Title of Paper: **BURTON IN MAKKAH AND MEDINA: SUFI ASPIRANT OR IMPERIALIST SPY?**

Author: Dr. John Wallen

Affiliation: University of Nizwa

Section: Articles

Date of Publication: September, 2014

Issue: 2.3

**Abstract:**

Richard Burton’s journey to Madinah and Makkah was undertaken at a time when such an adventure had practical usefulness. Much of Africa and Arabia was still unknown and it was ambitious and intrepid Victorian explorers like Burton, Speke, Livingstone and Stanley, who did much to help fill in the white stretches on world maps. At the time of his pilgrimage, Burton was a vigorous young man of thirty two and on leave from the Indian army. Why did he undertake such a dangerous and unlikely excursion into what were still violent and unfriendly lands? This paper will consider whether Burton was primarily motivated by imperialist ambition or a Sufi like need to visit the Islamic Holy Places.

**Keywords:** Burton, 19th Century Imperialism, Travel Literature, Victorian Travel

**Author Bio:** John Wallen is a writer and academic who has published numerous articles and books on Victorian literature as well as short stories and fiction under the pseudonym “Jon Aristides”. He currently works as an Assistant Professor in the University of Nizwa, Oman.

Author email: johnwallen79@gmail.com
Richard Burton’s journey to Madinah and Makkah was undertaken at a time when such an adventure had practical usefulness. Much of Africa and Arabia was still unknown and it was ambitious and intrepid Victorian explorers like Burton, Speke, Livingstone and Stanley, who did much to help fill in the white stretches on world maps. At the time of his pilgrimage, Burton was a vigorous young man of thirty two and on leave from the Indian army. Why did he undertake such a dangerous and unlikely excursion into what were still violent and unfriendly lands? It is true that he was not the first European to make the Muslim pilgrimage, even if in many ways, he was the most improbable. There was Ludovico Barlenna in 1503, who had travelled from Rome. When captured in Aden he was thrown into a dungeon. However, luckily for Bartema, he obviously possessed his country’s Latin charms and some Arabic women arranged his escape. Burton was hardly a romantic Italian adventurer, being by character a rather staid and sober Victorian—at least on the surface. More recently, the illustrious Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, a Swiss, had completed the pilgrimage, before unfortunately dying in Egypt of dysentery in 1817.

It was Burckhardt who Burton most admired of his predecessors. He was aware that, as regarded descriptive detail, he could hardly better his precursor’s accounts of Makkah and the Ka’aba. Burckhardt, in 1808 had set off for the East intending, after gaining enough experience, to penetrate to the heart of the Middle East. Calling himself Sheikh Ibrahim ibn Abdallah he travelled to Aleppo, where he devoted himself to the study of Arabic, Islam and Islamic
In early 1815, Burckhardt made the pilgrimage to Makkah, though he was only able to stay in the Holy City for a week at that time. Later he returned and spent three months documenting the life and religious heritage of the city. Burton praised Burckhardt by saying “Homage to the memory of the accurate Burckhardt.”

Most of the other European travellers to Makkah had been Turkish captives: prisoners who had “turned Turk”. There can be little doubt that, in his undertaking of the perilous mission, Burton was mostly measuring himself against the lofty stature of Burckhardt—and it is with this fact that we need to deal first. In the following discussion, I will first consider Burton’s pilgrimage in relation to Burckhardt’s exhaustive account of his earlier Hajj. Later, I will critique Said’s view of Burton as a mere imperialist adventurer in Arabian lands who was able to achieve so much in the East—including his pilgrimage—due to his understanding of the rules by which man lives his life in society. However, most attention will be given to Burton the man himself, in order to try and explore the ways in which he regarded his own actions at this critical time in his life.

