

Paradigm Shift in Orientalism (A Study of the Thoughts of Contemporary Orientalist Figures)

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Abstract

This study examines the paradigm shift in the study of Orientalism from a biased, colonial classical approach to a more sympathetic and holistic contemporary Orientalism, focusing on the ideas of Karen Armstrong, Annemarie Schimmel, Martin Lings, John Obert Voll, and Charles Kurzman. Using a library research approach with descriptive analysis, this study finds that this shift was triggered by historical, intellectual, and socio-political factors following colonialism. The findings highlight the specific contributions of modern Orientalist scholars, notably Armstrong, who offers a humanist and empathetic view of Islam and the Prophet Muhammad. Schimmel and Lings, through their in-depth exploration of the spiritual and esoteric aspects of Islam, combine academic and insider perspectives. Meanwhile, Voll and Kurzman provide critical analysis that rejects monolithic narratives and showcases the diversity of Islamic responses to modernity and democracy. The study concludes that although contemporary Orientalist thought represents a new, more equitable phase of Islamic studies in the West, fostering more balanced dialogue, efforts to understand Islam from an internal perspective remain within the framework of Western epistemology. Consequently, its influence remains limited mainly to academic circles and has yet to generate a broader change in Western public perception.

Keywords: Contemporary Orientalism; Classical Orientalism; Paradigm Shift.

Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis pergeseran paradigma dalam studi orientalisme dari pendekatan klasik yang bias dan kolonial menuju orientalisme kontemporer yang lebih simpatik dan holistik, dengan fokus pada pemikiran Karen Armstrong, Annemarie Schimmel, Martin Lings, John Obert Voll, dan Charles Kurzman. Melalui pendekatan studi kepustakaan dengan analisis deskriptif, penelitian ini mengidentifikasi bahwa pergeseran ini dipicu oleh faktor historis, intelektual, dan sosio-politik pasca kolonial. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan kontribusi spesifik para tokoh orientalis kontemporer, yakni Armstrong dengan narasi humanis dan empati terhadap Islam dan Nabi Muhammad Saw. Schimmel dan Lings dengan pendalaman dimensi spiritual dan esoteris Islam serta menggabungkan perspektif akademis dan emic. Kemudian Voll dan Kurzman dengan analisis kritis yang menolak narasi monolitik dan membuktikan keragaman respons Islam terhadap modernitas dan demokrasi. Disimpulkan bahwa meskipun pemikiran orientalis kontemporer merepresentasikan generasi baru kajian Islam di Barat yang lebih adil dan telah membuka ruang dialog yang setara, upaya memahami Islam dari dalam masih berada dalam kerangka epistemologi Barat. Sehingga, dampaknya masih terbatas pada kalangan akademis tanpa menjangkau perubahan persepsi publik Barat secara luas.

Kata Kunci: Orientalisme Kontemporer; Orientalisme Klasik; Pergeseran Paradigma.

Introduction

The study of Islam in Western academia has undergone a significant transformation over the past few decades. While in the past, the Orientalist approach, as criticized by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism*, tended to view Islam as the exotic, backward Other that needed to be controlled.¹ This contrasts with contemporary Orientalist figures such as Karen Armstrong, Annemarie Schimmel, Martin Lings, John Obert Voll, and Charles Kurzman, who have a more balanced, empathetic, and profound perspective. They not only examine Islam as an object of research but also seek to understand its values from within (an emic perspective), while maintaining academic integrity.²

However, the transformation of the Orientalist approach in contemporary Islamic studies has not been fully mapped out specifically. Previous research has focused more on critiques of classical Orientalism or on analyzing the thoughts of individual figures. Consequently, a gap remains in understanding the driving factors that collectively led to the paradigm shift in the thinking of Orientalist figures, which synergistically shaped the new character of contemporary Orientalism. Without a comprehensive analysis of the roots of this shift, understanding the dynamics and consistency of this transformation remains fragmented.³

This shift stems from criticism of classical Orientalism, which often harbors a colonial and reductive bias. For example, Islamic studies usually focus solely on legal and political aspects, neglecting the spiritual, cultural, and intellectual dimensions inherent in Muslim traditions. However, figures such as Annemarie Schimmel, with her studies of Sufism and literature, and Martin Lings, with his esoteric and spiritual approach, have demonstrated that Islam possesses a rich body of knowledge and spirituality. Meanwhile, Karen Armstrong emphasizes a more humane narrative of Islamic history, particularly in her biography of the Prophet Muhammad, which contrasts with the often negative portrayal in the West.⁴

On the other hand, scholars such as John Obert Voll and Charles Kurzman provide in-depth analyses of the dynamics of contemporary Islam, including

¹ Diana Lary, "Edward Said: Orientalism and Occidentalism," *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association* 17, no. 2 (2006): 3–15.

