Books reviews


90 pp. [Engl. text]. 170 pp. [Arab. text] (Foreword by Dr. Abdullah Ibn Abdulmohsen Al-Torky.)

This catalogue heralds a new development in the appreciation of what is called ‘Orientalism’ in the Middle East. In the past few years the distrust of what ‘the Orientalists’ were doing has steadily increased in Muslim circles. Numerous books have been published in the past ten years or so in which Muslim authors contend, among other things, that the study of Eastern languages and cultures in the West has the sinister objective of producing knowledge concerning the Eastern psychology and way of thinking solely in order to provide the necessary means for Western colonialists and Christian missionaries to penetrate into the lands of Islam and into the hearts and minds of their inhabitants. ‘Orientalism’ is a danger that should be averted by all means, and many an apologetical work has been published with the sole purpose of exposing the wickedness of what often is styled as the ‘movement of the Orientalists’, apparently some kind of secret society of destructive scholarship. This has reached a stage where the word ‘Orientalist’, which originally had the neutral meaning of a scholar of the East, has become a sort of invective, by which it has lost its usefulness in a civilised discussion.

Five years ago, the Riyadh-based scholarly journal ʿIlam al-Kutub (The World of Books) devoted an entire issue (vol. 5, part 1 (1404/1984)) to questions pertaining to ‘Orientalism’. Such questions as what the ‘Orientalists’ have done with the Islamic written heritage and how Hitti and Brockelmann have distorted Islamic history, along with many other subjects, are treated in it. The issue opens with a preface written by ʿAbdallâh b. ʿAbd al-Muḥsīn al-Turkī, the rector of the Islamic University of Imam Muhammad Bin Saud (who also wrote the foreword to the book presently under review). In it he writes: ‘The question of Orientalism has aroused the attention of universities and research institutes as well as that of the general interested public, since it belongs to the struggle which is being waged between the civilisations and is considered one of the issues which Muslim scholars have set themselves to treat in defense of their creed, their history and their cultural heritage.’ (p. 3). And: ‘Now that God has awakened the Islamic peoples, and universities and specialized institutions have been founded everywhere, in which the situation of the Islamic peoples is being taught, and where it is undertaken to restore their cultural pride to them, they must also look at this side of ‘Orientalism’, see what the Orientalists have done with the Muslim heritage and how their intellectual onslaught has affected the Muslims. The reader is invited to have a look at the purely scholarly research which they have brought about (if it exists at all) and to distinguish it from the other things the Orientalists have done: their attack on the Islam, the dissemination of doubt concerning its Prophet, the falsification of the history of Islam, the seduction of the Muslims by a way of life that is alien to their religion in order to maintain power over them and to uproot their fundament.’ (p.4).

Compared to what one usually sees in attacks on the ‘Orientalists’, these are mild and moderate words. Now, five years later, the Islamic University in Riyadh has a ‘Unit for the Study of Orientalism and Christian Missionary Works’, and it is for the use of this Unit that a collection of older ‘Orientalist’ studies has been acquired. The book under review here is the catalogue of that collection. Dr. al- Turkī writes in his foreword: ‘...the first step in counteracting any erroneous ideology or hostile doctrine is to study it thoroughly, collect all the necessary information about it, analyse the information, delineate the various stages of its development and figure out its objectives and consequences.’ (English part, p. 1). And this is great news. Whereas, till now, fantasies about ‘Orientalism’ could spread freely in the Islamic countries, the present collection of older works now kept in Riyadh is there to confront apologists with the facts and to force them to come to a more balanced view of their subject. As the compiler of the catalogue, Dr. Qâsim al-Sâmarrâ‘î, says in his introduction: ‘...no serious scholarly attempt has been made in the Arab world to look deeply into the influence that Orientalism has so far exercised on the intellectual, political and social aspects of the Orient ...’ (pp. 11-2). The availability of the works by these ‘Orientalists’ in an Arab institution of major importance may have the effect that more informed views on Oriental studies can be put forward and contribute to a better understanding of what is really at stake.

Now that I have sketched the milieu in which this collection is going to be used, let us turn to the catalogue itself. It is of a simple structure. It consists of an Arabic and an English part, both of which describe the same collection. The compiler provides the catalogue with a historical introduction, in which he summarily mentions trends in the study of the Middle East, with reference to some of the works in the catalogue. The compiler is heavily indebted for this historical survey to Fück’s Die arabischen Studien ... (Leipzig 1955). The catalogue is arranged alphabetically by author throughout, without any arrangement...
by subject. The works of the same author are usually, but not always, arranged in chronological order. Each item is numbered consecutively, but since the catalogue consists of two sections (an Arabic and an English one), each of which contains a complete description of the same collection, the works have different numbers in each section. As the indexes of each part refer to the pages anyway, these numbers are superfluous and only confusing. It struck me that the Arabic part contains 277 titles and the English part only 265. I have not tried to find a reason for this discrepancy.

The English part has a register of authors, the Arabic part one of authors and another one of titles. This double arrangement does not facilitate the use of the catalogue. The Arabic part of the book is in fact a sort of translation arranged in chronological order. Each item is by subject. The works of the same author are usually, but not always, arranged in chronological order. Each item is numbered consecutively, but since the catalogue consists of two sections (an Arabic and an English one), each of which contains a complete description of the same collection, the works have different numbers in each section. As the indexes of each part refer to the pages anyway, these numbers are superfluous and only confusing. It struck me that the Arabic part contains 277 titles and the English part only 265. I have not tried to find a reason for this discrepancy.

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