Burckhardt and Burton were two very different types of men. While Burton rejoiced in his combination of intellectual acuity and martial prowess, Burckhardt was a sickly specimen, frequently ill or frightened of falling ill during his travels in the East. In spite of this disadvantage, Burckhardt produced a most accurate description of Makkah and the Ka’aba—one that was really hard to better. On the other hand, Burton was able to give far more precise details about Medina, and
particularly the cemetery of the Muslim saints at al-Baqiya, than Burckhardt.

Interestingly, we get no idea of Burckhardt as a central protagonist in his account
of the pilgrimage. He is a shadowy observer who rarely enters directly into the
action of his story other than in the most cursory ways. This is not to say that
Burckhardt was not in danger during his travels. However, unlike Burton, he is not
inclined to emphasise the dangers he faced for dramatic effect. An example of this
might be found by examining the two men’s description of the interior of the
Ka’aba. Let us first look at Burckhardt’s account.

The Kaaba is opened only three times in the year: on the 20th of the month of
Ramadhan, on the 15th of Zulkade, and on the 10th of Moharram (or Ashour, as
the Arabs call it). The opening takes place one hour after sun-rise, when the steps
are wheeled up to the gate of the building: as soon as they touch the wall,
immense crowds rush upon them, and in a moment fill the whole interior of the
Kaaba. The steps are lined by the eunuchs of the mosque, who endeavour in vain
to keep order, and whose sticks fall heavy upon those who do not drop a fee into
their hands; many of the crowd, however, are often unmercifully crushed. In the
interior every visitor is to pray eight rikats, or make sixteen prostrations; in every
corner of it two rikats: but it may easily be conceived how these prayers are
performed, and that while one is bowing down, another walks over him. After
the prayers are finished, the visitor is to lean with extended arms against any part
of the wall, with his face pressed against it, and thus to recite two pious
ejaculations. Sobbing and moaning fill the room; and I thought I perceived most
heartfelt emotions and sincere repentance in many of the visitors: the following,
and other similar ejaculations, are heard, and many faces are bedewed with tears:
"O God of the house, O God forgive me, and forgive my parents, and my
children! O God, admit me into paradise! O God, deliver our necks from hell-
fire, O thou God of the old house!" I could not stay longer than five minutes; the
heat was so great that I almost fainted, and several persons were carried out with
great difficulty, quite senseless. 6

Burckhardt provides a very sober and objective account and, while he
found the interior stifling and not a place to stay longer than five minutes,

there is no sense of imminent danger of discovery here. Why should

Burckhardt be suspected of being a Christian when so many of the Hajis

couldn’t even speak Arabic? In contrast to Burckhardt, Burton likes to put

the emphasis on his own personal risk—and in the process to aggrandise his

heroic project:

A crowd had gathered around the Ka’abah, and I had no wish to stand bareheaded
and barefooted in the mid-day September sun. At the cry of ‘Open a path for the
Haji who would enter the House,’ the gazers made way. Two stout Makkans, who
stood below the door, raised me in their arms, while a third drew me from above
into the building. At the entrance I was accosted by several officials, dark-looking
Makkans, of whom the blackest and plainest was a youth of the Banu Shaybah
family…He held in his hand the huge silver-gilt padlock of the Ka’abah, and
presently taking his seat upon a kind of wooden press in the left corner of the hall,
he officially enquired my name, nation and other particulars…I will not deny that,
looking at the windowless walls, the officials at the door, and the crowd of excited
fanatics below…My feelings were of the trapped-rat description…This did not,
however, prevent my carefully observing the scene during our long prayers, and
making a rough plan with a pencil upon my white Ihram. 7

Burton is the hero of his own narrative and he doesn’t usually allow us to

forget it— even for a moment. Burckhardt, on the other hand, usually tries to
distance himself and his actions from the scholarly points he wishes to make.

