévy was elected and education became free and secular. In 1882 education became compulsory and public liberties were guaranteed (1881-1884). In the meanwhile French colonialism took roots and expanded⁷.

This age which was teeming with conflicts and sharp transformations witnessed the intellectual contributions to the conflict between the old and the new made by Renan (1823-1892) and other writers and philosophers. Among these intellectuals are Auguste Comte (1798-1857), the founder of social positivism; Victor Hugo (1802-1885) who wrote *Les Misérables*; the great romantic poet Lamartine (1790-1869); the novelist Stendhal (1783-1867) author of *Le Rouge et le noir*; the great novelist Balzac who wrote *La Comédie humaine* and founded the *Revue Parisienne*; Charles Baudelaire (1821-1867) who composed *Les Fleur du Mal* where in some poems he made fun of some Christian beliefs and Saint Paul; and Gustave Flaubert (1821-1880) who wrote *Madame Bovary* which includes some sharp critical passages and raised a controversy over its sexual morality.

All these intellectuals had, no doubt, a crucial role in all the confrontations that took place between the conservative faction represented by the catholic royalists and the liberals represented by the secular Republicans.

The hard evidence that they succeeded in their intellectual endeavour is that the 19th century saw before its end, with the rise of the increasingly stronger Third Republic, secular free compulsory education, public liberties, religious freedom, free speech, rights of election and nomination, human rights and separation of state and church.

However, it is ironical that the same France which sought freedom for itself also sought the enslavement of other nations whose territories in different areas of the world it was able to occupy. In so doing France reflects the spirit of Renan and other thinkers who dealt with other nations with discrimination based on race and ethnicity. This reflects the immoral stance taken by a will that is not consistent with itself.

⁷ The Third Republic lasted until WWII and was replaced by the Fourth Republic (1945-1958) which collapsed under the effect of the Algerian revolution and was replaced in turn by the Fifth Republic (1958) under Charles De Gaulle. See: Harvey, "History of France", Vol. 8, p. 272.

Positivist Philosophy Facing Religions

In the 19th century, Comte (1798-1857) declared the end of religion, Nietzsche (1844-1900) confirmed “*Gott ist tot*” (God is dead)⁸, Charles Darwin (1809-1882) published his theory of evolution through natural selection, technology made great strides forward, and positivist science in general accomplished great feats which lured some to put all their trust in it or even to go the extra mile and drop religion altogether. Many previously religious trends adopted atheism. However, religion stayed as one of the pivotal issues of interest for politics and philosophy in the 19th century, either for criticism or support and development. Religion occupied the stage and the clerics maintained their influence over the common people and in not very few cases over French politicians. The critical revolution did not finish Christianity off. Christianity stayed strong in France with the common people and within politics for a long time until education was declared secular at the end of the century.

Some of the philosophers, thinkers and writers who rejected traditional religion in the 19th century basing their views on positivism, rationalism, romanticism or other trends of thought called for a new way of religious thinking or even for a new religion with a humanistic tendency. The poet Lamartine called for a new Catholicism which is different from the classical dogmatic one⁹. Victor Hugo called for a new spiritual rational religion without rituals or clerics who would prevent all future developments. Hugo rejected Christianity but believed in God, leaving behind the conflicting sects and priesthood¹⁰.

Saint-Simon (1760-1825) expressed hopes in his book *The New Christianity* (1852) to form a new Christian religion to replace the old one which differed with the convictions of the new thinkers¹¹. Can it be said that Nietzsche did not consider himself as much the enemy of Jesus Christ as he was an enemy of Christianity since he loathed its spiritual and moral doctrines which are based on the spirit of humility and servitude. His real devil is Saint Paul who turned his master Jesus into a pundit and developed his pretty myths into an institutionalised theology? Can it be said that Nietzsche’s aim was to chase out the priests and money changers from the temple as Jesus himself did? Interpreting

⁸ Henry D. Aiken, *The Age of Ideology: The 19th Century Philosophers*, New York, New American Library, English Printing, 1956. P. 206.

⁹ Donald J. Harvey, “History of France”, Vol. 12, p. 174.

¹⁰ Ibid. Vol. 10, p. 294.

¹¹ M. Rosenthal & Yudin, *A Dictionary of philosophy*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1967. P. 396.

Nietzsche could go even further. So can we say that his idea of eternal recurrence is a disguised version of the belief in incarnation and resurrection?¹²

Rejecting all existing religions, the positivist philosopher Comte called for a “religion of humanity” based on his positivist views and methodology. The term “positivist” for Comte depends on two elements: what is real, i.e., in the physical world and in science, and what we can make use of, but theology and metaphysics are mere illusory systems. Thus, science is the base of positivism which requires that we put every given through true science so we can make use of the things in our reach¹³. All knowledge should suit our realistic needs. The positivist sciences include mathematics, astronomy, physics, chemistry, biology (supported by psychology), and then sociology¹⁴. Comte argues that the human phenomenon lies in the hands of the literary writers and historians in particular who are alien to the idea of science.

This positivism contradicts religion as well as metaphysics both being mere past stages in the history of humanity since humanity goes through three stages of development of knowledge: theological, metaphysical and positivist. When humanity was in its infancy it passed through its theological phase where events of nature were believed to be caused by a will similar to that of man but higher and more powerful; it is the will of the spirits or the gods or God. This first stage, in its turn, had undergone developments, springing initially from fetishism, a belief in the magical power of fetishes—charms or supernatural spirits believed to embody magical powers. This meant that all good events were caused by good spirits and all bad events were instigated by evil spirits. For the primitive man, these spirits were immanent in nature, driving it. Then, humans started to worship stars and planets and believed in polytheism. Their gods were less numerous than the spirits but more powerful. With more development humanity sought one cause to explain the universe and all its phenomena. Thus, humanity attained the concept of monotheism.

Comte here does not employ a social explanation of the origin of religion; he uses instead an interpretation related to a framework of biological interpretations as the first

¹² ¹² Henry D. Aiken, *The Age of Ideology*. P. 206. Aiken presents this idea in a declarative mood while I preferred to present it in an interrogative form since it is hypothesis that requires proof through a lengthy study of Nietzsche’s texts.

¹³ Emile Boutroux, *Science And Religion in Contemporary Philosophy*, (1908), Trans. Ahmed Fuad Al-Ahwani, Cairo, General Book Organisation, 1973, pp. 41-42.

¹⁴ Kamil Al-Hag, *Concise Encyclopaedia of Philosophical and Sociological Thought*, Beirut, Librairie du Liban, 2000, p. 475.

religion for him is a belief in spirits living in natural things. Two stages in the maturation of human knowledge followed the theological one. In the metaphysical stage, man interpreted nature by attributing its driving power to metaphysical abstract factors, such as causality. In the final stage, man uses positivist science to interpret reality where he describes events and phenomena using the inductive method, discovers the direct relations among them and reaches the constant laws of nature without recourse to metaphysical or religious causes¹⁵. This is according to the three-stage theory of Comte who sees that the more development humanity achieves, the more it rids itself of religious thought. Therefore, Comte called for a positivist religion where humanity, and not God, becomes the object of worship and where man lives for others not for a personal God¹⁶.

Renan followed in the footsteps of Comte in rejecting theological interpretations although the meaning of positivist science for him is more extended than that of Comte. “Renan, in contact with working scientists, rejected the simplistic notions of natural science characteristic of the positivism of Auguste Comte”¹⁷. Although he criticises Comte sharply, they both share their time’s strong faith and passion for the great capability of positivist science, scientific methodology, experimentation and natural laws. Like Comte, he rejects religious mysticism and all supernatural elements. He only accepts facts that have natural explanation and scientific proof—both based on a certainty of total inevitability. In his philosophy,

There is no place for a fact that does not immediately come from a laboratory or a library because everything we know we know through the study of nature and history. Only history is conceived, in the Hegelian manner, as a sort of revelation of the spirit in humanity. In history, positivism and spirituality unite.¹⁸

For Renan, positivist science takes the place of religion and does its functions. It is the only field that can organise and improve the affairs of humanity. It is only science that can provide humanity with the symbol and law without which it cannot live. «La science, et la science seule, peut rendre à l'humanité ce sans quoi elle ne peut vivre, un

¹⁵ Osman Ameen, *Philosophical Attempts*, Cairo, Al-Anglo, 1956, pp. 80-81.

¹⁶ Auguste Comte, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, ed. By Gertrude Lenzer, 1975, p. 237.

Mill, John Stuart, *Auguste Comte and Positivism*, London, N. Trubner, 1865, repr. 1961, p68.

¹⁷ W. M. Simon, “Renan”, in Paul Edward, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, New York, MacMillan, Vol. 7, p. 179.

¹⁸ Émile Bréhier, *Histoire de la philosophie*, Tome II. La Philosophie moderne, Paris, Librairie Félix Alcan, 1932. p. 623.

symbole et une loi»¹⁹.

Science here is above all philology. It is a position that is so much close to that of Herder and Hegel whose work Renan had just read. Émile Bréhier says that for Renan,

Philology is the science of spiritual things; that is it that allows humanity to know what is in its development; it is through it that humanity becomes aware of the unconscious spontaneity which is its guide; and it knows the scientists and thinkers who are the intellectual elite that demonstrate to man the best in himself²⁰.