² M Taufiq Rahman, "Penjajahan Pemikiran: Satu Bentuk Orientalisme Baru," *Risalah* 34, no. 6 (1996): 40–41.

³ Tri Susanto Madanun, Rahmawati Caco, and Ramoend Manahung, "Mengkaji dan Menganalisis Kritik Analisis Terhadap Kajian Orientalis," *Zaheen: Jurnal Pendidikan, Agama Dan Budaya* 01, no. 1 (2025): 36–47.

⁴ Ahmad Subakir, "Kritik Atas Orientalisme Dan Kecurigaan Atas Kajian Keislaman Di Dunia Barat," *Religió Jurnal Studi Agama-Agama* 4, no. 2 (2014).

Muslim responses to modernity, democracy, and globalization. Voll, for example, rejects the view that Islam is incompatible with democracy, while Kurzman critiques the "clash of civilizations" narrative by highlighting the diversity of thought within the Muslim world.⁵

Several contemporary Orientalist figures mentioned above have given new perspectives on Islam in the eyes of the global community. Therefore, it would be interesting to explore the thought patterns of these contemporary Orientalist figures in more depth, specifically examining the causes of the shift in contemporary Orientalist tendencies regarding Islamic studies.⁶ Furthermore, the methodological complexity of combining an empathetic emic perspective with the demands of academic objectivity also creates problematic areas that require further study.

This study aims to investigate how contemporary Orientalist figures have transformed the Orientalist paradigm in Islamic studies from a biased and political approach to a more holistic, just, and authentic understanding. By examining the contributions of each figure, this paper aims to demonstrate that current Islamic studies are not only more inclusive but also capable of bridging the gap between the Muslim world and the West.

Several previous studies discussing the development of Orientalism include Maghfirah Nasir, who reviewed the history and development of Orientalism as a Western study of the East, particularly the Islamic world. As it developed, Orientalism became more specific, focusing on the analysis of the Quran, Hadith, law, and Islamic history. Nasir also highlighted Orientalist motifs related to the golden age of Islam and the post-Crusades conflict between the West and Islam.⁷

Badarussyamsi also examines classical and contemporary Orientalism in Islamic studies. Classical Orientalism is positioned as a product of European imperialist expansion and is dominated by a positivist paradigm. Meanwhile, contemporary Orientalism has shifted to a more nuanced approach in examining the relationship between the West and the East, correcting the erroneous understanding of Islam in classical Orientalism.⁸ This aligns with Abdul Rahim's assertion that Orientalism has undergone a paradigm shift,

⁵ Abdul Rahim, "Sejarah Perkembangan Orientalisme," *Hunafa* 7, no. 2 (2010): 179–92, <https://doi.org/10.46870/jstain.v3i2.65>.

⁶ Badarussyamsi, "Islam Di Mata Orientalisme Klasik Dan Orientalisme Kontemporer," *TAJ DID: Jurnal Ilmu Ushuluddin* 15, no. 1 (2016): 23, <https://doi.org/10.30631/tjd.v15i1.6>.

⁷ St. Maghfira Nasir, "Sejarah Perkembangan Orientalisme," *Al-Mutsala* 3, no. 2 (2021): 96–106, <https://doi.org/10.46870/jstain.v3i2.65>.

⁸ Badarussyamsi, "Islam Di Mata Orientalisme Klasik Dan Orientalisme Kontemporer," 37.

demonstrating how it evolved from a philological study into a tool of cultural and intellectual domination.⁹

Although previous studies by Nasir, Badarussyamsi, and Abdul Rahim have successfully mapped the transformation of Orientalism at a macro and historical level, identifying a shift from a colonial paradigm to a more neutral approach, their analyses remain generic. These studies have not delved deeply into the individual thought constructions of contemporary Orientalists, who are the leading actors in this paradigm shift. Based on the above description, a gap remains in the analysis regarding how scholars such as Armstrong, Schimmel, Lings, Voll, and Kurzman practically and methodologically apply an empathetic emic perspective while maintaining academic integrity, as well as the specific driving factors behind the shift in each figure's tendencies.

