

OF THE ORIENT, BY THE OCCIDENT

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## XXIX International Congress of Orientalists

## Of the Orient, by the Occident

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International Congress of Orientalists is one of the oldest and most respected forums of International scholarship. Study of the Orient has had a long and almost open-ended tradition in the West. But Orientalism, as it is understood today, cannot claim to have such a long pedigree. During the medieval age Christian intellectuals and priests wrote a number of tracts on Islam, primarily to malign and discredit this rising force. The level of scholarship was poor and the anti-bias only too explicit. With the advent of the modern phase of Western imperialism different European powers came into contact with the Oriental world in a number of ways—in certain regions they had established their rule, with respect to others they were pursuing the path of competition and confrontation. This impressed on them the need for knowing more about the thought, religion, culture and history of these peoples. It was under the sheltering arm of the foreign ministries and colonial offices that Orientalist research began and flourished. The opportunity was seized by another group of scholars too: the Christian missionaries, who had multiplied their activities in the colonized world and were gathering fullest patronage from the colonial powers. With the rise of Zionism in the late 19th Century, Jewish scholars also began to take enhanced interest in the Middle East. All these faiths, among others, have shaped modern Orientalism. Its major areas of interest had been the Muslim world, the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent and the Chinese tradition. Many centres for Oriental studies had emerged in different parts of Europe—in particular in the universities, churches, synagogues and foreign and colonial offices. By the middle of the nineteenth century it began to be realised that they needed a joint forum to co-ordinate all this study and research and to exchange notes. While tensions between the colonial powers of Europe were reigning high on the political front, co-ordination on the academic front began. The First International Congress of Orientalists was held in Paris in 1873—the year Bismark had expounded his theory of balance of power. The academic world led the movement towards equilibrium among the antagonists.

The 1973 Congress of Orientalists was held in Paris to commemorate its centenary at the place where it was born. Paris was playing host to it for the third time. After the First Congress, the XIth Congress was also held there in 1897. The 1973 Congress was the first one held in Paris in the twentieth century. It was also the first conference in the post-colonial period of France, if 'post-colonial' is the proper word for the contemporary phase of neo-imperialism. It might be of some interest to note that in the last hundred years only three of the twenty-nine Congresses have been held in the Orient—two in the Muslim world (XIVth Congress of 1905 in Algiers and XXIIth congress of 1951 in Istanbul) and one in India (Delhi, 1964, XXIVth Congress). Whether this confirms the shibboleth that Orientalism is the study of the Orient by the Occidentals for the Occident, is a matter of opinion.

The Congress began on the 16th July, 1973 and concluded its deliberations on the 22nd July. Professor M. Rene Labat acted as the President of the Congress. Professor M. Yves Hervouet was its secretary. The Plenary Session was presided over by Professor Bernard Lewis of the London University School of Oriental Studies.

After the Plenary Session the Congress was divided into eleven sections, each section met independently almost every morning and evening. Five to eight papers were read in every sectional session. The Congress has grown so huge that it has become virtually impossible for any one person to attend more than one section. Two Conferences and thirteen seminars were also organised in whatever time could be snatched before, in-between, or after the sessions. The programme was overcrowded, so were the portals of the Sorbonne and College de France, where most of these meetings took place. A number of exhibitions and social functions were also organised by different cultural organisations of Paris. An idea of the variety of subjects covered and the number of papers devoted to each theme can be had from the following resume:

<i>Sections and sub-sections</i>	<i>No. of Papers</i>
<b>1. Ancient Near East</b>	
(a) Assyriology—16	
(b) Egyptology—37	
(c) Semitic Studies—24	77
<b>2. The Christian Orient</b>	27
<b>3. Hebraic Studies</b>	13
<b>4. Arabic &amp; Islamic Studies</b>	108
<b>5. Iranian Studies (Ancient and Modern)</b>	63
<b>6. Central Asian Civilization</b>	
(a) Ancient—22	
(b) Mongol and Tibetan—34	
(c) Turkish—44	100
<b>7. India (Ancient &amp; Modern)</b>	167
<b>8. South-East Asia</b>	
(a) Insulindian archipelago—50	
(b) South-East Contintal Area—52	102
<b>9. Chinese Studies</b>	
(a) Pre-Modern—78	
(b) Modern China—46	124
<b>10. Japanese and Korean Studies</b>	
(a) Korea—43	
(b) Japan—51	94
<b>11. Libraries and Documentation</b>	16
<b>Conferences:</b>	
i The Deciphering of Writings and Languages	31
ii Contemporary Literature in South-East Asia—17	48
<b>Seminars (Papers)</b>	49
<b>Total number of papers:</b>	<b>1019</b>

Standards are bound to vary in such a diverse enormity of papers. My impression is based on the papers presented in the section on Arabic and Islamic Studies, plus those I was able to gather from the fellow delegates, particularly from the sections on India, Iran and Central Asia. Some of the papers were well researched and neatly presented. Many seemed reasonably good. But at the other end of the spectrum some were extremely

superficial and patently subjective. But understandable! What is significant, however, is that the type of scholarship and the themes which were introduced by the founding orientalist have become outdated. Almost all the papers, with rare exceptions, were steeped in the classic method of Orientalism. There were new research even new conclusions, but almost nothing about the basic attitudes and methods of Orientalism.

The dead past is still more important than the living present. Oriental cultures, even living and dynamic, are dissected and examined as parts of a legacy, not as a live force determined to fashion the future. The construction of language has precedence over the content of thought. The criterion for judging the past is still provided by the Occident—the method of criticism developed in the West is regarded as universally relevant. Cultures of the Orient are not studied on the basis of their own value-pattern. The absolutist assumption of universalism of Western paradigm accepted almost without question. And so despite two to three decades of independence and a growing participation by Oriental Orientalists! Almost half the congressionists to the XXIXth Congress came from the Orient. But this made little difference to the themes, issues and methodology of Orientalism.