The future of humanity depends on the historical sciences, among which Renan is especially interested in philology and the historical study of religions. History is the necessary form of the science of the future—the true science for humanity. “It is evident”, argues W. M. Simon, “that Renan used the word science in the original sense of “knowledge”; “science” is not to be equated with the natural sciences”. Simon describes Renan’s philological and historical method as “rationalistic and critical”²¹.

Renan maintains that the origins of humanity can be known not through religion but through chronology²², geography and physiology. It is necessary to study the psychology of the child and the primitive people as well not to confine the study to civil society so that the evolution of humanity can be studied. History, as Hegel sees it, is a spontaneous striving towards the ideal and not a random series of episodes. In general, Renan posits the positive sciences above metaphysics and abstract philosophical analysis since chemistry and physics have accomplished in the study of bodies what abstract philosophical analyses have done. Therefore, the philosophy advocated by Renan is a scientific not a metaphysical one. Philosophy for him is not a specific science; it is rather the cumulative result of all the sciences. It is considered among poetry and the arts in general not the natural sciences. The philosophers who achieved progress are those who did not consider philosophy as a stand-alone discipline, such as Rene Descartes. His followers, such as Nicolas Malebranche caused philosophy to retreat as they turned it into an independent specialization. This also applies to the philosophers of the Middle Ages whose philosophies were of greater harm than benefit because of their absolute nature.

¹⁹ Renan, *L’Avenir de la science*, p. 31.

²⁰ Bréhier, *Histoire de la philosophie*, p. 623.

²¹ Simon, “Renan”, p. 179.

²² This is the study of historical records and the sequence of events to establish the exact dates of past events.

One of the causes of the progress achieved by modern thought is its replacing the absolute by the relative.

The moral aspect of Renan's idea of science appears in his concept that the honest races are the only ones that can be scientific. These ideas which Renan clearly expressed in *Examen de conscience philosophique*, (Examining the Philosophical Conscience, 1889) and *Dialogues et fragments philosophiques* (Philosophical Dialogues and Fragments, 1876) show that he kept faithful to the positive science which he expounded in *The future of Science*²³.

In spite of the Hegelian spiritual dimension in Renan's philosophy, he asserts, that the human mind must be separated from all supernatural beliefs in order to be able to achieve its fundamental task which is building positive science. All revealed religions had to show hostility to positive science²⁴. On the other hand, science opposes religion considering it based on the impossible, that is to say, miracles, and that it is simply superstitious to say that there is divine intervention in nature. "Renan denied, in principle, that there is any mystery in the world"²⁵.

His adoption of positive science did not drive him to call for the destruction of religions; he called instead for treating them kindly as free manifestations of human nature, "but not to guarantee them, most of all not to defend them against such of their own members as desire to leave them, — this is the duty of civil society"²⁶.

Renan almost confirms that religions will go through total transformations if they are reduced to the scope of free and independent studies, such as literature and taste. When religions are "deprived of the official or temporal bond, they will disintegrate and lose the greater part of their drawbacks"²⁷. All this is utopian now, but it will be a reality in the future.

He argues that the religion of the future is going to be of pure humanistic tendency. In *The Future of Science*, Renan states,

My intimate conviction is that religion of the future will be a *pure humanism*, i.e., the cult of everything human, the whole life sanctified and

²³ Ernest Renan, "Appendix to the preceding lecture", in: Ernest Renan and William G. Hutchison, *Poetry of Celtic Races and other Studies*, USA, Kessinger Reprints, 2003, p. 106.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 105.

²⁵ Simon, "Renan", p. 179.

²⁶ Ernest Renan, "Appendix to the preceding lecture", p. 108.

²⁷ Ibid.

elevated to a moral value.²⁸

This is consistent with the rest of his views since he maintains that the human reason unites all the individuals of humanity of all walks of life while religions set them apart.

The league of the whole world's honest thinkers against fanaticism and superstition is apparently composed of an imperceptible minority; essentially it is the only league destined to endure, for it rests upon truth, and will end by winning the day, after the fables that rival it have been exhausted in lengthened series of powerless convulsions²⁹.

However, Renan's attitude towards religion in general is paradoxical; he oscillates between a scientific stance and romantic aspirations, leaning much more towards the former.

His scientific positivism is clear in his belief in science and his adoption of the methodology of historical criticism in studying religion and its origins. Renan changed the course of his life because of this approach as he started his career to study for the catholic priesthood³⁰. Then he took up the approach of pure positive science to study religion, ending up with destabilising the basic pillars of belief. He proposed a concept of divinity different from that of the revealed religions. His god is a being who "becomes" and not "is"³¹. It is through the progress of humanity that spirit will win over matter when man's conscious of himself grows. The history of the world is simply the various beautiful and necessary manifestations of the total existence, infinite in its search for itself and for the completion of its consciousness. The purpose of the world is "the development of the human mind, which is in turn the key to the universe". This reveals the influence of Hegel because Renan describes history as the manifestation of the human spirit.

Since history cannot prove the immortality of the individual mind, Renan does not

²⁸ Renan, *L'Avenir de la science*, op. cit. p. 101. « Ma conviction intime est que la religion de l'avenir sera le *pur humanisme*, c'est-à-dire le culte de tout ce qui est de l'homme, la vie entière sanctifiée et élevée à une valeur morale. »

²⁹ Renan, "Appendix to the preceding lecture", p. 103-104.

³⁰ Renan gave up the career of priesthood because of the doubts engendered by his philological study of the Bible as W. M. Simon says. He went then under two strong influences, that of Marcelin Berthelot (1827 – 1907), the great French chemist and politician, with whom he maintained a lifelong friendship, and German idealism, particularly that of G. W. F. Hegel.

³¹ Abdul Rahman Badawi, *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Beirut, Arab Corporation of Studies and Publishing, 1984, Vol. 1. P. 549. Badawi explains Renan's concept of God in these words: « Dieu n'est pas, mais il devient » (God is not, but He becomes).

believe in the immortality of the individual. However, he believes in the development of the world in a manner that makes it possible for the absolute Spirit³² to manifest itself as the aim and teleological end of the world. Renan states,

The pearl oyster appears to me the best image of the universe and the degree of consciousness that we suppose in the whole. At the bottom of the abyss, obscure germs create a consciousness that is singularly badly served by the bodies, and prodigiously skilful however to reach its ends. What is called a disease of this small living cosmos brings a result of an ideal beauty, that people are ready to sacrifice any price for. The general life of the universe is, like that of the oyster, vague, obscure, singularly constrained, and consequently slow. The suffering creates the spirit, the intellectual movement and morality. The ailment of the world, one may say actually the pearl of the world, is that the spirit is the goal, the final cause, the last result and certainly most brilliant of the universe in which we live. It is quite probable that, if there are teleological ends, they are of an order infinitely higher.³³

Although Renan's philosophy includes clear evidence of his almost mystic worship of positive science, there is also evidence of his spiritual romantic aspirations in his stance on religion. In addition to his scientific positivism, he was also one of those who can be described as prominent figures of the mystic tendency of the 19th century. He vehemently refuted the tenets of religion, but at the same time held religious sentiments in high esteem. This may be ascribed to his poetic sensibility and aesthetic taste which kept fighting the rationality of his mind. He, therefore, sees that it is more logical for the thinker to deal with religion as if it were true since the two religious hypotheses, God and the soul, are useful. Renan argues,

We have to act as if God and the soul existed. That is because religion is one of these numerous hypotheses, such as the ether, the electric luminous, caloric and nervous fluids, or the atom itself, which we know well as nothing more than symbolic and adequate means for the

³² "Spirit" or "Mind" since the German word, 'Geist', used by Hegel, can mean either 'Mind' or 'Spirit'.

³³ Renan, "Examen de conscience philosophique", in: *Feuille détachées*, Paris, Calmann Lévy, quatrième édition, 1892. p. 442-443.

explanation of the different phenomena and we still hold to anyway³⁴.

It seems that Renan has gone through a development of attitude which combined faith and scepticism in a pragmatic formula. He considered religion as a useful hypothesis, but did not adopt religion in its Christian guise or the historical form in general. He was inclined towards a religion which believes only in God and the immortality of the soul—a sort of natural religion or deism.

This double standard towards religion also applied to historical religions. The conflict between positivism and romanticism stayed alive and kicking in his mind, controlling his specific views on Judaism, Christianity or Islam.

In his book *Histoire du peuple d'Israël* (History of the People of Israel 1889), he explained how the early prophets had the concept of religion without dogmas or ritual worship while all this has changed because of the historical transformations which have turned religion into dogma, rituals and priestly authority³⁵.

Renan's stance on Christianity is expounded in his book *Vie de Jésus* (Life of Jesus, 1863) and the eight-volume *Histoire des origines du Christianisme* (History of the Origins of Christianity, 1866-1881) in addition to a number of other books. He applied the historical critical approach in all of them, criticising what Christianity had undergone of stagnation in thought, writing off all supernatural aspects. According to French positivist philosopher and lexicographer, Émile Littré (1801-81), "Despite all the researches which have been made, no miracle has ever taken place where it could be observed and put upon record". Renan argues this is a stumbling block that cannot be put out of the way. "It is impossible to prove that a miracle occurred in the past, and we shall doubtless have a long time to wait before one takes place under such conditions as could alone give a right-minded person the assurance that he was not mistaken."³⁶ We no longer believe in miracles as we do not believe in zombies, magic, astrology or the devil³⁷. Renan, therefore, asserts that in order to use only the events we are certain of, we

³⁴ Ibid. p. 432.