Based on the identification of previous research gaps, the analytical framework in this article is systematically structured to answer the research questions comprehensively. First, the analysis begins with an in-depth, ideographic approach to the thought of the figures, focusing on dissecting their objects, methodologies, and specific contributions. Second, it identifies the driving factors behind the paradigm shifts they collectively represent. Third, a comparative synthesis is used to map methodological intersections and the negotiation process between emic and academic perspectives. Through this analytical framework, this study goes beyond simply listing the contributions of scholars to construct a coherent argument about how the paradigmatic transformation in Islamic studies in the West occurred. This analysis reveals that this paradigm shift is not a homogeneous phenomenon, but rather the result of the convergence of various factors that simultaneously respond to the limitations of the classical Orientalist paradigm and produce an inclusive and interactive landscape for Islamic studies.

Method

This research is library-based, relying on literature sources as its primary database. Primary data sources were obtained from the written works of contemporary Orientalist figures, such as books and scientific articles that directly discuss their thoughts. Meanwhile, secondary data were collected from various other relevant scientific publications. Data collection techniques were employed through documentation, involving the search and collection of written materials from multiple sources, both conventional (in libraries) and

⁹ Rahim, "Sejarah Perkembangan Orientalisme," 184.

digital. The data were then analyzed using descriptive analysis methods to systematically map, describe, and synthesize the thoughts of these figures.¹⁰

Results and Discussion

The Paradigm of Classical Orientalism

Orientalism in French originates from the word "orient," meaning "East," and in English, "orient" has a broad meaning, referring to the East. Meanwhile, the term "orientalist" refers to an expert on all things related to the East. Therefore, it can be concluded that Orientalism is a school of thought that desires to investigate the East and all things related to the East. More specifically, Orientalism can be understood as the activities of Western Orientalists to explore Eastern religions and cultures.¹¹

Orientalism initially developed and aimed to support Western colonialism against Eastern nations. Orientalism emerged as one of the missions of imperialism against Eastern countries, particularly Islam. Many of the theories and views put forward by Orientalists tended to have negative connotations toward Islam in various aspects and contradicted the beliefs of Muslims. This later led to Muslims' suspicion of Orientalism as a Western product out to destroy Islam.¹²

Edward W. Said offered a fundamental critique of Orientalism, exposing this Western intellectual tradition not as an objective discipline but as a power project inseparable from Western imperialism. Said argued that Orientalism created the construction of the East as the backward and irrational other. This was a way for the West to define itself as advanced and rational. Said's critique sparked and catalyzed a paradigmatic transformation in Islamic studies in the West, subsequently shaping subsequent generations of methodological introspection. Contemporary Orientalists with their inclusive approach can be seen as a response to Said's critique and an attempt to escape the colonial trap by understanding the East from an emic perspective, while simultaneously recognizing cultural diversity and the fullness of humanity.¹³

¹⁰ Sumadi Suryabrata, *Metodologi Penelitian* (Jakarta: Rajawali Pers, 2012).

¹¹ Rahim, "Sejarah Perkembangan Orientalisme," 182.

¹² Rizki Ulfahadi and Reynaldi Adi Surya, "Pandangan Orientalis Terhadap Sejarah Islam Awal," *Ushuluna: Jurnal Ilmu Ushuluddin* 1, no. 2 (2020): 184–201, <https://doi.org/10.15408/ushuluna.v1i2.15297>.

¹³ Yunika Sari, Pujawati, and Miftahul Ulum Bahtiar, "Orientalism: Edward Said's Postcolonial Thoughts and Theories Against the Eastern World and Islam," in *Gunung Djati Conference Series*, vol. 23, 2023, 854–74.

In the development of Orientalism, distinct classifications of Orientalists emerged based on their studies of the East. Some challenged the Eastern understanding, while others supported it. Some early Orientalist figures and views tended to be biased and superior toward the East, as follows.

1. Christoph Luxenberg

Christoph Luxenberg is an orientalist interested in studying the Quran. According to Luxenberg, numerous aspects require reconstruction and reexamination. He believes that there are many errors in the interpretations of the Quran by Muslim commentators. For this reason, Luxenberg proposed reconstructing the pre-canonical version of the Quran to ensure its text is free from ambiguity. Luxenberg also believes that the original language of the Quran was not Arabic, but rather a mixed Aramaic-Arabic language transmitted through Christian media.¹⁴

2. Ignaz Goldziher

According to Ignaz Goldziher, the Quran and its interpretations are a plagiarism of Roman teachings, and the Quran is also the work of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Goldziher frequently comments on historical events and stories in the Quran, employing a historical approach to interpretation. On the other hand, Goldziher also believes that Quranic interpretations are written solely to reflect the interests of the Quranic text. In addition to the Quran, he also comments on the Hadith. For Goldziher, the Hadith are not considered historical documents that serve as a reference for Muslims. Instead, they are merely reflections of communication that emerged during the growth of Islam.¹⁵

