

A response to Andrew Rippin's review of *The Integrated Encyclopedia of Qurʾān, Volume I*, published in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 136.1 (2016), pp. 222-225.

University of Victoria Professor Emeritus of Islamic History and Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London Andrew Rippin's review of the first volume of the *Integrated Encyclopedia of the Qurʾān (IEQ)* describes it as "sumptuous and carefully produced," "an impressive beginning", and "a considerable contribution to the study of the Quran" (p. 222 par. 1). His review goes downhill from there. In the process he appeals to a purported shared understanding of the nature of academic scholarship on Islam and makes serious charges that give pause and warrant scrutiny, which this response is meant to be.

Rippin asserts that *IEQ* "does not participate in all the norms of academic work" (p. 222 par. 1) and "does not partake of the cumulative nature of the academic enterprise" (p. 223 par. 4). This critique is alarming because of the assumption on which it is based: that serious scholarship on Islam is defined by Orientalism *sine qua non*. That is, the historical tradition of knowledge-production is primarily vested in the culture of Western institutions of higher education. Such a bias shows lack of awareness of another view that considers Orientalism an elaborate syllabus of errors in which are occasionally found pearls. There is unquestionably another, independent and older scholarly tradition on Islam that is arguably more authoritative, and that it should have been the focus of every academe to study and convey with utmost transparency, because it has its own unexplored trove of insights. However, while Orientalism has vastly capitalized on that tradition, it has also actively occulted it in order to pass itself off as original knowledge; worse, it has distorted it in order to make it say the opposite of what it actually says, for a variety of reasons. This is what projects like *IEQ* are good at debunking and this is why the tightly held industry is expected to chafe.

Rippin's presumptions about academic neo-Orientalism being the guardian of serious scholarship on Islam also emerge from the penultimate paragraph of the review: "Academic scholarship... aims for as broad an audience as possible, meaning that all readers should be able to feel addressed within the discourse... the language employed should not exclude anyone.... *Academic writing is directed to a community of scholars defined by their sharing in an academic discourse* [emphasis added], not by their membership in a religious community... which such absence of 'agnosticism' conveys" (p. 225 par. 1).

I have italicized the *lapalissade* in the last sentence as a classic example of a circular platitude ("we are agnostic writers because we all agree to write agnostic writings") where the endogamy of the Orientalist industry is proudly displayed right under the reader's nose. It also escaped the reviewer that he had claimed, only five lines before, that academic scholarship was neither elitist nor clannish (this is the nearest he comes to admitting a universal ethical and moral role to scholarship). As for scholarly agnosticism and all readers feeling included, it is as if he had no idea that Orientalism had specialized in excluding countless generations of readers from its discourse, and leaving plenty feeling violated as well. From Ludovico Marracci's (d. 1700) pan-European summa of anti-Qur'an commentary to Helmut Gätje's (d. 1986) *The Qur'an and Its Exegesis* with its identical brazen suggestions that the Prophet was a master Biblical plagiarist and docetic syncretist, to the first statement about Hadith and its transmission chains I ever heard from my former teacher at Columbia the late Jeanette Wakin (d. 1998) as being "all made up from the bottom up," nothing has changed. Think also of the historical responsibility of Orientalism in helping to shape policies and agendas that were detrimental to one specific religious community.

Rippin accuses *IEQ* of lacking complexity again and again (p. 222 par. 3, p. 223 par. 4, p. 224 par. 2, p. 225 par. 2). He objects that "the contents... rarely reflect any sense of historical development within the understanding of a unified 'Islamic tradition' [his quotes]... for the most part... presented as an undifferentiated, singular entity" (p. 222 par. 2) instead of addressing the "complexities," the "sometimes mutually contradictory statements" (p. 222 par. 3). "*IEQ* tends to take a monolithic view of the Islamic heritage" (p. 225 par. 2). These are sweeping accusations that are hardly substantiated by the examples he gives, which show resistance to *IEQ* methodology, a poor reading of the text under review and a selective understanding of Qur'ānic concepts as the next paragraph illustrates.