³⁵ Benrubi, J. *Les Sources et les courants de la philosophie contemporaine en France*, Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1933, trans., Badawi, p. 28.

³⁶ Ernest Renan, *Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse*, Paris, Calmann Lévy, 1884, pp. 282-283.

³⁷ Félicien Challaye, *Petite histoire des grandes religions*, tr. Hafez Al-Jamali, Damascus, Talas Publishing, 1991, p. 241.

shall confine ourselves to a few lines — “quelques lignes”³⁸. He makes great use of these few lines and turns them into big fascinating tome, , based on the historical criticism methodology which presents a realistic picture of the life of the beginnings of Christianity different from the traditional dogmatic and idealistic image that the believers of Christianity hold dear.

Historical criticism presents historical Christianity, i.e., as revealed by the scientific discipline of history—the realistic and not the sacred idealistic creed. This historical criticism distinguishes between Jesus, the human being, the real historical figure, and Jesus the holy deity that is sacred for a certain group of people. This kind of criticism explores as well how this historical figure has turned over time into a deity for some religious denominations.

Adopting an approach of historical criticism and philology, Renan could not see in the history of Christianity but contradictory and unstable views of reality. This reveals the influence of the German Tübingen School of historical criticism of Christianity, especially David Strauss who set forth a theory that Jesus is a myth invented by early Christian groups. Renan was inclined first to follow suit and adopt a similar view, but he soon resolutely formulated his own notion that Jesus was actually a historical figure, i.e., he really existed but not in the manner that is traditionally believed by Christianity. Renan maintains that Jesus was an incomparable man—« homme incomparable »³⁹, not a god or the son of God. He thus strips Jesus of the divinity conferred on him by Christians.

A big controversy and commotion followed the publication of Renan’s purely historical views on Jesus and Christianity. When he delivered a lecture in the Collège de France in 1862 to an audience of students, some dignitaries and the public, the reaction was loud, especially when he referred to Jesus as « homme incomparable ». His audience reacted fiercely refusing to describe what they believed was God and the Son of God as simply a man. They accused Renan of apostasy and joined demonstrations in the streets denounced Renan’s denial of the divinity of Jesus. Some Catholics visited him at home and discussed his views which meant they intended to kill him. The French government called off his lectures and he lost his professorship at the university. He went in hiding for a while until the fall of the reign of Napoleon III⁴⁰.

³⁸ Ernest Renan, *Vie de Jésus*, Paris, Calmann Lévy, 1863, p. 20.

³⁹ *Ibid.* p. 100.

⁴⁰ Badawi, *Encyclopaedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 1, p. 548-549.

Although he denied the catholic creed, he kept his inherited Christian sensibility; he believed that discovering the origins of Christianity is the mission he should set for himself. Christianity for him is the model of the spiritual religion which makes man go above the commonplace and the vulgar. In his *Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse* (Recollections of My Youth, 1884), he asserts that he owes his humanistic tendency and moral constitution of his mind and philosophy to his theological training at the seminary of Saint Sulpice.

Renan was interested as well in studying Islam through the historical criticism approach. This interest in Islam shows in almost all his works. His book *Études d'histoire religieuse* (Studies in Religious History, 1863) set apart a chapter for the prophet of Islam, « Mahomet et les origines de l'islamisme ». Moreover, he gave a famous lecture on Islam and Science, « L'islamisme et la science »⁴¹, in addition to compiling other essays on some Arabic and Islamic books. His last research in these Islamic studies was one he wrote in commentary on the Alessandro D'Ancona's book *La Leggenda di Maometto in Occidente* (The Legend of Muhammad in the West, 1889).

Renan approaches Islam as the last of the great religions and confirms in his clear scientific way that the origins of Islam are unmistakable and that “the genuine monument of the primitive history of Islamism, the Quran, remains yet absolutely unassailable”⁴².

Using his historical critical method, Renan does not discern any mystery in the origins of Islam while he sees that the other religions have unclear beginnings with roots difficult to fathom. The roots of Islam are unmistakable. The life of Mohammed is known in details like the life of the reformers of the 16th century.

Consequently, Renan does not doubt the historical origins of Islam as he does concerning Christianity. However, he is critical of what he sees as Islam's obstructing the scientific movement and the fetters with which it shackles the mind—views he expounds in his lecture on Islam and science, « L'islamisme et la science ». In his book on the Islamic philosopher Averroes (Ibn Rushd), *Averroès et l'averroïsme* (1852), he argues that religious dogmatism made the Muslims hostile to scientific and philosophic advance⁴³.

⁴¹ Given at the Sorbonne, on 29 March 1883.

⁴² Renan, *Studies in Religious History*, Trans. O. B. Frothingham, New York, Carleton Publisher, 1864, p. 283.

⁴³ Renan sets out his views on Islamic philosophy in the context of the subject of this book, the philosophy of Averroes, which are the same views he would later expound in the lecture

However, Renan harbours deep appreciation for the greatness of Islam as he admits, “Islam has always raised in him feelings so deep that every time he enters a mosque he regrets not being a Muslim. The greatness of the Islamic religion contradicts the Orient’s loathsome reality, intrigues and false pride”⁴⁴.

In his lecture on Islam and science Renan states, “Islamism has its beauties as a religion; I have never entered a mosque without a vivid emotion—shall I even say without a certain regret in not being a Mussulman?”⁴⁵

Therefore, it transpires that Renan’s ambivalent attitude towards religion in general, which oscillates between scientific positivism and romantic aspirations, is the same towards particular religions, whether Islam or Christianity, where conflict between positivism and romanticism contends in his mind and heart.

Western Vision of the East

It is not possible to understand Renan’s positivist view of Islam, philosophy and science without exploring the general backdrop of the 19th century Orientalism, especially that influenced by the philosophy of positivism. It can be said that Renan is the offspring of the Western positivist vision of the Orient. The Western vision of the Orient has generally been formulated through Orientalism as the field of knowledge in which the West approaches the Orient. “Orientalism is the discipline by which the Orient was (and is) approached systematically, as a topic of learning, discovery, and practice”⁴⁶. It is, therefore a kind of “Western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient”⁴⁷.

The term Orientalism implies levels of meaning which Edward Said sees as interdependent. First of all, it is an academic discipline, which is the term used in a number of academic institutions where anyone who teaches, writes on or researches the subject of the Orient is an Orientalist. Second, Orientalism is a style of thought based on

« L’Islamisme et la science ». He additionally explored the Latin Averroism and its history from the 13th to the 16th centuries in Europe, especially Italy. It is, however, noted that Renan did not have good knowledge of Arabic despite his being an Orientalist and a philologist. See: Benrubi, J. *Les Sources et les courants de la philosophie contemporaine en France*. p. 28 ; and Abdul Rahman Badawi, *Encyclopaedia of Orientalists*, p. 312.

⁴⁴ Hesham Djaït, *Europe and Islam*, Beirut, Haqiqa Publishing, 1980, p. 53.

⁴⁵ Ernest Renan, “Islamism and Science”, (Lecture delivered at the Sorbonne, March 29th, 1883). In: Ernest Renan and William G. Hutchison, *Poetry of Celtic Races and other Studies*, USA, Kessinger Publishing’s Rare Reprints, 2003, p. 99.

⁴⁶ Edward Said, *Orientalism*, London, Penguin, 2003, p. 73.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

ontological and epistemological distinction between the Orient and most of the time the Occident. Third, it is the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, teaching it, settling it, ruling over it⁴⁸.

The 19th century fits the three levels of the meaning of Orientalism as well. Focusing on the imperialist aspect, just like E. Said, Maxime Rodinson argues that “the most evident aspect of the European vision of the Orient, particularly starting from the mid 19th century, is imperialism.”⁴⁹

Subscribing to a similar view is the Russian Alexy Zhuravsky who asserts that Islamic studies were born from the womb of imperial schemes or they at least appeared at the same time there were European voices calling for “regaining control over the Holy Land from the Muslim usurpers.”⁵⁰ This took place through a number of practical measures, foremost of which is establishing Arabic schools in the West as a condition for better accurate knowledge of the Arab mind and the Islamic creed. The effect of the Orientalist studies can be felt in the imperialist movement as is apparent in the effect of such studies on the French Expedition to Egypt and how the French travelers of the time played a large role in the expedition and in planning the French political and colonialist project⁵¹.

Analysing the role played by Orientalism in setting the plans of the colonialists, Edward Said states,

The idea of reconquering Egypt as a new Alexander proposed itself to him [i.e., Napoleon], allied with the additional benefit of acquiring a new Islamic colony at England's expense. ..., Napoleon considered Egypt a likely project precisely because he knew it tactically, strategically, historically, and—not to be underestimated—textually, that is, as something one read about and knew through the writings of recent as well as classical European authorities. The point in all this is that for Napoleon Egypt was a project that acquired reality in his mind, and later in his preparations for its conquest, through experiences that belong to the realm of

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 2-3.