3. Theodor Noldeke

Theodor Noldeke was one of the orientalists who questioned the originality and authenticity of the Quran. Noldeke described the Quran as plagiarizing and duplicating previous scriptures by tracing the semantics of the words in those scriptures. For Noldeke, Muhammad was merely an impostor and the Quran was Muhammad's own work. Furthermore, according to Noldeke, Islamic teachings are heavily influenced by Jewish teachings, including doctrine, law, and outlook on life.¹⁶

¹⁴ Fahimah and Ilmi, 296.

¹⁵ Ahlal Kamal, Muhammad Hendri, and Sandy Aulia Rahman, "Al-Qur'an Dan Hadis Dalam Pandangan Orientalis: Studi Pemikiran Ignaz Goldziher," *Al-Muhith: Jurnal Ilmu Qur'an Dan Hadits* 2, no. 1 (2023): 66, <https://doi.org/10.35931/am.v2i1.4067>.

¹⁶ Mohammad Anwar Syarifuddin, *Kajian Orientalis Terhadap Al-Quran Dan Hadis*, UIN Syarif Hidayatullah, 2012, 41.

Based on the description of the three early Orientalists above, it can be concluded that the early Orientalist paradigm strongly supported the goals of colonialism and imperialism. This paradigm divided the world into two large blocs: the West and the East. The West was viewed as a superior, advanced nation, while the East was considered inferior, backward, and less developed. This then sparked resistance from the East, known as Occidentalism, the antithesis of the West. This culminated in the post-colonial era, characterized by the equality of the East and West, promoting a more objective and equal perspective.

The Causes of the Paradigm Shift from Classical Orientalism to Contemporary Orientalism

The paradigm shift from classical to contemporary Orientalism was influenced by several historical, intellectual, social, and political factors that shaped Western Orientalists' perspectives on the East, particularly Islam. The following are the leading causes of this paradigm shift.

1. Changes in Historical and Political Context

In its early days, Orientalism was heavily influenced by the context of Western colonialism and imperialism towards the East. Relations of power and domination, as well as attempts at political, economic, and cultural hegemony, led Orientalists to view the East negatively and biasedly. However, after the end of colonialism and the emergence of independent states in the East, Orientalism's approach began to shift to a more academic and objective one.¹⁷

2. Religious Motives and Christian Mission

Early Orientalism was often driven by religious motives, particularly the desire to refute Islamic teachings, which were perceived as being in opposition to Christian teachings. This gave birth to works that tended to be apologetic and polemical. However, as Islamic studies developed in the West, orientalist emerged who were more neutral and critical of their own traditions.¹⁸

3. Development of Science and Methodology

Changes in research methodology also triggered the paradigm shift in Orientalism. Subjective and less scientific approaches primarily

¹⁷ Rowiyah and Asrar Maburur Faza, "Qaul Qadim Dan Qaul Jadid Orientalis Terhadap Al-Qur'an," *TASHDIQ: Jurnal Kajian Agama Dan Dakwah* 11, no. 2 (2025): 1–11.

¹⁸ Hasani Ahmad, Mardiyah Nur Batubara, and Widya Oktavia, "Orientalisme Dan Oksidentalisme: Kajian Keotentikan Al-Qur'an," *Al-Bayan: Jurnal Ilmu Al-Qur'an Dan Hadist* 5, no. 2 (2022): 210, <https://doi.org/10.35132/albayan.v5i2.200>.

dominated classical Orientalism. Meanwhile, contemporary Orientalism places greater emphasis on scientific, critical, logical, and systematic methods. Contemporary Orientalists such as Karen Armstrong utilize primary sources with a historical-critical approach and attempt to clarify the misinterpretations of classical Orientalism.¹⁹

4. The Influence of Dialogue and Cultural Interaction

The increasing dialogue between East and West, along with open access to information, has also led Orientalists to gain a more objective understanding and appreciation of Eastern religions and cultures. The study of Islam in the West is no longer merely a tool of domination, but also a means of building understanding and dialogical relationships between the world's religions.²⁰

5. Internal and External Critiques of Orientalism

The emergence of criticism from Western Orientalists, such as Edward Said, and Eastern Occidentalists, like Maryam Jameelah, against the biases and hidden interests within classical Orientalism also triggered a paradigm shift within Orientalism toward a more honest, open, and reflective perspective. This encouraged the emergence of Orientalists who were more objective and sympathetic to the study of Islam.²¹

Based on the above description, early orientalists tended to study Islam to destroy it from within. Orientalism was not merely an academic discourse but also embraced political, economic, and religious motives. However, contemporary orientalists are now beginning to develop an awareness of the need to study Islam objectively. Many contemporary orientalists today are revising the biased views of classical orientalism with a more holistic and critical approach. This has resulted in more sympathetic views and equal scientific validity regarding the East, especially Islam.

