

## A CRITIQUE OF JOHN WANSBROUGH'S METHODOLOGY AND CONCLUSIONS<sup>1</sup>

*Mohammad Nasrin Mohammad Nasir*

“Qur'an as a text has to be studied with literary analysis  
due to its birth in a period of intense literary ability...”  
[John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*]

### *Introduction*

There seems to be a surge in interest of the West towards Islam in general and the Qur'ān<sup>2</sup> in particular. Most of these writings have, however, focused upon a new understanding of the Qur'ān, including its history which is a great divergence from normative Muslim understanding. One of it is the claim that the Qur'an evolved over time, and it is not what the Muslim understand it to be, a book revealed to the Prophet 1400 years ago.

The main exponent of such an idea is John Wansbrough. Even though his book *Quranic Studies* was published over 20 years ago, his views are being put forward by many of his exponents. His students, i.e., Andrew Rippin, Patricia Crone and Gerard Hawting have been using his methods and conclusions as well as his presuppositions in their field of *tafsīr* text as well as the history of Islam and Muslims. Each of them in turn has produced diverse studies in the

---

<sup>1</sup> This is a summary of chapters 2 & 3 of our unpublished dissertation of the same title, submitted to Islamic College For Advanced Studies, London in June 2002 as a partial requirement for MA.

<sup>2</sup> See for example the article 'What is the Koran?'<sup>2</sup>, 'A Macabre Farce' and 'For People who understand' that appeared in The Atlantic Monthly magazine, January 1999. The online version is available at [www.theatlantic.com/issucs/99jan/koran.html](http://www.theatlantic.com/issucs/99jan/koran.html). After September 11, many other articles have appeared discussing the Qur'ān. The most notable would probably be "Scholars Are Quietly Offering New Theories of the Koran" which had appeared on the front-page of *The New York Times* on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 2002.

form of books and articles, which have been spread wide within their specializations.

Rippin, for instance, is by far the most lucid exponent of the *tafsīr* studies in the West. However, he does study *tafsīr* text with the scepticism of Wansbrough as can be seen in his many studies of the figure of Ibn Abbas.<sup>3</sup> Outside from academia, Wansbrough's methods and conclusions are mainly used by Christian websites attacking Islam.<sup>4</sup> He is used in their criticism of the belief held by Muslims that the Qur'an is the word of God.

Muslims have often viewed suspiciously Westerners (read Orientalists) studying Islam and in some sense they are justified for holding such a belief, especially if we look at the studies that was conducted on Islam in the 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century where most of them were written by missionaries who wanted to downgrade Islam and thus convert Muslims to Christianity. Articles written by the late scholar, A.L. Tibawi,<sup>5</sup> pointed out some of the major problems of deliberate misconception of Islam, especially regarding the Holy Prophet and his family. The book written by Edward Said<sup>6</sup> further generated heated debate amongst the scholars of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies departments in the Western world, thus producing a vast amount of literature as a response towards it<sup>7</sup>. The result of is that many scholars have tried to balance a sceptical view with that of their findings within the Islamic tradition.

Another main reason for such diverse views on Islam is the

---

<sup>3</sup> See the collection of his articles in *Qur'an and its interpretative Tradition*, Variorum reprints, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> See especially the two main websites: [www.answerislam.org.uk](http://www.answerislam.org.uk) & [www.debate.org.uk](http://www.debate.org.uk) in their many articles under the Qur'an section.

<sup>5</sup> 'Critique of the English-Speaking Orientalist', 'Second Critique of English-Speaking Orientalists and Their Approach to Islam and the Arabs'; 'On the Orientalists Again'; all of which originally appeared in the *Islamic Quarterly and Muslim World*. They have all been compiled in *Orientalism: A Reader*, ed. A.L. Macfie (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000) as chapters 10, 19 & 20 respectively.

<sup>6</sup> *Orientalism*, Pantheon Books, 1978. This title is now been published by Penguin Paperbacks.

<sup>7</sup> An excellent survey of the subject can be seen in *Orientalism: A Reader*, ed. A.L. Macfie (2000).