One exception to this would be Burckhardt’s extreme dislike, bordering on real
hatred, for Egyptians and Turks. An example of this bad feeling is seen in the
following passage on the Turks, Syrians and Egyptians:

For my own part, a long residence among Turks, Syrians, and Egyptians,
justifies me in declaring that they are wholly deficient in virtue, honour, and
justice; that they have little true piety, and still less charity or forbearance; and
that honesty is only to be found in their paupers or idiots. Like the Athenians of
old, a Turk may perhaps know what is right and praiseworthy, but he leaves the
practice to others; though, with fine maxims on his lips, he endeavours to persuade himself that he acts as they direct. Thus he believes himself to be a good Muselman, because he does not omit the performance of certain prayers and ablutions, and frequently invokes the forgiveness of God. 8

Burckhardt’s xenophobia against “Turks, Syrians, and Egyptians” was (as we shall later see) matched and perhaps exceeded by Burton’s fulminations against Indians.

It may reasonably be stated that the main differences between the accounts of Burton and Burckhardt’s Hajj is, on the one hand, Burckhardt’s greater objectivity in his account and, on the other, Burton’s concern to portray himself as the hero of his narrative. Burton’s Hajj added little new information to that already included in Burckhardt’s account. However, Burton’s Pilgrimage is a far more entertaining read than Burckhardt’s rather dry and scholarly work. As I suggested earlier, the only place where Burton’s account is more useful than Burckhardt’s is at Medina, where the latter fell ill and filled up his narrative with a lot of second hand material. In particular, Burton is better on the cemetery of al-Baqiya than Burckhardt. Burckhardt himself says of his time in Medina:

My remarks on Medina are but scanty; with good health, I should have added to them but as this town is totally unknown to Europeans, they may contain some acceptable information. The plan of the town was made by me during the first days of my stay; and I can vouch for the correctness of its outlines; but I had not the same leisure to trace it in all its details, as I had that of Mekka. 9

Burckhardt’s description of the cemetery of the saints near Medina, al-Baqiya, is certainly far more circumscribed and generalised than Burton’s memorable account:
On the day after the pilgrim has performed his first duties at the mosque and the tomb, he usually visits the burial ground of the town, in memory of the many saints who lie buried there…Considering the sanctity of the persons whose bodies it contains, it is a very mean place…The Wahabys are accused of having defaced the tombs…but they would certainly not have annihilated every…simple tomb built of stone here, which they did neither at Mekka nor any other place. The miserable state of this cemetery must have existed prior to the Wahaby conquest, and is to be ascribed to the niggardly minds of the towns-people, who are little disposed to incur any expense in honouring the remains of their celebrated countrymen. 10

Something of the same carping spirit that earlier expressed contempt for “Turks, Syrians, and Egyptians” can here be discerned in Burckhardt’s condemnation of the “niggardly minds” of the Medina townspeople.

In contrast to Burckhardt, who gives hardly a page to the saints’ cemetery at al- Baqiya, Burton devotes an entire chapter of his Pilgrimage to his visit. After a long discourse on the history of the cemetery and its restoration since Burckhardt’s day by the Turkish Sultans, Abd al-Hamid and Mahmud, Burton gives a precise and accurate eye-witness account of his own trip to the cemetery.

I entered the holy cemetery right foot forwards, as if it were a mosque, and barefooted, to avoid suspicion of being a heretic. For though the citizens wear their shoes in the Bakia, they are much offended at seeing the Persians follow their example. We began by the general benediction; ‘Peace be upon Ye, O people of Al-Bakiya! Peace be upon Ye, O Admitted to the Presence of the Most High! Receive Ye what Ye have been promised!…’ After which we recited the Chapter Al-Ikhlas and the Testification, then raised our hands, mumbled the Fatihah, passed our palms down our faces, and went on. 11

Burton’s account continues in this same minute way as he visits the places of holy interest including the mausoleum of the Caliph Usman, the tomb of
Mohammed’s wet nurse, the final resting places of the Martyrs of Al-Bakiya and
the tomb of Mohammed’s young son, Ibrahim:

