Chapter-6

Modernist Writing on William Montgomery Watt
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Islam and the west is no new subject. Islam is the most misunderstood religion in the west. A critical study of the western writers on Islam reveals ignorance and prejudice.

A few outstanding western scholars have devoted their works to Islamic studies because of their sincere interest in it. This is undoubtedly a welcome change, but despite the sane and fair approach of only a few, the general atmosphere still abounds with ignorance and prejudice. Real teachings of Islam are extraneous to the west.

Western writers on the whole has impelled by the desire to find out weakness in Islam and the Islamic pattern of things which can be exploited to serve the political ends of the Christian west.

In the opinion of many modernist writers of east William Montgomery Watt was acknowledged a leading western authority on Islam and prophet Muhammad at the same time. He was a learned Christian scholar whose writings on Islam and Christianity and biography of Prophet and historical subjects are well known among the Muslim scholar also.

There have been very few scholarly writings by Muslim scholars in English about orientalist views on Islam in general and the Quran in
particular criticized the orientalists have always tried their best to study on the Islam but the Muslim Scholars have now presented their views of what had been written about Islam by them.

Regarding the study on Islam it is obvious that an analysis and evaluation of the works of Watt by Modern writers be done. Because many modern writers have out only analysed but have also presented a healthy and factual criticism of Prof. Watt’s writings on Islam and Prophet.

In the seventh century Islam crossed the boarder of Arabia and was spreading faster in Iran and other parts of the world. This made the western writers very apprehensive. So they decided to arrest spreading power of Islam and they began to projected it as the most despicable and repulsive force against Christianity. The reason behind it that they considered Islam a great threat against Christian faith. A glance at twentieth century literature on Prophet Muhammad shows that many authors treated the subject not an area of substantial interest but an additional issue. We also have observed an intense prejudice and hatred against the religion and two fundamental sources i.e. the Quran and the Sunnah. Therefore the need of the time was to develop a better understanding between the two civilizations i.e. Islamic and Western.
Among the 20th century Western Scholars of Islam, W.M. Watt stands out as the most prolific writer on Prophet Muhammad. Since he seems to have a better understanding of Islam, he is able to occupy a special chair of Islamic studies in the western orientalist school. Unlike others, who has spent all their energies in painting the darkest possible picture of Islam and the life of Prophet, W.H. Watt has used a subtle technique of interpretation by using the Modern attire of objective study.

Sheikh Ahmad Zaki Yamani has indirectly spoken about Watt’s eminence among western scholars in the foreword to Watt’s book ‘Islam and Christianity today’.¹ Shaikh Yamani says: Professor Watt has done much in the effort to free the western mentality of the shackles of prejudice and hatred that originated in the hostilities of medieval times and that originated in the hostilities of medieval times and that have for so long blinded the western world to the merit of trying to understand Islam. In spite of the phenomenal difficulties inherent in attempting to reconcile positions that are generally regarded as irreconcilable he has achieved a high level of open-mindedness.² He recognized the efforts of Watt to free the Western mentality of the shockles of prejudice by using a high level of open mind ness. According to him Watt has maintained a more balanced attitude towards the understanding of Islam than of his contemporaries.
Antonic Weakeles considered W.M. Wat’s ‘Muhammad At Mecca’ and ‘Muhammad at Modena’ very profound and respectable accounts regarding the biography of the Prophet Mohammed. Imaduddin Khalil favoured him by saying that Watt rendered it necessary to maintain respect and impartiality while writing about the unseen foundation in the background of the facts and events related to the prophet’s life.

According to Khurshid Ahmad, Watt has made an effort to change the attitude of Western scholarship on Islam and Prophet.

A.L. Tibawi who could usually see through the hidden facts and spot the wrong impression about Islam, which was the result of hypocritical stance by many Western scholars, has praised Watt’s work in his words that Watt has made an honest attempt and also his command of the facts and his imaginative reconstruction of events are really admirable.

Khurram Murad was of the opinion that Watt was kind enough to lend a sympathetic era and pen to Islam.

A.S. Bazmee admires his openness and honesty in pointing out the problems non-Muslim Western scholars face in the field of Islamic studies.
A modern writer, Andreas D’souza, critically analyzed the writing of Watt and said that Watt attempted to move beyond a mere description of Islamic data to the more challenging task of helping Muslims to deepen and strengthen their faith, making it more directly relevant to the questions and issues we face today.⁶

There can be no doubt about W.M. contribution of Watt in the field of study of Islam. But inspite at all this, we can not deny the fact that Jabal Mohammad Bauben has accused Watt to have relied on his own conjectures overlooking the contemporary Islamic scholars. All this is specially in connection with the image of Prophet Muhammad.⁷

There is no doubt that Jabal Muhammad Buaban brings out the historical background of the negative image of the prophet in the writing of the western writers. In doing so he discovered that Watt has insisted that the Quran is a subdued revelation, and not wholly true. He furthers points out that Watt has shown a special fascination with the concocted story of the “satanic verses”.