Contemporary Orientalism's View of Islamic Studies

The contemporary era has opened the door to a more objective and equitable scientific approach to the study of contemporary Orientalist figures

¹⁹ Umi Wasilatul Firdausiyah, "Menelisik Eksistensi Tuhan, Islam, Dan Al-Qur'an Perspektif Karen Armstrong Umi," *Nun: Jurnal Ilmu Al-Quran Dan Hadis* 7 (2021): 93–118.

²⁰ Nawawi, "Paradigma Orientalis Terhadap Islam: Antara Subyektif Dan Obyektif," *Istidlal: Jurnal Ekonomi Dan Hukum Islam* 4, no. 1 (2020): 45–54, <https://doi.org/10.35316/istidlal.v4i1.209>.

²¹ Yuangga Kurnia Yahya, Syamsul Hadi Untung, and Umi Mahmudah, "Orientalisme Sebagai Tradisi Keilmuan Dalam Pandangan Maryam Jameelah Dan Edward Said," *Jurnal Ilmu Agama: Mengkaji Doktrin, Pemikiran, Dan Fenomena Agama* 21, no. 2 (2020): 179–95.

regarding the East. During this period, figures began to emerge whose views on the East became more dialogical. While the opinions of early Orientalists were considered heavily biased against the East, particularly Islam, in the contemporary era, many figures have corrected these early Orientalist views and offered a more positive perspective with a critical approach.²² This can be seen from the thoughts of contemporary orientalist figures as follows.

1. Karen Armstrong

Karen Armstrong was born in England on November 14, 1944. Her family was devoutly Catholic. As a child, she aspired to become a nun out of curiosity about the existence of God. After becoming a nun, Armstrong was recommended to study English literature at Oxford, which included diplomas in theology and apologetics, scripture, and church history. However, she eventually resigned from her religious life due to her inability to discover the existence of God. At that time, Armstrong began to criticize and examine monotheistic religions, viewing all three as legitimate paths to God. From this point on, Armstrong gained greater recognition in the field of religion.²³

Some of Armstrong's works have been translated into Indonesian, besides the book "The History of God," such as:²⁴

- a. *Muhammad Prophet For Our Time* (1991), translated edition, (Bandung; PT. Mizan Pustaka, 2013).
- b. *The battle of God: fundamentalisme of Judaisme, Christianity, and Islam* (2000), translated edition "*Berperang demi Tuhan: Fundamentalisme dalam Islam, Kristen, dan Yahudi*" (Bandung: Mizan Pustaka, 2001).
- c. *Islam: A Short History* (2000), translated edition "*Sejarah Islam: Telaah ringkas komprehensif perkembangan Islam sepanjang zaman*" (Bandung: Mizan Pustaka, 2002).

Armstrong's research on the search for God in the history of ideas and the experiences of God found in Islam, Christianity, and Judaism explains that God is a product of creative imagination, which Armstrong believes is akin to inspirational art and music. Armstrong's opinion has drawn much criticism from various monotheistic religious figures, who say

²² Rahim, "Sejarah Perkembangan Orientalisme," 188.

²³ Firdausiyah, "Menelisik Eksistensi Tuhan, Islam, Dan Al-Qur'an Perspektif Karen Armstrong Umi," 98.

²⁴ Firdausiyah, 99.

that God is not a reality that exists out there. For Armstrong, ideas about God are a subject of comprehensive study, and the idea of God will no longer have any meaningful meaning if belief in God is abandoned and replaced by a new theology.²⁵

Armstrong's research on Islam began with his examination of the concept of the oneness of God in Islam, which, according to Armstrong, portrays the Prophet Muhammad as a genius who united all Arab tribes and even established his own empire and civilization, stretching from the Pyrenees to the Himalayas. In the process of Muhammad's appointment as a messenger, Armstrong describes Muhammad as someone who was attacked by a jinn and showed himself while saying "read" to Muhammad. Then, Armstrong describes Islamic spiritual activities such as prayer, zakat, fasting, and pilgrimage as part of the social virtues instilled in Islam.²⁶