⁴⁹ Maxime Rodinson, *La Fascination de l'islam*, tr. Elias Morcos, Beirut, Tanweer Publishing, 1982, p.56.

⁵⁰ Alexy Zhuravsky, *Islam and Christianity*, tr. Khalaf Muhammad Al-Garad, Kuwait, Alam Al-Marefa, issue 214, 1996, p. 104.

⁵¹ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 80.

ideas and myths culled from texts, not empirical reality. His plans for Egypt therefore became the first in a long series of European encounters with the Orient in which the Orientalist's special expertise was put directly to functional colonial use; for at the crucial instant when an Orientalist had to decide whether his loyalties and sympathies lay with the Orient or with the conquering West, he always chose the latter, from Napoleon's time on.⁵²

E. Said adds referring to recommendations of Comte de Volney, a French traveler whose *Voyage en Egypte et en Syrie* appeared in two volumes in 1787,

there were three barriers to French hegemony in the Orient and that any French force would therefore have to fight three wars: one against England, a second against the Ottoman Porte, and a third, the most difficult, against the Muslims⁵³.

When Napoleon managed to recruit a force to impose his control over Egypt, he discovered it was too small to accomplish his purpose. He consequently tried to make the local imams, muftis, and Muslim scholars interpret the Quran in favour of his army. "Napoleon later gave his deputy Kléber strict instructions after he left always to administer Egypt through the Orientalists and the religious Islamic leaders whom they could win over; any other politics was too ex-pensive and foolish."⁵⁴

In a study entitled, "The Status of Islamic Orientalism: Gains and Problems"⁵⁵, Rodinson argues that the scientific aim was the main drive of Orientalism, but he admits that it was not free from Eurocentrism and European racial attitudes towards the peoples under study. In this, he agrees with E. Said.

Rodinson enumerates, in this study, the efforts exerted by the classic Orientalists to enable Orientalism to reach its current status. While European historical studies thought it enough to cover the Greek and Roman civilisations, the Age of Enlightenment added to these both the Islamic Arabic and the Chinese civilisations in order to extend its humanistic horizons, relinquishing the older look which used to disdain non-European nations. The Europeans did a great gigantic job, argues Rodinson, in discovering and studying the history of the Arabic Islamic civilisation; they sent scientists, mostly

⁵² Ibid. p. 80.

⁵³ Ibid, p. 81.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p. 83.

⁵⁵ Maxime Rodinson, "The Status of Islamic Orientalism: Gains and Problems", in: *Orientalism between its Promoters and Opponents*, tr. Hashem Saleh, Beirut, Al-Saqi Publishing, 2000.

philologists at that time, collected manuscripts, classified, indexed and translated them. The early Orientalists collected a huge amount of data and sorted them out, paving the way for the 19th century stage of scientific theorising. However, Rodinson acknowledges, as mentioned before, that this effort was not free from a Eurocentric attitude tinged with racism towards the nations they studied.

Eurocentrism, which has become more prominent than before led to the aggrandisement of the utilitarian Western tendency full of contempt of the other civilisations. Consequently, the only possible universe in the vision of the European has become the European model with all its dimensions and levels⁵⁶.

In the framework of this state of Eurocentrism, we should distinguish between two trends of Orientalism: missionary Orientalism and positivist Orientalism which stood in opposition of religious priesthood and was promoted by thinkers who all come out from Voltaire's cloak.

On the one hand, missionary Orientalism was promoted by the Christian missions which ascribed the European advance to the Christian religion while attributing the backwardness of the East to the Islamic religion. This type of Orientalism looked at Islam with hostility tinged with modernity although their practices were a mere revival of the medieval polemics and antagonisms. These early practices were a series of accusations and defamations poured on the person of the Prophet of Islam and his holy message⁵⁷. In *Islam and the West*, Norman Daniel summed up the plan of the early Christian ideologists to destabilise Islam in a few words in the chapter entitled, "False Prophethood" saying that they tried to prove that Muhammad was a mere human with no divine intervention in his life and hence, he could not be a prophet, hoping that this will push the whole edifice of Islam to collapse⁵⁸. Consequently, stereotypical ideas of Islam and its prophet took shape in the consciousness of Christianity. Many aspects of these ideas arose as contingent result of the nature of the traditional attitude of the church towards Prophet Muhammad and Islam, according to Alexy Zhuravsky⁵⁹.

On the other hand, positivist Orientalism, opposing religious priesthood and inspired

⁵⁶ Compare Hassan Hanafi, *Introduction to Occidentalism*, Cairo, Fanayya Publishing, 1991, p. 29 and the following pages; and Maxime Rodinson, *La Fascination de l'Islam*, p. 57.

⁵⁷ Omar Lotfi, *The World, the Orientalists and the Quran*, Malta, Islamic World Studies, 1st ed., 1991, pp. 49ff.

⁵⁸ Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*, New York, MacMillan, 1975, p. 47.

⁵⁹ Alexy Zhuravsky, *Islam and Christianity*, p. 92.

by Voltarean thinkers, glorified the Aryan spirit as opposed to the Semitic, and highly esteemed the Hellenic civilisation based on reason, freedom and beauty. In contrast, it despised the Arab Islamic mentality in particular and the Semitic culture in general as a reflection of lazy determinism, strict dogmatism, intolerance, slighting the arts and hostility towards scientific and philosophic thinking. Ernest Renan adopts this trend with some reservations⁶⁰.

It may be clear that positivist Orientalism was influenced by David Hume and the methodology of Auguste Comte, especially his book, *Cours de philosophie positive*, where he explained the three-stage law, “*trois états théoriques différents*”. The last stage is the positive scientific one, *l'état positif*, which depends on inductive description through reasoning and observation to discover the constant laws of nature and to disallow theological and metaphysical interpretations⁶¹. Thus the role of religion is superseded by that of science for Comte who obviously influenced Renan in his rejection of religions.

In this context, it should be stated that the 19th century may be the most important historical point for Orientalism. Although Orientalism has much earlier roots, it has not crystallised into a concept and a scientific term until the late 18th century and the early 19th century. The term *Orientalist* appeared in English in 1779. In French, it first appeared in 1799 but the Académie Française did not approve it for entry in its dictionary until 1838⁶². It emerged to satisfy the need for introducing a discipline of the study of the Orient. Rodinson says there was a bad need of specialists to establish periodicals, scientific societies and academic departments to serve this field⁶³.

One manifestation of this need of specialists in Orientalism is the founding of the School of Living Eastern languages (École spéciale des langues orientales vivantes) in France under Silvestre de Sacy (1758-1828). The School became the Mecca of European Orientalists and gave Orientalism a French spirit for a long time. Other important Orientalist projects were accomplished as well, such as the Orientalist societies and the international Orientalist annual conferences starting in 1873⁶⁴.

⁶⁰ Maxime Rodinson, *La Fascination de l'Islam*, p. 58.

⁶¹ Auguste Comte, « Première Leçon », *Cours de philosophie positive*, Vol. 1, Paris, Rouen Frères, 1830, passim.

⁶² Rodinson, *La Fascination de l'Islam*, p. 52.

⁶³ Maxime Rodinson, "The Western Image and Western Islamic Studies," in: *The Legacy of Islam*, Ed Joseph Schacht, With. C.E. Bosworth, 1978, p. 64.

⁶⁴ Mahmoud Hamdi Zaqqoq, "Orientalism and the Intellectual Background of Cultural Conflict", Qatar, *Kitab Al-Oma*, Issue 5, 1984, p, 38ff.

In the 19th century Orientalists' efforts abounded in studying the life and prophethood of Muhammad. This interest is still thriving up till now. Thus as early as 1843 the German Orientalist Gustav Weil compiled his book *Mohammed, der Prophet: sein Leben und seine Lehre* (Stuttgart, 1843), Muhammad, the Prophet: his Life and Doctrine. Abdul Rahman Badawi comments on this book saying,

Weil made recourse to the *Biography of the Prophet* written by Ibn Hesham, to the Ali Al-Halabi's Biography, and the Prophet's Biography compiled by Hussein Ed Diyar Bakri. Weil's book is considered the first such work of a series that other Orientalists would write later on the Prophet and his message. It is also considered the most prejudiced and free from scientific objectivity and historical accuracy⁶⁵.

Weil also compiled a historical critical introduction of the Quran, *Historisch-Kritische Einleitung in den Koran*, 1844, in addition to the Biblical Legends in Islam, *Biblische Legenden der Mohammedaner* (Frankfort, 1845), in which Weil explores the influence of the rabbinic legends upon the religion of Islam. He also translated Ibn Hesham's *Biography of the Prophet*, 1864, into German in two volumes⁶⁶.

Theodor Noldeke, 1836-1931, published *Geschichte des Korans*, (History of the Quran) in 1856 which was his doctoral dissertation in which he argued that the letters at the opening of some Quran chapters are not a part of the Quran but symbols denoting the sheets of the Quran belonging to different Muslim scholars before the Quran was collected in the final version of Osman. The letter "m" for example denoted the version of Mogheira, "h" referred to the version of Abu Horayra, "s" meant Saad ibn Abi Waqas, and "n" was the symbol of Osman's version. They were signs of ownership which were mistakenly integrated into the main text. He also questioned the order of the chapters as we know it now⁶⁷.