Josef Ven Ess points out that since Watt has been Anglican Clergyman throughout this life, therefore, sometimes his writings could be described as didactic or possibly propagandistic.⁸
Muhammad Hamidullah, through praises Watt for his efforts in translating the works, yet he clearly spots the fact that Watt has offered an incorrect rendering of Al-Ghazali’s original.

Dr. M.M. Ali in his book *Sirat-al-Nabi and the orientalists* has critically analysed the works of Watt in order to refute the life of Prophet Muhammad. According to him the suggestion made by him regarding the ambition and preparation on the prophet’s parts to become the messenger of God are totally groundless and they are not supported by the text of Quran or by the traditions of the Prophet.

Whether it be Muhammad’s experience of poverty as a Youngman. Novurshing the sense of deprivation or his exclusion from the most lucrative trade or his consciousness of having great organizing ability, all allegations are baseless. We donot get any record of any kind of criticism by his subsequent opponents if they had knowledge of Muhammad’s preparation for becoming a leader. Apart from this, we get the example of divine consolation to the prophet of the movement of dejection which was caused by people continuous disobedience.

The Quranic passage “And you were not used to reading /reciting any book before this, nor to writing it with your right hand “ (29:48) clearly shows that the statement has been made in the context of unbeliever’s allegations that the Prophet had himself composed the text.
Since the passage itself expresses the absurdity of allegations of Watt's statement "there is a presumption that Muhammad knew at least enough to keep commercial records" or when Watt says that probability Muhammad had the old world stories written down for him by secretaries", it can be discarded because Watt does not provide the relevant source in this connection. Depending upon only on probabilities does not make any sense.

Though it is obvious that an analysis and evaluation of the works of these idea of their approach to the 19th century and at the beginning of 20th century. It also gives us relevant information about the evaluation of their ideas and opinions throughout and till the present time.

While having a close look at Watt's tall claim i.e. "I am not a Muslim in the usual sense, though I hope I am a "Muslim" as "one surrendered to God". It can be observed that in declaring himself a 'Muslim' he seems to have an intention in his mind to misguide people. Although the basic meaning of the word 'Muslim' is to surrender to God' but Watt has forgotten that to be a Muslim one must believe in five pillars of Islam, the very first of which is to believe in Almighty Allah and His prophets. He himself has criticized the prophet which a sensible Muslim can never ever dream of. Therefore there is no point in considering him a Muslim spending life time in the study of Islam, leaving the basic pillars
of Islam, how can one declare himself a Muslim. The intention is obvious Watt wanted to misguide the people with the helps of his fabricated words.

In his book *Islam and Christianity today* discussing Christian attitude to Islam Watt has distorted the image of Islam on the basis of violence, self indulgence, moral and sexual weakness especially in connection with the practice of Prophet Muhammad who was popularly identified with the devil. Though he further highlighted the efforts of various scholars who could correct more gross and enormous distortion resulting into positive image which is presently revived.

Similar kind of argument is given in his article “Muslim-Christian dialogue” in *Hamdard Islamicus* published from Pakistan. In this article he has written mainly about his efforts of understanding the extent of confirm that the Christians of today are in no position to condemn out right the sexual ethics of Islam.

Actually what appears is that Watt is trying his best to understand certain aspects of Islam comprehensively but of not all together, at times, he seems to have failed. If we will go through the study of Quran and Sunnah any body can find that Islam is a religion of peace, Justice, non-violence and morality. And all these points can be confirmed from various direct references from the life of Prophet and Sahaba. Whether it
is about polygamy, mutual differences on various fronts, moral degradation, sexual ethics or any other issues, Islam provides solution to all these issues.

Zafar Ali Qurashi says: Montgomery Watt is prominent among such well-known orientalists. His two volume biography Muhammad at Mecca and Muhammad at Medina, has become a veritable orientalists classic upheld as the uncontested authority on the subject even at Pakistani Colleges and universities.\(^\text{12}\)

Mazeruddin Siddiqi writes: Most of the books written by Prof. Watt on Islam and life of the Holy Prophet of Islam show him to be not too much sympathetic to Islam.\(^\text{13}\)

Tibawi writes: My acquaintance with Montgomery Watt is slight, but I studied all his works on Islam and reviewed a number of them. As a typical example, I quote here from my assessment of his portrait of Muhammad as a prophet and statesman. It simplified and popularized the author’s earlier and more scholarly volumes. Almost every Orientalist has at one time or another tried his hand on the life of Muhammad, but down to our own time their approach and its outcome continue to be colored with prejudice and hostility. Often enough, the Orientalists sat in judgement on Muhammad and Islam according to standards that ill befit
his time and environment. Often enough they lingered on inevitable human contradictions in order to discredit the man and his cause.