Regarding the Quran, Armstrong explains in his work that it is the holy word of God with absolute authority. For Armstrong, the language of the Quran is sacred. This differs from the holy texts of other religions, which lack the concept of the sacredness of language. Furthermore, the process of the Quran's revelation, which occurred gradually, differs from that of other sacred texts that were revealed all at once. For Armstrong, the revelation of the Quran aimed to engage the people of that time in dialogue, ensuring that the revealed verses would not issue arbitrary commands.²⁷

Armstrong also explained that there are distorted and exaggerated aspects that have slowly tarnished history and understanding that need to be straightened out, that the East and Islam must be adequately understood and objectively. As in the case of the tragedy of September 11, 2011, Armstrong has been very persistent in writing in various media to correct negative prejudices against Islam. Armstrong believes that the holy text of Islam, the Quran, is a pluralistic religious text and respects the main traditions of other religions.²⁸

²⁵ Umi Wasilatul Firdausiyah, "Biografi Nabi Muhammad SAW Dalam Sejarah Perspektif Karem Armstrong," *Jurnal Ulunnuha* 9, no. 2 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.35316/istidlal.v4i1.209>.

²⁶ Nurmiah Nasution, "Pemikiran Karen Armstrong Tentang Tuhan Menurut Perspektif Islam," *JUSPI (Jurnal Sejarah Peradaban Islam)* 3, no. 1 (2019): 73–84.

²⁷ Rio Febriannur Rachman, "Perspektif Karen Armstrong Tentang Islamofobia Di Media Barat," *Dakwatuna: Jurnal Dakwah Dan Komunikasi Islam* 4, no. 2 (2018): 184.

²⁸ Firdausiyah, "Biografi Nabi Muhammad SAW Dalam Sejarah Perspektif Karem Armstrong," 183.

2. Martin Lings

John Martin Lings (1909–2005), also known as Abu Bakr Siraj ad-Din, was a British Muslim scholar who was unique in that he was not simply an Orientalist, but a convert to Islam, and wrote from both an emic and academic perspective. His most famous work, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, takes a very different approach from the tradition of classical Orientalism, studying Islam not as a foreign object, but as a believer while maintaining historical accuracy. Lings combined Western academic methods with a spiritual understanding of Islam, producing a work that is both respected by Muslims and non-Muslims.²⁹

John Martin Lings views Islam as a universal and eternal spiritual tradition, encompassing not only the formal legal and theological dimensions, but also the inner (esoteric) essence that lies at the heart of all religions. As a Sufi and a follower of the Perennial Philosophy school inspired by René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon, Lings believes that Islam, particularly in its Sufism form, can preserve the same metaphysical truths as those taught by the prophets since the time of Adam. In his book *The Book of Certainty*, he explains that Islam, particularly through the doctrine of Tawhid (the Oneness of God), offers a direct path to realizing the Absolute Reality, which in the Sufi tradition is referred to as al-Haqq.³⁰

Lings emphasized that the Prophet Muhammad was not only the bearer of the Shari'a, but also the perfecter of the spiritual path. In *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources*, he portrays the Prophet as a perfect human being (*Insan Kamil*), whose life embodies divine truth. Unlike orientalists who often doubted the authenticity of early Islamic sources, Lings accepted the *Sirah Nabawiyah* and Hadith with both a faith-based and academic approach. However, he preferred narratives that emphasized the spiritual dimension over critical-materialist analysis.³¹

Critics of Lings often highlight his esoteric and idealistic tendencies, which sometimes lead him to overlook the historical complexities and diversity of Islamic interpretations. However, it is precisely this unique approach that makes his work so influential for both Muslims seeking

²⁹ Effendi, "Sufisme Martin Lings Dan Kontribusinya Terhadap Perennialisme" (UIN Syarif Hidayatullah Jakarta, 2020).

³⁰ Effendi, 44.