Among the prominent Orientalists of the 19th century is the French Louis Pierre Eugène Amélie Sédillot. He started his career as a professor of history and then became secretary of the Collège de France and of the School of Living Eastern languages (l'Ecole des langues orientales) in 1832. He wrote *Histoire des Arabes* (History of the Arabs) in 1854 in which he traced the history of the Arabs since the beginnings to the Algerian

⁶⁵ Abdul Rahman Badawi, *Encyclopaedia of Orientalists*, p. 391.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid. p. 595. And Tohami Naqra, *The Quran and the Orientalists: Research in the Methodology of the Orientalists in Arabic and Islamic Studies*, Vol. 1, Gulf States Arabic Education Bureau, p. 43.

prince Abdel Qader. In this context he praised Islam, but claimed that the Quran lacks the Christian concept of resignation when facing hardships. He says for example that Muhammad allows retaliating one disservice for another as if this was not the norm of the day. When Muhammad adopted the principle of retaliation, he condoned the mores of his time⁶⁸ and found good reception among the Jews. Sédillot presented Muhammad as a political leader who used religion as a means to implement his political program⁶⁹. He further maintains that the Prophet of Islam was influenced by Christianity, saying that in his first journey to Syria with his uncle Abu Talib, he had a meeting with the Christian priest Guirgis or Sergius who became good friends with him⁷⁰.

At the time most Orientalists of the 19th century adopted the previously explained attitude towards Islam, a number of them adopted a different view. An example is the Scottish essayist and historian Thomas Carlyle, 1795-1881. He wrote *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History* in 1840 where he maintained that man should find his symbol and religion. Religion for him is not the ecclesiastical belief; it is rather what every man actually believes in through his unconscious relation with the hidden universe. The agent that moves us is a divine infinite power which materializes in the great man as Johann Gottlieb Fichte says. Carlyle carried out Fichte's ideas about the activity of the ego and moral awareness as the creative element in the world. He considered the history of the society as nothing more than the history of the great characters; they are the spirit of the general history⁷¹. One of these great characters that made history is Muhammad as,

The word this man spoke has been the life-guidance now of a hundred and eighty millions of men these twelve hundred years. These hundred and eighty millions were made by God as well as we. A greater number of God's creatures believe in Mahomet's word at this hour, than in any other word whatever. Are we to suppose that it was a miserable piece of spiritual legerdemain, this which so many creatures of the Almighty

⁶⁸ Abdel Motaal M. Al-Gabri, *The Prophet's Biography and the Illusions of Orientalists*, Wahba Bookshop, 1988, p. 107.

⁶⁹ See both: Muhammad Ahmed Diab, *Lights on Orientalism and Orientalists*, Cairo, Manan Publishing & Distribution, 1990, p. 176-177; and Sultan ibn Abdel Aziz Al-Hossein, *Sédillot's Attitude towards the Prophet's Biography: A Critical Study of his book the General History of the Arabs*, Islamic University of Imam Muhammad ibn Saud, Madina Dawa Faculty, 1992.

⁷⁰ Mostafa Omar Halabi, *The Cultural Background of the Orientalists' Attitudes in a Study of the Character of the Prophet*, Madina, Higher Institute of Islamic Calling, 1988, pp. 36-38.

⁷¹ Camil Al-Haj, *Concise Encyclopaedia of Philosophical and Social Thought*, p. 448.

have lived by and died by? I, for my part, cannot form any such supposition. I will believe most things sooner than that. One would be entirely at a loss what to think of this world at all, if quackery so grew and were sanctioned here.⁷²

Carlyle also insisted on Muhammad's sincerity and morality. He says, "Much has been said and written about the sensuality of Mahomet's Religion; more than was just"⁷³.

Edward Said comments on Carlyle's attitude describing it as salutary,

Mohammed is no legend, no shameful sensualist, no laughable petty sorcerer who trained pigeons to pick peas out of his ear. Rather he is a man of real vision and self-conviction, albeit an author of a book, the Koran... Mohammed is a hero, transplanted into Europe out of the same barbaric Orient ...⁷⁴

Among these Orientalists, a very prominent figure in Orientalism of the 19th century who had special effect on Renan is Silvestre de Sacy. De Sacy may be called the father of the French Orientalists. He was a philologist and the founder of the school of research, the most influential in the 19th century. He was also the teacher of prominent Orientalists and the author of institutionalising books in the study of languages and religions. De Sacy compiled *Grammaire arabe* (1810), *Exposé de la religion des Druzes* (1838), and the editions of *Maqamat Al Hariri* (1822) and *Calila et Dimna* (1816), among other books⁷⁵.

Edward Said points out the importance of Sacy to Orientalist studies, saying,

It was not only because he was the first president of the Société asiatique (founded in 1822) that Sacy's name is associated with the beginning of modern Orientalism; it is because his work virtually put before the profession an entire systematic body of texts, a pedagogic practice, a scholarly tradition, and an important link between Oriental scholarship and public policy⁷⁶.

What De Sacy started was completed by Renan especially in the area of philology in

⁷² Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, London, Chapman & Hall, 1840, p. 53.

⁷³ Ibid. p. 82.

⁷⁴ E. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 152. Said says that Carlyle's thesis is analogous to that of Caussin de Perceval which is that the Arabs were made a people by Muhammad, Islam being essentially a political instrument, not by any means a spiritual one.

⁷⁵ Badawi, *Encyclopaedia of Orientalists*, pp. 338-339.

⁷⁶ E. Said, *Orientalism*, p. 124.

a manner that had not been exploited by De Sacy. Renan linked the Orient to the latest of the disciplines of knowledge, most prominent among which was philology. E. Said explains Renan's and De Sacy's contributions saying,

The difference between Sacy and Renan is the difference between inauguration and continuity. Sacy is the originator, whose work represents the field's emergence and its status as a nineteenth-century discipline with roots in revolutionary Romanticism. Renan derives from Orientalism's second generation: it was his task to solidify the official discourse of Orientalism, ... For Sacy, it was his personal efforts that launched and vitalized the field and its structures; for Renan, it was his adaptation of Orientalism to philology and both of them to the intellectual culture of his time that perpetuated the Orientalist structures intellectually and gave them greater visibility⁷⁷.

Philology, or historical linguistics, was one of the most important three important disciplines used by 19th century Orientalism, i.e., philology or comparative and historical linguistics; history of religions; and physical anthropology. Historical and comparative linguistics tends to consider each nation as identical with its language and to maintain that linguistic kinship necessitates kindred spirit—the spirit which is the cause of all historical developments⁷⁸. It is philology that was the starting point of Renan, and “it is the extraordinarily rich and celebrated cultural position of that discipline that endowed Orientalism with its most important technical characteristics”⁷⁹.

In *L'Avenir de la science*, Renan describes the major role played by philology saying, “The modern spirit, that is, rationalism, criticism, liberalism, was founded on the same day that philology was founded. The founders of the modern spirit are the philologists (Les fondateurs de l'esprit moderne sont des philologues)”⁸⁰. A few pages later, Renan adds, “Philology is the exact science of the spirit (mind). It is to the sciences of humanity what physics and chemistry are to the philosophic sciences of bodies”⁸¹.

The history of religions, on the other hand, arose, as Rodinson argues, from the

⁷⁷ Ibid, p. 130.

⁷⁸ Rodinson, *La Fascination de l'Islam*, pp. 54-55

⁷⁹ Said, p.131.

⁸⁰ Renan, *L'Avenir de la science*, p. 141.

⁸¹ Ibid. p. 149. « La philologie est la science exacte des choses de l'esprit. Elle est aux sciences de l'humanité ce que la physique et la chimie sont à la science philosophique des corps. »

struggle of bourgeois plurality with its tendency towards relativism against the Christian ideological monopoly. He thinks a great deal of the study of Oriental religions as past or present alternatives of Christianity. He reveals to people that with the theoretical idealism of the time the essence and basic core of all civilisations lie in the religious circle—everything can be explained accordingly⁸².

As for the third important discipline, physical anthropology, it classified nations as of various ethnicities and essences in the context of the 19th century. It emerged in the 18th century as the scientific study of race. These three disciplines created an indefinite illusory exaggeration of the impact of religion, language or race. This led to neglecting the actual, the realistic and the contemporary for the sake of adopting the characteristics of the old ages as giving the defining features of each nation in a final decisive way! Accordingly, there was a divorce between the findings of these scientific disciplines and the existing facts and reality with all its complications⁸³.

While the expressed aim was to give a rational scientific base for Orientalist studies to deconstruct the myths and silly ideas concerning the Oriental religious tradition, the outcome was constructing a large number of new Western myths and fairy tales in dealing with Islam. Zhuravsky laments this saying that, “in addition to bestowing scientific attire on old Western delusions, fantasies and stereotypical ideas on Islam, the majority of the 19th century Orientalists did not get rid of their prejudices against Islam, whether in a flagrant violent way or in the form of discomfort towards Islamic nations.”⁸⁴ Even when such Orientalists experience the Orient in the field, they carry with them the ready evidence which supports their inherited Western stereotypical views ignoring all facts which contradict these views.