The fifth station is near the centre of the cemetery at the tomb of Ibrahim, who died, to the eternal regret of Al-Islam, some say six months old, others in his second year. He was the son of Mariyah, the Coptic girl, sent as a present to Muhammad by Jarih, the Mukaukas, or governor of Alexandria. The Prophet with his own hand piled earth upon the grave, and sprinkled it with water,—a ceremony then first performed,—disposed small stones upon it, and pronounced the final salutation. For which reason many holy men were buried in this part of the cemetery, everyone being ambitious to lie in ground which has been honored by the Apostle’s hands. 12

There is clearly a sense, in passages such as these, of Burton being emotionally involved in the retelling of Muslim stories and history. Burckhardt, in contrast, keeps his own sympathies very much to himself.

In general terms, Burton did not—and could not really hope to—add a lot that was new to Burckhardt’s earlier narrative and pilgrimage. What then was Burton’s real motive in performing the Pilgrimage? We might reasonably believe that the young Burton went partly in search of adventure and fame. Burckhardt’s account of his travels was not widely known to the common man and, after all, he had not been English. In addition, as we have seen, Burton shaped his narrative as a heroic deception in the interests of colonialism and the Empire. The change in perspective made all the difference in the world and meant that Burton’s account would become fabled in Britain, while Burckhardt’s foreign narrative (even though he wrote in English) would be largely ignored. Was then Burton a mere adventurer acting on behalf of British imperialism and acquiring a major fame in the process? This would indeed seem to approximate to Said’s view of Burton.
However, before we look at Said’s position in more detail, we should first ask ourselves whether Burton might possibly have had a deeper and more profound reason for embarking on the Hajj than mere personal glory, the Empire and the addition of a few glosses to Burchardt’s scholarly work.

In his 1990 biography of Burton, Edward Rice makes the assertion that Burton had become a Sufi Muslim while an army officer in India and, in consequence, his pilgrimage was necessary to his spiritual welfare and perfectly in order:

Burton’s claim to an advanced rank as a Sufi must not be taken too seriously. The average Englishman had no idea what a Sufi was, and ‘Master’ sounds better than novice. What is important is that Burton was one of the first Westerners to convert to Islam and then to follow it deeper into a religious brotherhood. He certainly was the first European to write about Sufism, not as an academic but as a practicing Sufi. He gained a sufficient grasp of the inner knowledge, the Gnosticism he mentioned so often, to be able to preach in various mosques in Sind and Baluchistan…and later in Somalia. And he had realized a good part of that honored Muslim practice, the memorizing of the Qu’ran. 13

Rice argues that in his essay, “El-Islam”, started when he was a young man, but never completed, Burton summarised the reasons for his acceptance of Islam and rejection of other religions, including Hinduism, Judaism and Christianity: all faiths that he had adhered to or flirted with at one time or another. In this essay, Burton asserts that Christianity has become corrupted over the centuries and suffers from having no set times for prayers, nor any insistence on ritual cleanliness. Furthermore, he abhors the Christian’s tolerance for ‘unclean’ meats such as pork and rabbit and its tolerance, even more debilitating, for alcohol. He states that Christianity was ready for reform in the sixth century when Muhammed appeared on the scene. Rice asserts that from this time on, Burton
could only praise Islam, ‘for in short, from its dietary prescriptions to its highest moral, ethical, philosophical, and mystical beliefs he thought it was the only faith for man, guiding him through the perils of life.’ As Burton himself puts it in the aforementioned essay:

The world is the Muslim’s prison, the tomb his stronghold, and Paradise his journey’s end….To the Muslim, time is but a point in illimitable eternity, life is but a step from the womb to the tomb…He has no great secret to learn. The Valley of Death has no shadow for him; no darkness of uncertainty and doubt horrifies his fancy…As in Christianity as in El Islam, eye hath not seen, nor hath ear heard, nor hath fancy conceived the spiritual joys of those who in mundane life have qualified themselves for heavenly futurity.

Is the equivalence of Christianity and Islam at the conclusion of this passage really the bridge from one religion to the other?