Montgomery Watt’s contributions “had been remarkable for attempting to redress the balance. His command of the facts and his often imaginative interpretation are admirable. But his treatment of Muhammad the statesman is more acceptable to Muslim opinion than that of Muhammad the prophet”. For while his Prophethood and sincerity are recognized, it is asserted in the same breath that he was “aware” of Jewish and Biblical traditions. This is an ill-disguised resurrection of the hoary story of the alleged Judaeo-Christian “origins” of Islam. That is in conflict with the Qur’an, or that its propagation in these “liberal” times is offensive to the believers does not seem to have troubled the mind of the writer. He cannot be accused of ignorance of the Qur’an or of Islamic sentiment. It is therefore inexplicable why he tried to ride two horses at the same time.14

In M.M. Watt article “Thought on Muslim Christian Dialogue” editor write in his note about the Watt’s writing Professor Watt is certainly one of the best qualified to write on such a delicate and sensitive subject as he is at one’s both a committed Christian who combines in himself loyalty to his faith with deep scholar of approach and, at the same time, a renowned scholar in Islamic studies with an unusual sympathy1.
In this long article he has tried to pose the problems and the points of dialogue without taking any definite position for himself. Watt makes it clear that "the following pages are addressed mainly to Christians in the sense that, since the writer is a Christian he is most likely to have influence with his fellow Christian Editor further stated – we must also appreciate his courageous attitude in exposing certain misunderstanding about Islam among the Christian and particularly his frank remark that "the British Christian is generally very badly informed about Islam".15

Mazheruddin Siddiqi and Ali Quli al-Qarar write a review article of Watt's book *Islam and Christianity today - A contribution to dialogue*. In his review Mazheruddin look at the book positive and negative both. Acknowledging what he sees as a positive posture of his work, Mazheruddin cites- Professor Watt has been involved in the study of Islam since 1938. He has written numerous books on Islam including Islam and the integration of society, *what is Islam? The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* etc. Prof. Watt is considered to be a leading authority in the English speaking world on the life of the holy prophet of Islam and the early history of Islamic theology (Kalam). According to Mazheruddin most of the books written by Prof. Watt on Islam and the life of the holy Prophet on Islam show him to be not too much sympathetic to Islam. In this respect he does not stand favourable
comparison with Prof. H.A.R. Gibb; because sometimes he makes very adverse remarks about Islam. His book *Muhammad at Medina*, is notably defective from this print of view. Al Qarai detects a dual efforts in Watt’s writings, he finds that Watt’s inner dialogue is prompted by the need to defend his own faith against the continuous growth of scientism, and by defending Christianity, he would be defending aspects of Islamic beliefs as well.

In his article “Free will and Predestination in Early Islam- A critique appreciation” William Thomson writes about the Watt’s writings and says “Dr. Watt would perhaps disavow such an ambitious intent. But his synthetic treatment of subject, which is virtually a new departure in the study of Muslim religious thought, opens out that prospect for the readers and he has put forward, well considered views regarding the historical development of a department of that thought, wherever in his opinion his sources entitled him to do so. Thomson further says “How valid his modestly tentative conclusions are will undoubtedly be the subject of much further inquiry and discussion, but many of them will assuredly stand the light of criticism and find ultimately general acceptance, even if some restatement, or modification, be required in the light of new material, or by the general recognition of some still disputed foreign influence.
A.L. Tibawi, in his review writes that Professor Montgomery Watt is a prolific writer. His writing is clear, logical, and sparkles with inventive comments.\textsuperscript{22}

James E. Royster in his article ‘A survey of approaches from the perspective of the history and phenomenology of religion’\textsuperscript{23} says about the Watt that he accepts Carlyle’s guideline in focuses on the good side of Muhammad.\textsuperscript{24}

Royster writes that as one of the most prolific western writers on Muhammad in the mid-twentieth century, Watt warrants special attention.\textsuperscript{25} Further Royster says Watt’s work, his overall approach to the study of Muhammad and Islam may be termed multi-methodological. Second only to the underlying religio-historical orientation of most of his work is a decided sociological current.\textsuperscript{26}

William A. Bijlefeld write in his article “some recent contributions to Quranic studies : Selected publication in English, French, and German, 1964-1973 Part I “ about the Watt work ‘index to the Quran’ in Montgomery Watt’s edition of Bell’s introduction are helpful for anyone who seeks to find Quranic data on a specific issue\textsuperscript{27}. Bijlefeld further says that Montgomery Watt’s companion is the most difficult one to characterize, partly because of the extreme brevity of many notes. The book certainly provides some helpful data which can be consulted with
ease and quickly. But with regard to Quran exegesis it is as true as in many other cases that in trying to save time we may be in danger losing it. It would be irresponsible to compare Montgomery Watt’s companion with Paret’s for more demanding Kommentar without taking into consideration that they try to reach different group of readers and intend to serve different purposes. However, Montgomery Watt himself seems to suggest in his ‘introduction’ that his commentary is not intended for “the direction Watt’s index is the remarkable scarcity of printed index to the Quran in English. Leaving the language aspects aside, it seems to me that even these indexes, in themselves excellent.  

Bijlefeld point out that Montgomery Watt had done earlier, the question of the sources of the Quran is helpfully discussed in term of influences of Jewish and Christian ideas on Arabs in the Pre-Islamic Period.
References