In the last quarter of the 19th century, Western strategic circles created a double-faced picture of Islam. On the one hand, Islam was still an enemy, though a defeated one, not to be feared unless it tends towards unity as in the form of an Islamic League. It takes the side of the barbarians who stand against the European universal humanistic colonialisation. On the other hand, Islam was seen as a body of resignation which made it a factor of stability and settlement and of good use in keeping the status quo of the

⁸² Rodinson, *La Fascination de l’Islam*, p. 54.

⁸³ *Ibid.* p. 55.

⁸⁴ Zhuravsky, *Islam and Christianity*, P. 105.

political conditions under the control of friendly rulers⁸⁵.

What description fits the 19th century: age of positivism or age of ideology? It would be a contradiction to call the age of positivism the age of ideology. This double-faced description, which applies to the whole age, most definitely applies to Renan who was faithful to positivism but could not set himself free from the clutches of ideology. However, this is not strange for a philosopher who grew up in an age when most of the main influential beliefs were of an ideological nature.⁸⁶

Islam, Philosophy and Science: Positivist Interpretation and Analogy

In the light of both the positivist philosophical tendency which dominated Renan's orientation and vision, and the Orientalist anti-clerical influences inspired by Voltaire, Renan formulated his attitude towards the relation between Islam and philosophy and science. He argues that philosophy and science started in the early centuries of the Islamic history, from the 9th to the 12th centuries (3rd to 6th centuries of the Hegira calendar) since Islam was not powerful enough at that time to fend them off. However, Islam itself, as Renan sees it, is antagonistic to philosophy and science—as a Semitic religion of course. It imposes strict limitation on the freedom of research⁸⁷. In so doing, Renan reiterated the usual Orientalist claims of the hostility of the Arabs and Muslim towards the scientific and philosophic spirit. Muzaffar Iqbal comments on Renan's contribution to this type of Orientalist discourse,

Renan is, thus, an important player in the making of this discourse. His main point was that “early Islam and the Arabs who professed it were hostile to the scientific and philosophic spirit” and that science and philosophy “had entered the Islamic world only from non-Arab sources”⁸⁸

Renan expresses these views in his famous Sorbonne lecture on Islam and science, « L'islamisme et la science », where he states,

Every person, however slightly he may be acquainted with the affairs of our time, sees clearly the actual inferiority of Mohammedan countries, the decadence of states governed by Islam, and the intellectual nullity of the races that hold, from that religion alone, their culture and

⁸⁵ Norman Daniel, *Islam, Europe and Empire*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 1966, p. 467-8.

⁸⁶ Henry David Aiken, *The Age of Ideology: the 19th Century Philosophers*, New York: New American Library, 1956.

⁸⁷ Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age*, London, Oxford University Press, 1967, p. 120.

⁸⁸ Muzaffar Iqbal, *Science and Islam*, London, Greenwood Press, 2007, p. 148.

their education. All those who have been in the East, or in Africa, are struck by the way in which the mind of a true believer is fatally limited, by the species of iron circle that surrounds his head, rendering it absolutely closed to knowledge, incapable of either learning anything, or of being open to any new idea⁸⁹.

Moreover, he describes the Muslim even at a very young as a fanatic who is full of stupid pride, believing that he has the absolute truth. His creed makes him despise others and their religions. The Muslim “has the most profound disdain for instruction, for science, for everything that constitutes the European spirit. This bent of mind inculcated by the Mohammedan faith is so strong...”⁹⁰

Renan makes an exception for the Persians who were able to preserve their genius from the attack of this state of ignorant backwardness. Surprisingly, Renan passes a strange judgement concerning the Persians; they are “more Shiites than Moslem”⁹¹ as if Islam is one religion and the sect of Shia another. He goes further and maintains that “The terrible blast of Islam completely checked, for the space of a century, all this fine Iranian development”⁹² until the advent of the Abbasids who revived the brilliancy of the Persia.

Strangely enough, the Persians development was checked by Islam and revived by the Abbasids while Islam is not the cause of either case. Their influence was initially checked by the Omayyads and the resumption of their influence was instigated by the Abbasids—a political and social issue not related to Islam as a religion.

Scientists and philosophers were persecuted under Islam, argues Renan. The Egyptian scholar Ahmed Ameen, in his book *Leaders of Reform*, summarises Renan’s attitude and describes his bias,

Those of the Muslims who took up philosophy were faced with persecution or suffered the burning of their books unless they lived under the

⁸⁹ Renan, « L’Islamisme et la science », p. 85.

Given at the Sorbonne, on 29 March 1883, and was published the following day in *Le Journal des Débats*.

See Also:

Muzaffar Iqbal, *Science and Islam*, p. 148; and:

Pervez Hoodbhoy, *Islam and Science: Religious Orthodoxy and the Battle for Rationality*, London, Zed Books, 1991, p. 61.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid, 86.

⁹² Ibid, 88.

protection of a caliph of a prince who was apparently religious while hiding irreligion in his heart⁹³. Nevertheless what these philosophers achieved was not much; it was merely a deformed version of Greek philosophy. The philosophy the European took from the Muslims of Spain was badly translated, which deformed the sources and Europe could not really benefit from it until it was retranslated from the original sources again.⁹⁴

Renan argues that the philosophy produced under the Arab Islamic civilisation should not be described as Islamic. The non-Muslim Nestorians and the Harranians produced this philosophy when they did the translations. The Persians were converted to Islam only later and without much conviction. The renowned caliphs, such Al-Mansour, Haroun al-Raschid, and Al-Mamoun, "can scarcely be called Muslims"⁹⁵. Renan ignores the fact that these caliphs are of pure Arab extract and at the same time were able to think in a free way and live a liberal life. This is the same for the Arabs of Andalusia.

Islam is reduced in Renan's presentation to the restricted type practiced by some theologians; other types are necessarily not Islamic. Here, Renan falls in the trap of mechanisms of exclusion and denial, as if exchanging seats with the religious dogmatic believers who exclude all methods of thinking except their own closed type.

Accordingly, Renan explains the flourishing philosophical movement under the Abbasids by the sceptical caliphs who were in spirit elsewhere not sharing the religiosity of their surroundings. They were fond of the wisdom of India, Persia, and above all, Greece, contributing thus to a thriving life of philosophy, the arts and science. Sometimes there were setbacks caused by fanatic theologians in the courts of Baghdad, but this would soon retract. "Then the independent influence takes the upper hand once more; the Caliph recalls his men of science, and his boon companions: and a free life begins anew"⁹⁶.

The Syrian Christian physicians were increasingly active in translating the Greek philosophy and thought, especially medicine, mathematics, astronomy and peripatetic philosophy with the encouragement of the Abbasid caliphs. At that time active minds like

⁹³ In this point Renan's words are "*Externally they practise the religion of which they are the chiefs, or popes, if one can thus express one's self; but in spirit they are elsewhere*" (page 89 of the discussed lecture). Here Renan relinquishes his accurate scientific method and gives himself the right to guess intentions.

⁹⁴ Ahmed Ameen, *Leaders of Reform*, Cairo, Egyptian General Book Organisation, 1996, Vol. 1, p. 41.

⁹⁵ Renan, « L'Islamisme et la science », p. 89.

⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p.89.

that of Alkindi began to speculate and produce their philosophies, but they were perceived with suspicion and philosophy often caused death or persecution. However, rationalism produced great thinkers like Alfarabi and Avicenna and led to the development of chemistry, astronomy and algebra. In Andalusia, a similar advance took place in which the Jewish scholars played a role. In the 12th century philosophy made great strides, never seen before since antiquity at the hands of Ibn Baja, Ibn Tofail and Averroes.⁹⁷

This philosophy of the Muslims, from Alkindi to Averroes did not arise from Islamic sources; that is why it was considered an alien body and a discordant tune in the Islamic tradition. The true evidence of this fact is found in the ideas of the dissenting theological sects of Mu'tazila, Shia, Asha'riya, Khawarij. Renan maintains the resultant philosophical thought was actually Graeco-Sassanian⁹⁸. "It would be more precise to say Greek, for the really fruitful element of all this came from Greece. ... Greece was the one source of knowledge and of exact thought"⁹⁹.

The progress in the Orient for him resulted from taking from the Greek through the efforts of the poor Syrians, the Harranians and the persecuted "filsouf" whose scepticism put them under the ban of their contemporaries.¹⁰⁰

He argues the awakening of the West started when it used the 12th century Arabic translations through Syria, Baghdad, Cordova and Toledo although he asserted they were poor confused translations in a language not suited to contain the Greek thought. At the last quarter of the 13th century two movements appeared on the horizon: the Mohammedan countries (as called by Renan) "plunged into the most pitiable intellectual decadence", and Western Europe started the move towards progress. Moreover starting from 1200, philosophy was erased from these Mohammedan countries. Strangely enough, Renan claims that the philosophical manuscripts were destroyed¹⁰¹ as he sates, "Philosophy was abolished in Mohammedan countries. The historians and other writers only speak of it as a memory, and that an evil memory. The philosophical manuscripts

⁹⁷ Ibid. pp. 91-92.