According to Rice, we cannot be sure how far Burton progressed in his studies of Sufism, but he advanced far enough to assert he had become a Master-Sufi. Burton himself writes in the *Pilgrimage*:

A reverend man, whose name I do not care to quote, some time ago invited me into his order, the Kadiriyah under the high-sounding name of Bismillah Shah, and after a due period of probation he graciously elevated me to the proud position of a Murshid, or Master of the mystic craft.

Rice also claims that Burton took a full part in the Sufi’s demanding spiritual exercises:

One of Burton’s favorite practices was the sacred dance, the sama, in the tauhid-khanah, where, after praying silently for half an hour, seated in a circle on sheepskins on the floor, swaying in rhythm to the dhikr, the dervishes would begin the first movements of the dance and then, on their feet, enter the majestic cadences…They chant Allahu Akhbar—‘God is Great’—and the Fatihah until they reach the stage of halat, ecstasy. At this point two dervishes would take cutlasses down from the niches in the walls and heat them red hot and present them to the Shaykh. Breathing over them in prayer, the shaykh would impart the
mystical presence of Abdul-Qadir Gilani and return them to the dervishes. At this point in proceedings, the dervishes in an ecstatic state would take hold of the red hot cutlasses, apply them to various parts of the body and inflict wounds upon themselves, apparently without any sensation of pain or discomfiture. Rice goes on to tell us that:

When Burton’s body was prepared for burial after his death in 1890, it was found to be covered with scars, the wounds of innumerable swords, which have never been explained…What seems likely is that Burton, in engaging in the sama with the other dervishes, did not hesitate to enter fully into the ritual of the swords, suffering cuts on his torso and limbs with the same abandon as the other dervishes.

This report of body scarring is evidently conclusive proof, for Rice, of Burton’s conversion to Islam.

In the early eighteen fifties, while in England and France, Burton began to dwell seriously on the possibility of making a journey to Madina and Makkah. Ostensibly, there were good practical reasons for this, including the mapping and exploration of the famous “Empty Quarter” of Arabia, ethnographical studies of the local people, and the possible opening up of a market for horses between Arabia and India. However, Rice suggests that Burton was directed by personal motives as well:

Burton had some personal reasons, too, one the question of nerve, which he mentioned after his return. He wanted to ‘prove, by trial that what might be perilous to other travelers was safe to me.’ And underlying all the other reasons was the matter of his Muslim duty.

This then, is the story as far as Rice sees it. Burton was fulfilling his Muslim duty by going on Hajj and was by no means indulging in anything that might be
interpreted as duplicitous or self-serving behaviour: “He was a Muslim, and it was both his Muslim duty and his Muslim privilege to go to Mecca.”

This perspective is, of course, very different from that of Said who saw Burton as a kind of highly intelligent outcast figure, or adventurer, determined to make his name and fortune as an agent of empire in the Middle East and elsewhere. Said notes in Richard Burton’s writings ‘the struggle between individualism and a strong feeling of national identification with Europe (specifically England) as an imperial power in the East.’

According to Said, ‘Burton thought of himself both as a rebel against authority…and as a potential agent of authority in the East.’ As a result, unlike Rice, Said sees Burton as continually playing a role in the East. His knowledge of Islam and Islamic customs—-and even his great journeys in Islamic lands—representing nothing more than an exercise in the practice of ‘the degree to which human life in society was governed by rules and codes.’