³¹ Martin Lings, *Muhammad* (Penerbit Serambi, 2007).

spiritual depth and non-Muslims seeking to understand Islam through the lens of love and respect, rather than simply cold academic analysis. Lings's legacy, then, is a bridging of the gap between Western intellectual tradition and Eastern wisdom, demonstrating that Islam can be studied deeply without losing its spirit.³²

3. Annemarie Schimmel

Annemarie Schimmel (1922–2003) was a German scholar and orientalist renowned for her contributions to Islamic studies, particularly in the fields of Sufism, Islamic literature, and Muslim culture. Her views on Islam were often sympathetic and profound, with a focus on the spiritual and aesthetic aspects of the Religion. Annemarie Schimmel was born in Germany on April 7, 1922, to a middle-class family. Her final education was a doctorate in Islamic languages and civilization. She later earned a doctorate in the history of religions at the Protestant Theological Faculty. Schimmel earned a professorship in the history of religions at Ankara University, Turkey.³³

Schimmel's first lecture focused on the leading representatives of Islamic Sufism. In subsequent congresses, Schimmel expressed his disappointment with the study of religion, which was often viewed from a Western-centered perspective. For Schimmel, Easterners also made significant contributions to the history and phenomenology of religion. However, in their development, many early Western scholars were influenced by biblical backgrounds and classical approaches.³⁴

Schimmel was deeply interested in the spiritual dimension of Islam, particularly Sufism. He saw Sufism as the heart of the profound religious experience of Islam. His work on Jalaluddin Rumi, Ibn Arabi, and other Sufi figures demonstrates his appreciation for the teachings of love, tolerance, and the search for God within the Sufi tradition. Schimmel studied Islam not only as a theological religion, but also as a civilization encompassing art, literature, and culture. He wrote extensively on Persian, Urdu, and

³² Muhammad Yunus, "APA ITU TASAWUF Mengenal Dimensi Spiritual Islam Lebih Dalam Martin Lings (Abu Bakar Sirajuddin)" (Turos, 2022).

³³ Umar Faruq Thohir, "Pemikiran Mistisisme Annemarie Schimmel," *ULUL ALBAB Jurnal Studi Islam* 13, no. 2 (2013): 203–18, <https://doi.org/10.18860/ua.v0i0.2376>.

³⁴ Thohir, 207.

Arabic poetry, as well as Islamic calligraphy, showcasing the richness of the aesthetic traditions of the Muslim world.³⁵

Unlike some orientalists who tend to be critical or even biased towards Islam, Schimmel seeks to understand Islam from an insider's (emic) perspective. Although he himself is part of the orientalist tradition, Schimmel often critiques simplistic Western views of Islam. He emphasizes the importance of understanding Islam holistically, not solely through the lens of politics or conflict. He values Islamic values and often defends the complexity and diversity of Muslim experiences. In his book, "And Muhammad Is His Messenger," Schimmel explores Muslims' reverence for the Prophet Muhammad with a respectful approach. He examines Muslim devotion to the Prophet in poetry, art, and popular traditions.³⁶

During his journey, Schimmel has written many books about Islam, including three of his books:

- a. *Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam*, (Gifford Lectures, 1992).
- b. *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, (North Carolina Univ. Press, 1975).
- c. *Islamic Names: An Introduction (Islamic Surveys)*, (Edinburgh University Press, England, 1990).

4. John Obert Voll

John Obert Voll cannot be fully categorized as an Orientalist in the classical sense, often associated with Western bias towards the Islamic world. As a contemporary academic, Voll is more accurately described as an Islamic studies scholar who employs a historical and sociological approach. Unlike classical Orientalists who often viewed Islam as the Other, Voll seeks to understand Islam from an internal Muslim perspective, particularly within the context of modernization and socio-political change.³⁷

His works, such as "Islam: Continuity and Change in the Modern World," demonstrate a serious attempt to examine the internal dynamics of the Islamic world without Western bias, focusing on how Muslim

³⁵ Sevina Dwi Yulingga, Niken Ayu Permatasari, and Fahmi Ali Zuhdi, "Prophet Muhammad as a Catalyst for Social Change: Insights from Martin Lings and Annemarie Schimmel," *Peradaban Journal of Religion and Society* 4, no. 1 (2025): 78–96.

³⁶ Annemarie Schimmel, *And Muhammad Is His Messenger: The Veneration of the Prophet in Islamic Piety* (UNC Press Books, 2014).

³⁷ Asna Andriani, "Mendialogkan Peradaban Timur-Islam Dan Barat-Kristen," *'Anil Islam: Jurnal Kebudayaan Dan Ilmu Keislaman* 8, no. 2 (2015): 248–67.

societies responded to the challenges of modernity. Some of Voll's works include Islam:

- a. *Continuity and Change in the Modern World* (1982),
- b. *Islam and Democracy* (1994, bersama John L. Esposito),
- c. *Makers of Contemporary Islam* (2001, bersama John L. Esposito).