⁹⁸ In the original French Renan used "gréco-sassanide". The Sassanid Empire was the last pre-Islamic Persian Empire, ruled by the Sassanian Dynasty from 226 to 640.

⁹⁹ Renan, « L'Islamisme et la science », p. 92.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ This is a claim refuted by historical facts since many of these manuscripts were re-edited and published in the modern time depending on the old versions found in the Islamic world.

were destroyed, and have become rare”¹⁰². He adds that from that moment, with some rare exceptions, like Ibn Khaldoun, Islam no longer counted among its members any man of great mind. Soon the Turkish race assumed the hegemony of Islam, and caused the universal prevalence of its total lack of the philosophic and scientific spirit. Philosophy and science were slain.¹⁰³

One of the causes of the chains that fettered science in the Islamic civilisation, in Renan’s words, is the determinism of the Arabs’ thinking. It is an accusation of grave consequences for Renan and other thinkers since it is based on racial judgement on the so-called Semitic mind. It is a mind that can see the details but not the whole picture, without a unifying logic, which means, on the level of human behaviour, separation, splintering, conflict, submission, weakness, and resorting to other than reason to reach one’s target. If the Greek thought is the cause of the moments of progress of the Islamic world as Renan sees it, one of the causes of the Arabs’ backwardness is latent in Arabian nature. The nature of the Arabs is antagonistic to free rational thinking, whether philosophical or scientific since this nature is affiliated with the Semitic race which is inferior to the Aryan race. He even goes further than accusing the Arab nature of lack of the scientific spirit; it also lacks the political spirit, so it is incapable of establishing any kind of organisation or a continuously stable society. He considers this lack incurable.¹⁰⁴

This is an outdated mythical idea about the Orient which is too fantastic to deserve refutation. It was however set forth in a number of Renan’s essays and books, most important among which is *Histoire des langues sémitiques* (History of the Semitic Languages) which was not pure Orientalism despite the wide-spread influence it had on different writings of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century.

An early critic of Orientalism, Syrian writer Muhammad Rohi Faisal summarises Renan’s thought in a few points, including points related directly to what Renan expounded in his lecture on Islam and science. These are:

1. The Semitic race reached its highest perception point in religion since it lacked rational thinking; it is the race of the revealed books, fables, psalms and chants.
2. The Semitic race lacks the refined spirituality which the Indians and the Germans have had. It has no sense of beauty while that sense reached its perfection with the Greeks.

¹⁰² Renan, « L’Islamisme et la science », p. 94.

¹⁰³ Ibid. pp. 94-95.

¹⁰⁴ Badawi, *Encyclopaedia of Orientalists*, p. 313.

3. The Semites have “quick wit but in a limited way; they have a strange idea about the concept of unity which is their main characteristic”, which leads them to fanaticism.
4. The Semites “lack the sense of wonder which leads to inquiry, thinking and the search for truth”. Their belief in the oneness of God leads them to refer everything to this deity.
5. They have no philosophy since what is borrowed is not philosophy.
6. Their poetry lacks "difference and variety"; that is why the Arabs have mostly personal lyrical poetry while the Jews have metaphorical poverty. They lack imagination, hence their inability to invent.
7. “The Semites have no sense of diversity; the Semitic jurisprudence knew only one type of retribution: death. The faculty of laughter is absent with them”.
8. “Even in morality, the view of the Semite is different from that of the Aryan race. The Semite knows no duties except towards himself. If you ask him to keep his word, fulfil his promise, to uphold justice without any prejudice, you discover you are asking for the impossible. Selfishness in its clearest manifestations is embodied in them”¹⁰⁵.

Faisal did not discuss these ideas as he have deemed them too untenable to discuss. It was clear they reflected inherited ideas in the Western culture with religious, political and social projections on the Semitic race, including the Jews. Renan argues that the Jewish literary culture of the middle ages is simply a reflection of the Islamic and no more, « Toute la culture littéraire des juifs au moyen âge n'est qu'un reflet de la culture musulmane,... ». This is clear in the cases of Moses Maimonides and his disciple Joseph Ben Juda, Moses Ben Tibbon, Moses ben Machi, Calonyme Ben Calonyme and others who translated the Aristotelian commentaries of Averroes into Hebrew¹⁰⁶.

There were some attempts in answer to Renan’s claim that the Jewish culture is only a reflection of the Islamic culture, but these took place before Jewish and leftist Orientalists started refuting these ideas outside their 19th century ideological context or referring them to Arabic literature. They led the discussion into areas of the confrontation between the leftists and Jews, on the one hand, and on the other the Nazi ideology which

¹⁰⁵ Muhammad Rohi Faisal, “To Muhammad Kurd Ali: The Purposes of the Orientalists,” *Al-Resala*, issue 111, 3rd Year, 1935, pp. 1331-1335.

¹⁰⁶ Renan , *Averroès et l'Averroïsme*, Paris, Calmann Lévy, 1852, p. 173ff.

used such ideas as a base.¹⁰⁷

Renan no doubt is right here as the Jewish philosophy of that time mirrored the philosophy and theology which appeared in the Islamic Arab civilisation. Therefore, the attempts of some Jewish Orientalists to refute this point are futile although these attempts were of political significance since they made the West see the Jews as different from the Arabs. In addition, the efforts to incriminate anti-Semitism in the West did not bear benefit for the Arabs although both Arabs and Jews belong to the same Semitic race!

Apart from this point, the discrimination between Semitic and Aryan which Renan expressed in *Histoire des langues sémitiques* is clearly related to his attitude to Arabs and the Arab nature in his lecture « L'islamisme et la science »; the Arabs, like the other Semitic nations, are confined within the narrow circle of lyricism and prophetism (Renfermés, comme tous les peuples sémitiques, dans le cercle étroit du lyrisme et du prophétisme).¹⁰⁸ The Arabs are by nature not ready for philosophising or scientific thinking. As long as Islam was in the hands of the Arab race, i.e., under the first four Caliphs and under the Omayyads, no intellectual movement was born within it. “When Persia took the upper hand, and made the dynasty of the descendants of Abbas victorious over that of the Beni-Omeya, the centre of Islam found itself transported into the Tigris and Euphrates. But this country was still full of the traces of one of the most brilliant civilisations that the East has ever known, that of the Sassanid Persians”.¹⁰⁹

Most the aspects of Islamic civilisation, Renan claims, were made by people of Persian origins, and most philosophical thought was produced by Christian Nestorians and the Sabaeans of Harran¹¹⁰. No philosophy or science in the Arab world was produced by an Arab except for Alkindi who was of an Arab descent. Renan writes,

What is in fact a very remarkable thing is, that among the philosophers and learned men called Arabic, there was but one alone, Alkindi, who was of Arabic origin; all the others were Persians, Transoxians, Spaniards, natives of Bokhara, of Samarkand, of Cordova, of Seville. Not only were those men not Arabs by blood, but they were in

¹⁰⁷ See: Mohsen Jasem Al-Mosavi, *Orientalism in Arab Thought*, Beirut, Arab Corporation of Studies and Publishing, 1993, p.146.

¹⁰⁸ Renan, *Averroès et l'Averroïsme*, p. 90.

¹⁰⁹ Renan, « L'islamisme et la science », pp. 87-88.

¹¹⁰ Hoodbhoy, *Islam and Science*, p. 89.

- Nikki R. Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyed Jamal Ud-Din Al-Afghani*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1983, p. 85.

nowise Arabs in mind.¹¹¹

This philosophical and scientific product was written in Arabic, but this does not mean that the Arabs are to be thanked for that. If Arabic was used to transfer philosophy, this happened because it succeeded to impose and maintain its role as a cultural language. Renan explains,

The Moslem conquest had borne the language of the Hedjaz to the very ends of the earth. It was with Arabic as with Latin, which in the West became the vehicle of feelings and thoughts that had nothing to do with ancient Latium. Averroes, Avicenna, al-Battani, were Arabs, as Albertus Magnus, Roger Bacon, Francis Bacon, and Spinoza were Latins. It is as great a mistake to give the credit of Arabic science and philosophy to Arabia, as to put all the Latin Christian literature, all the Scholastic Philosophy, all the Renaissance, and the whole of the science of the fifteenth, and in part of the sixteenth centuries, to the credit of the city of Rome; because all this was written in Latin.¹¹²

Renan even goes further and considers Arabic itself as a language not quite fit to transfer metaphysical thoughts. It is suitable for poetry and a certain type of eloquence, and therefore it obstructed the thoughts of its thinkers who “were fettered by it, as the mediaeval thinkers were fettered by Latin, and modified it for their own use”¹¹³.

It seems that Renan cannot think without making analogies between his object of study and Western history—a deep-rooted characteristic of his methodology which depends heavily on comparison against an ideal and thus flouting the historical conditions and the cultural circumstances.

Just as Renan made an analogy between the relation of Avicenna, and the other Muslim philosophers, to Arabic and the relation of Roger Bacon, and other European thinkers, to Latin, he made an earlier analogy between the relation of Islam to science and the relation of Christianity to science. Thus, his methodology of analogies ended up with the rejection of Islam as a precondition for any renovation, neglecting, or being ignorant of, the fact that Islam does not recognise any theological clerical power like that of Catholic Christianity, and that it is not in any way similar to the European Catholic

¹¹¹ Renan, « L'Islamisme et la science » pp.95-96

¹¹² Ibid. p. 95.