For Said, Burton is a highly ingenious interpreter of the codes and rules by which societies work. Far from performing the pilgrimage as a Muslim duty, Burton is actually, in his accomplishment of this task, asserting his complete understanding of the rules and codes specific to Muslim society and also his superiority over them. Said draws attention not only to Burton’s self-dramatisation, but also to his actions’ political implications:

For even in Burton’s prose we are never directly given the Orient; everything about it is presented to us by way of Burton’s knowledgeable (and

The Victorian
often prurient) interventions, which remind us repeatedly how he had taken over the management of Oriental life for the purpose of his narrative. And it is this fact—for in the Pilgrimage it is a fact—that elevates Burton’s consciousness to a position of supremacy over the Orient. In that position his individuality perforce encounters, and indeed merges with, the voice of Empire, which is itself a system of rules, codes, and concrete epistemological habits. Thus when Burton tells us in the Pilgrimage that ‘Egypt is a treasure to be won,’ that it ‘is the most tempting prize which the East holds out to the ambition of Europe, not excepted even the Golden Horn,’ we must recognize how the voice of the highly idiosyncratic master of Oriental knowledge informs, feeds into the voice of European ambition for rule over the Orient.

For Said, Burton’s knowledge of the codes and system of rules governing Islam are merely the necessary prerequisites for the completion of his main task: that of serving the Empire and, in the process, advancing his own material and social position. According to this perspective, Burton is able to successfully copy any system of rules for the purpose of his own advantage. This is a profoundly different point of view to that of Rice and we need to ask in the light of Said’s remarks whether Rice is able to give any concrete evidence for his assertion that Burton was a Muslim at the time of the Pilgrimage.

Rice does not point to any one conclusive statement or action by Burton to support his contention that the famous travel writer thought of himself as a Muslim, but it is an assumption that permeates his biography. However, such an assumption leaves many unanswered questions. Reading Burton’s own account of his pilgrimage, we will come up against many sections where it is clear that he sees himself as a traveller in disguise, a Christian in foreign lands. I intend to look at these parts of the Pilgrimage in some detail, but first I want to consider whether there were any good reasons why Burton might deny being a Muslim (or
wish to conceal the fact that he was a Muslim).

Islam was poorly understood by the Europe of Burton’s day, and the idea of a civilized white man willingly converting would have been inexplicable to the vast majority of its citizens. Certainly, more than a little opprobrium would attach to the name of a gentleman and British Officer who had, without any force being used, “turned Turk”. On the other hand, it was only necessary to dissemble his real motives in order to appear in an entirely different light. As a fearless explorer in an age of exploration, he would be seen as a hero, a master of disguise and foreign languages who by pluck and determination had been able to penetrate to the very heart of the Muslims’ inner sanctum and come home safely. Seen from this point of view, Burton had pulled the Turk’s beard and returned home to tell the tale. At this stage of the argument, a moral objection suggests itself. If Burton were truly a Muslim, wouldn’t he hesitate to lie and deceive concerning his own true beliefs? Wasn’t the pit of Hell and eternal damnation awaiting for any Muslim who betrayed his own religion for a temporary reward in this world?

Rice deals with this objection by reference to the Isma’ili practice of ‘taqiya’. While in Sind, according to Rice, ‘Burton became absorbed in Isma’ili doctrines.’ Rice goes on to claim that Burton “could now see a relation to some of the Kabbalistic beliefs he had come across at Oxford, especially in the mystical use of numbers.” Exactly how Rice knows this is not clear. Regarding the Ismaili’s practice of ‘taqiya’ Rice tells us:

To survive reprisals and to avoid detection among orthodox Muslims, the
Isma’ils and other extremist sects had developed the practice of ‘taqiya’, dissimulation or concealment of belief. Under the Sunni princes, their enemies, the Shi’as, could be forced under pain of death to denounce Ali and the Imams. The hiding of one’s true beliefs by taqiya came to be not only a matter of survival but of religious ordinance. The tenth century Shi’a divine, Ibn Babuya al-Saduq, stated, ‘Our belief concerning taqiya is that it is obligatory’.

Accordingly, Rice then argues:

Taqiya seems to have been adopted by Burton as a sensible practice—naturally he could not admit to taqiya—and the result is that often his feelings about the faith of Islam are obscure, though never negative: questioners were not likely to get a clear answer from him, and in print he was very circumspect…

In other words, if Rice is correct, Burton was under no moral imperative to make others aware of his Isma’ili faith. In fact, it was perfectly in order and even desirable for him to dissemble about his true beliefs.