Rippin views the fact that *IEQ* did not include human beings in its discussion of animals in the Qur'an as a "speciesist" offence (p. 223 par. 5). However, no commentator or lexicographer has argued, on the basis of the *ḥaqīqa lughawiyya* of the Qur'ānic term *dābba* ("earth-crawler"), for a sub-

itemization of human beings, jinn and angels under the category of *dawābb* in the sense of animals. Furthermore, a qualified speciesism is certainly found in the Qurʾānic concepts of *taskhīr* and *khilāfa* among others; linguistic commentators pointed out that *ʿālamīn* in the *Fātiḥa* is a personalized plural (instead of the expected *ʿawālim*) for that very reason. He faults *IEQ* for not contextualizing the relationship of ablutionary acts in attitudes towards bodies (p. 224 par. 2), but such notions of historical subjectivism are peripheral to, and arguably outside Islamic scholarship proper; the entry “Ablution” is certainly complete without indulging them. He states, “In the entry ‘Abu Lahab’ the theological problems of the mention of a historical person in an eternal text receives [*sic*] no consideration” (p. 224, par. 2) but it appears he overlooked the entry “Ability” 50 pages up, which does discuss Abu Lahab and similar cases within the Ashʿarī and Māturīdī codification of the concept of *istiḥāʿa* in precisely the terms he brings up. He continues, “The topic of foreign vocabulary in the Quran is acknowledged—for example in the entry ‘Animal’ [*sic*] under the subsection ‘Lion’—but there is no attempt to discuss its merits or to investigate it through contemporary philological considerations.” This criticism is also out of place, because the already oversized entry “Animals” would not be the right place to treat the *muʿarrab* of the Qurʾān, which surely warrants its own category, especially given its extensive considerations in actual Qurʾānic scholarship long before we turn to contemporary considerations. All in good time.

Rippin refuses to accept the main tenet of the *raison d’être* of *IEQ*, which he finds to be exclusionary of readers who do not hold Muslim beliefs. His proposed solution is to alter the style of *IEQ*; he suggests that all its main statements be subordinated to the premise “Most Muslims have understood that....” (p. 225 par. 1); but his whole review up to that point is an acknowledgment that the introduction to *IEQ* has already made this point abundantly clear. The critical mass of mainstream cumulative scholarship known as *ʿilm* more than amply justifies *IEQ*’s sourcing methodology and the organization (and hierarchy) of its scholarship. Yet for Rippin, what is not acceptable as the philosophical premise underlying the entire work becomes acceptable as a stylistic caveat emptor using the most dubious distancing quotation marks possible. He raises the astonishing complaint that “Particular knowledge based on the Quran and the Sunna is suggested to be needed in order to counter the sense of being confounded when confronted with the complexities of those classical sources and their sometimes mutually contradictory statements” (p. 222 par. 3). It is as if *IEQ*’s axiomatic view of the necessity of solid knowledge of and prerequisite grounding in the Islamic disciplines for any Qurʾānic scholarship worthy of the name must be problematized as some unscholarly subterfuge designed to evade complexity. Alternately, *IEQ* is being reprimanded for too

cohesive and straightforward a picture of the Islamic knowledge tradition and its contents: it should have indulged the market's demand for peripheral themes, disharmony, absurdity. In the review's penultimate paragraph he scoffs at *IEQ*'s sourcing methodology as a case of "the older the better" (p. 225 par. 2) after having previously made light of *IEQ*'s *madhhab*-bound sourcing as "slott[ing] into intellectual categories of later construction (Ash'arī, Ḥanafī etc.)" (p. 222 par. 2): here *IEQ* is either antiquated or newfangled. The same paragraph shows his lack of understanding of scholarly *khilāf* as *khilāf mu'tabar*, not just any wild dissent and bizarrerie in the history of Islam.

Biased as it is, Rippin's review is nevertheless helpful. He critiques from the very perspective that *IEQ* is warning against and which he insists is the only valid one. The pulpit of an Orientalism born out of medieval heresiography, morphing into missionaryism then colonial *littérature de surveillance* then area studies still has its preachers to the choir; but from the perspective *IEQ* has defined as its own, such fault-finding is a confirmation that *IEQ* is on the right track. There is an Orientalist *EI*, an Orientalist *EQ*, now even a syncretist "*Study Quran*;" let there be a 'Ulematic *IEQ* as a work that keeps faith with the field's oldest standards, a work that refuses to put everything on a par and in which there is a qualitative and epistemological differentiation between *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *1,001 Nights!* It is not all literature and intertextuality. Such is only one of many unsound doctrines of which it is hoped *IEQ* shall serve as the antidote of choice in our time.

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