Voll has extensively researched Islamic reform and revivalist movements, including the Salafist, Modernist, and Muslim Brotherhood movements, using an objective and evidence-based historical approach. In his book, "Islam and Democracy," co-authored with John L. Esposito, he even challenges the Western narrative that Islam is incompatible with democracy by demonstrating the diversity of political responses in the Muslim world. This approach differs from traditional Orientalists, who tend to view Islam as a monolithic and backward entity.³⁸

However, as a Western-based scholar, Voll's work is not entirely free from Western epistemological frameworks. However, he consistently seeks to avoid generalizations and prefers contextual analysis. Criticisms of his work typically concern his over-optimism about the ability of Islamist movements to adapt to democratic values, as well as his inattention to the authoritarian aspects of some Islamist movements. Overall, Voll represents a new generation of Western scholars seeking to study Islam in a more sympathetic and balanced way, away from the stereotypes of classical Orientalism.³⁹

5. Charles Kurzman

Charles Kurzman, a sociologist and professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, cannot be categorized as an Orientalist in the classical sense, which is often laden with colonial bias. As a contemporary academic, Kurzman is more accurately described as a scholar of Islamic studies who employs a critical and empirically based approach. In works such as **The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran** and **Modernist Islam 1840–1940: A Sourcebook**, Kurzman demonstrates a commitment to understanding Islam as a dynamic phenomenon interacting with modernity, rather than as the static and backward entity often depicted in the classical Orientalist tradition.⁴⁰

³⁸ John L Esposito and John O Voll, *Islam and Democracy* (Oxford University Press, 1996).

³⁹ Andriani, "Mendialogkan Peradaban Timur-Islam Dan Barat-Kristen," 261.

⁴⁰ Charles Kurzman, *Modernist Islam, 1840-1940: A Sourcebook* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

Kurzman is known for his in-depth analysis of Islamic reformist movements and the relationship between Islam and democracy. In *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook*, he brings together texts by progressive Muslim thinkers to demonstrate the intellectual diversity within the Islamic tradition. This approach contrasts with older Orientalism that tends to simplify Islam into a single narrative. Kurzman's critique of Samuel Huntington's concept of the Clash of Civilizations and his skepticism of Islamophobic narratives in the West reflect his position as a scholar seeking to transcend the biases of classical Orientalism.⁴¹

However, as an academic working within the Western intellectual tradition, Kurzman's work is not entirely free from Western epistemological frameworks. However, he consistently strives to balance internal (emic) and external (etic) perspectives in his analysis. Critics of Kurzman's approach typically highlight his tendency to overemphasize liberal variants of Islam, which may not be representative of the mainstream in many Muslim societies. Overall, Kurzman represents a new generation of Western scholars seeking to study Islam more objectively and free from the stereotypes of classical Orientalism, while still working within the Western academic tradition with its own conceptual framework.⁴²

Based on the above, the contemporary era has brought significant changes to the study of Orientalism, where previously biased and one-sided narratives are being corrected through a more dialogical and critical approach. The presence of contemporary Orientalists who are objective and fair towards the East, particularly Islam, is evidence of positive developments in the field of Oriental studies. This not only enriches academic discourse but also creates space for a more equitable dialogue between the West and the East. Thus, the study of Orientalism today is no longer merely a legacy of colonialism. Instead, it is a discipline that continues to evolve towards a more inclusive and equitable understanding.

Conclusion

The development of Islamic studies in recent decades has demonstrated a significant paradigm shift from the biased and reductive approach of Orientalism to a more sympathetic, holistic perspective based on authentic understanding. Through the works of Karen Armstrong, Annemarie

⁴¹ Charles Kurzman, *Liberal Islam: A Source Book* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

⁴² Andriani, "Mendialogkan Peradaban Timur-Islam Dan Barat-Kristen," 266.

Schimmel, Martin Lings, John Obert Voll, and Charles Kurzman, we can see the serious efforts of contemporary Orientalists to understand Islam not merely as an object of research but as a living, dynamic tradition rich in spiritual, intellectual, and cultural dimensions. These contemporary Orientalists not only correct past misunderstandings of Orientalism but also open the door to a more equal dialogue between Islam and the West.

Despite its positive contributions, this contemporary Orientalist approach also has fundamental limitations. Their epistemological position as Western scholars often prevents efforts to understand Islam emically from being entirely separated from Western frameworks. Ultimately, the impact of their thinking remains limited to academic circles without reaching broader changes in Western public perception. Based on the limitations of this study, it is recommended that future researchers expand the scope of research by including the perspectives of non-Western scholars and examining the impact of contemporary Orientalists beyond academic circles, such as in the media and public policy, to test the effectiveness of this transformation in broader society.

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