On the other hand, this contradictory form of deceit left him open to a different form of criticism: that of basic dishonesty. One vociferous critic was Francis Palgrave, who himself made a trip to Arabia in 1865. Palgrave cast serious doubts on Burton’s ethics and integrity.

To feign a religion which the adventurer himself does not believe, to perform with scrupulous exactitude, as of the highest and holiest import, practices which he inwardly ridicules, and which he intends on his return to hold up to the ridicule of others, to turn for weeks and months together the most sacred and awful bearings of man towards his Creator into a deliberate and truthless mummer, not to mention other and darker touches—all this seems hardly compatible with the character of a European gentleman, let alone that of a Christian.

Burton was particularly sensitive to the allegation that he had made a laughing stock of Islam. In his defense, he wrote passionately of his deep regard for the foreign faith.
The fact is... Al-Islam, in its capital tenets, approaches much nearer to the faith of Jesus than do the Pauline and Athenasian modifications which, in this our day, have divided the Indo-European mind into Catholic and Roman, Greek and Russian, Lutheran and Anglican... The Moslem may be more tolerant, more enlightened, more charitable, than many societies of self styled Christians. 30

Again, Burton takes pains to associate Islam with Christianity--indeed to present Islam as a kind of reformed version of Christianity.

We return then to the central dilemma. Was Burton a Sufi Muslim, practicing the devotion of ‘taqiya’ in his trip to Makkah and Madinah, or was he a Christian or agnostic, interested only in self-aggrandisement and the promotion of the imperialist mission? There are certainly many parts of Burton’s *Pilgrimage*, which could be used to support either contention and perhaps by examining some of them, we might come to some resolution.

Burton’s first view of the Ka’abah, though obviously filled with deep significance, would seem to support the belief that he was merely a wily traveller of another faith, deceiving the ‘Infidel’ in the very heart of his own domain.

There at last it lay, the bourn of my long and weary Pilgrimage, realising the plans and hopes of many and many a year. The mirage medium of Fancy invested the huge catafalque and its gloomy pall with peculiar charms. There were no giant fragments of hoar antiquity as in Egypt, no remains of graceful and harmonious beauty as in Greece and Italy, no barbarous gorgeousness as in the buildings of India; yet the view was strange, unique—and how few have looked upon the celebrated shrine! I may truly say that, of all the worshippers who clung weeping to the curtain, or who pressed their beating hearts to the stone, none felt for the moment a deeper emotion than did the Haji from the far-north. It was as if the poetical legends of the Arab spoke truth, and that the waving wings of angels, not the sweet breeze of morning, were agitating and swelling the black covering of the shrine. But to confess humbling truth, theirs was the high feeling of religious enthusiasm, mine was the ecstasy of gratified pride. 31
When Burton rhetorically states “and how few have looked upon the celebrated shrine!” it is clear that he means how few Europeans, or non-Muslims. Furthermore, the passage is actually a rather beautiful description of the traveller reaching his journey’s end: is it likely that Burton could conceal his true feelings at such a moment of high emotion? In the last sentence of the passage, Burton makes it clear that he is presenting himself as an outsider who, by stealth, knowledge and intelligence, has penetrated to the very beating heart of an alien faith. This is to say, that he is undoubtedly trying to take the credit for having performed a remarkably difficult and dangerous task, while also criticising himself for the gratification of pride where others are experiencing high religious feelings. Should we then take these words at face value? Or is the secret Sufi Muslim deceiving us by his masterly use of ‘taqiya’? Is that final sentence a cover for his own sense of spiritual exaltation? There can be no definitive answer to this. All that can be said, is that this seems to be a remarkably heart-felt passage. Perhaps the truth could be that there is confusion in Burton’s own mind. At this moment, he wishes to be everything to all men: the good and respectable Muslim to his fellow travellers and the bold and dynamic adventurer and scholar to his own compatriots. Is it possible, as Rice argues, that in his own mind, these contradictions were cursorily resolved by obeisance to the secretive practice of ‘taqiya’?