¹¹³ Ibid. p. 96.

Christianity which launched crusades by Papal decrees in the 12th century, established the inquisition, stood in the way of scientific advance, and fettered the freedom of thought and conscience.

He nevertheless insists that philosophy and science were produced and transferred in the Islamic world only when Islam was initially weak by analogy to the European Catholic Christianity in its relation to modern science. “In the first half of the Middle Ages Islam supported philosophy because it could not prevent it; it could not prevent it, because it was itself lacking in cohesion. ... Islam has been liberal in its day of weakness, and violent in its day of strength.”¹¹⁴

Islam, he claims, has no role in allowing scientific and philosophic progress to run its course since this progress simply happened in spite of Islam or even against Islam which “happily has been unable to prevent”.¹¹⁵ Thus Islam only allowed philosophic and scientific thought in its early period when it did not have full control, argues Renan saying,

Islamism has then, in reality, constantly persecuted science and philosophy. It ended by stifling it. It is, however, necessary to distinguish in this respect two periods in the history of Islam — one from its commencement to the twelfth century, the other from the thirteenth century to our own days. In the former period Islam, undermined by sects, and tempered by a species of Protestantism (known as Motazelism), was much less organised and less fanatical than it has been in the latter, when it has fallen into the hands of the Tartar and Berber races—races which are heavy, brutal, and without intelligence.¹¹⁶

It is puzzling that Renan keeps using this approach which reveals his hidden agenda; he maintains that the first Arabs who converted to the new religion scarcely believed in Islam. However, this incredulity was hardly hidden during two or three centuries until the advent of “the absolute reign of dogma, without any possible separation of the spiritual from the temporal ... it is the reign of a dogma, it is the heaviest chain that humanity has ever borne”¹¹⁷.

One other reason why Islam is hostile to science that Renan, with his inadequate

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p. 97-98.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p. 99.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p. 96-97.

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p.97.

knowledge of the Quran because he did not know Arabic, proposes is that the natural sciences are attempts at rivalry with God. In addition, the historical sciences may revive ancient heresies because they apply to times anterior to Islam. Thus, Islam treats science as an enemy¹¹⁸.

This characteristic was fairly ascribed by Renan not only to Islam, but to all religions¹¹⁹. All religions expressed enmity to science¹²⁰ as religions are based on mysticism although there is not any mystery in the world¹²¹. They also depend on the supernatural elements not the natural laws of science. Renan, in his commentary on Al-Afghani's answer, asserts that "Christianity has no reason to boast over Islam. Galileo was not treated more kindly by Catholicism than was Averroes by Islam"¹²².

On the other hand, Renan maintains scientific experience fends off the divine for "Experience causes the supernatural to draw back, and restrains its domain. But the supernatural is the basis of all theology"¹²³.

It is obvious, as mentioned above that Renan did not read the Quran. The Quran clearly emphasises the fact that exploring the universe, the secrets of creation and the constant laws of nature are means to solidify faith in the infinite abilities of the Creator. The Quran states how the Prophet repeatedly rejected the demands of the non-believers for supernatural miracles since this is a kind of slighting the ability of the mind to perceive truth through rational reasoning not through overwhelming miracles. The Quran acknowledges the constant laws of nature and that all natural phenomena function with mathematical precision and are subject to these laws. Some of the many Quranic verses that testify to that are:

{ إِنَّا كُلَّ شَيْءٍ خَلَقْنَاهُ بِقَدَرٍ ۗ ۝۹۹ } القمر: 49

BEHOLD, everything have We created in due measure and proportion; (54:49)

{ ... وَالشَّمْسُ وَالْقَمَرُ حُسْبَانًا ذَلِكَ تَقْدِيرُ الْعَزِيزِ الْعَلِيمِ } الأنعام: 96

... and the sun and the moon to run their appointed courses: [all] this is laid down by the will of the Almighty, the All-Knowing. (6:96)

{ لَا الشَّمْسُ يَنْبَغِي لَهَا أَنْ تُدْرِكَ الْقَمَرَ وَلَا اللَّيْلُ سَابِقُ النَّهَارِ وَكُلٌّ فِي فَلَكٍ يَسْبَحُونَ } يس: 40

¹¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 99-100.

¹¹⁹ Badawi, *Encyclopaedia of Orientalists*, p. 315.

¹²⁰ Renan, "Appendix to the preceding lecture", p. 105.

¹²¹ W. M. Simon, "Renan", p. 179.

¹²² Renan, "Appendix to the preceding lecture", p. 105.

¹²³ Renan, « L'Islamisme et la science » p.100.

[and] neither may the sun overtake the moon, nor can the night usurp the time of day, since all of them float through space [in accordance with Our laws]. (36:40)¹²⁴

The Quranic verses confirm that there is no violation of natural laws.

The histories of the past are no danger to Islam as the Quran which related some of them even these of nations that have gone astray. The Quran urges the believers to know the past history to deduce moral lessons from what happened to previous nations. Moreover, the Islamic historical books are full of stories of the ancient peoples written by Muslim scholars who usually start their chronicles with the beginning of creation. Apart from the accuracy of such stories, they simply show that there was no fear of exposing the events of the past that are anterior to Islam.

On aspect of the methodological deficiency in Renan's approach is dealing with the Islamic Arab civilisation as one closed system or a unity with no internal variation, judging it through what is partial, transient, and exceptional. The cases of thought persecution are a few compared to the space of intellectual and belief freedom which was available in many periods. One piece of evidence is that the Nestorians and Harranians kept their original beliefs under Islam and continued to produce scientific and philosophical works. The Jewish philosophers wrote their philosophical and theological treatises under Islamic rule. The Islamic civilisation preserved the philosophic and scientific works of the Greeks. No physician, chemist or astronomer was persecuted because of their scientific research in contrast to what took place in Europe. "For a person such as Abu Al-Alaa [Al-Ma'arri, 973-1057, Syrian Arab philosopher] to come out in his writing declaring his non-belief is proof enough of the absence of Islamic coercion of faith."¹²⁵ This is one among numerous other well known cases which Renan simply overlooked or nonchalantly passed over. The objective researcher cannot ascribe cases of thought persecution to Islam as a religion describing it as dogmatic; such cases are the outcome of political social conflicts and to the abuse of religion by factions defending their interests.

Renan's interpretation is misleading and reversed. What he presents as an effect is actually the cause. The rise of the fanatic and dogmatic religious trends and their hegemony over the intellectual, social and political life brought about the retreat of the

¹²⁴ Translation of Quranic verses is taken from Leopold Weiss's translation of the Quran: Leopold Weiss, *The Message of The Qur'an*, (1980).

¹²⁵ Djäit, *Europe and Islam* p. 57.

Islamic civilisation. These trends themselves were brewed by economic, political and social circumstances, and when they flourished, they undermined the Islamic culture.

Islam itself as a discourse encourages freedom of thought and *ijtihad* (independent and innovative thinking)¹²⁶. It rejects the blind propagation of old traditions and stagnation. The Prophet of Islam says, “In passing a judgement, if one makes an independent decision based on genuine thinking and turns out to have chosen the right option, one is reward twice by God; if the person turns out to be wrong, he is rewarded once.”¹²⁷ We do not to use any traditional apologetics nor traverse the verses of the Islamic text to prove Islam is not hostile to free science. This is an area that is well-trodden although dogmatic thinkers, with certain interests, on both sides of the argument are still at one another’s necks.

The relation between Islam and science is not a problem, but Renan projected a European problem on Islam and then transferred a European solution; the problem is the conflict between Catholic Christianity and science, the borrowed European solution is the necessity of pushing religion aside if we want science to progress!

The issue of the conflict between religion and science arose in the historical context of the European experience—the point which Renan overlooked. In the case of Islam, the conflict was in a few exceptional cases; it never reached the level of a phenomenon as in the European Catholic Christian case. In the Islamic civilisation, religion never took the form of an executive institution or an organised authority specialised in combating liberal thinking as in the case of the Spanish Inquisition. Furthermore, Muslim theologian clerics never developed as a group into an authoritarian priesthood. The nature of Islam is against the formation of such an autocratic priesthood. Despite the existence of religious scholars as a part of the political structure starting from the 13th century AD, they never wielded power similar to that the Church had in the history of Catholic Christianity. As Heshanm Djaït says,

Religious Islam never had that organised resistance power which Christianity enjoyed. ... The internal dynamic which caused Islam to spread around the world was its own driving power with no external

¹²⁶ *Ijtihad* (اجتهاد) is a technical term of Islamic law that describes the process of making a legal decision by independent interpretation of the legal sources, the Qur'an and the Sunnah. The opposite of *ijtihad* is *taqlid*, Arabic for "imitation". Wikipedia.

¹²⁷ Hadith no. 6919 in *Bukhari*, and no. 1716 in *Muslim* in addition to other sources.

organising power for support; it was not aided by any certain social class or any defence intellectual system. It maintained itself and fought for its own survival.¹²⁸

¹²⁸ Djaït, *Europe and Islam* p. 61.