Later, when Burton is able to enter the interior of the Ka’aba he describes his feelings as being of the ‘trapped rat’ variety. Perhaps it is not necessary to
doubt Burton’s sincerity at this point. After all, he was an Englishman pretending to be an Indian with Afghan parents and, whatever his real allegiance might have been, it is likely that the people of Makkah would have given him short shrift, if his true origins had become known. However, there can also be little doubt that Burton is, at least to some extent, playing up to his readership here. A little later, when Burton is talking with Abdullah, the brother of Muhammed, the subject of the English people comes up:

His curiosity about the English in India was great, and I satisfied it by praising, as a Muslim would, their *politique*, their even-handed justice, and their good star.  

After then commenting on a fable, common in Arabia at the time, about the English almost accepting the new religion of Islam at the end of the Prophet’s life, Burton states his belief that at some future point in time, the English may need to take Makkah under its protecting arm.

It requires not the ken of a prophet to foresee the day when political necessity…..will compel us (i.e. Britain) to occupy in force the fountain-head of Al-Islam.

Is the secret Muslim here merely saying something that might erase all suspicion of a clandestine conversion? Or is the viewpoint faithfully held: in this case suggesting that Burton was, as Said suggests, more a colonialist Englishman of his time, than the Sufi Muslim Rice would have us believe in?

The answer to this question is likely to prove rather complicated. Certainly, Burton was a man of his time and there is nothing in his writings to suggest that he considered British colonial rule as anything other than beneficial to the world
(a point of view that seemed to become more pronounced as he got older and became more relativist in his thinking). A British protectorate over Makkah might, in his opinion, have been the best assurance of stability and peace in the region, not only for Christians, but for Muslims too. We should not forget that the Wahhabi puritans from Nejd province had laid waste to many of the graves at Al Baqiya cemetery in Madinah, not so many years before Burton’s own pilgrimage. A British protectorate probably would, in Burton’s opinion, at least prevent any future repeat of such wanton destruction of Holy places and relics.

There are many sections in the Pilgrimage, where Burton’s English roots appear to run very deep. For example, he often seems to believe in the racial superiority of European peoples over their Asian counterparts. In chapter two of the Pilgrimage, when Burton is about to leave Alexandria, he turns down the services of an Egyptian guide, citing what would probably today be considered pseudo-scientific, phrenological reasons in defense of his decision.

[M]y ‘brother’ had shifting eyes (symptoms of fickleness), close together (indices of cunning); a flat crowned head, and large ill-fitting lips; signs which led me to think lightly of his honesty, firmness, and courage. Phrenology and physiognomy, be it observed, disappoint you often amongst civilized people, the proper action of whose brain upon the features is impeded by the external pressure of education, accident, example, habit, and necessity. But they are tolerably safe guides when groping your way through the mind of man in his so-called natural state, a being of impulse, in that chrysalis condition of mental development which is rather instinct than reason.

A little further on in the same chapter, Burton ironically bemoans the fact that Egypt is becoming ‘civilized’: 
If you order your peasant to be flogged, his friends gather in threatening hundreds at your gates; when you curse your boatman, he complains to your consul; the dragomans afflict you with strange wild notions about honesty; a Government order prevents you from using vituperative language to the ‘natives’ in general; and the very donkey boys are becoming cognizant of the right of man to remain unbastinadoed. 38

This is surely the superior voice of a nineteenth-century British imperialist and it doesn’t seem to sit easily with the concept of Burton as a secret Muslim.

On the Nile steamboat, nicknamed the ‘Little Asthmatic’, during his long journey to Cairo, Burton watches the embarkation of an Indian traveller with the haughty superiority of a true British imperialist.

His sooty complexion, lank black hair, features in which appeared beaucoup de finesse, that is to say, abundant rascality, an eternal smile and treacherous eyes, his gold ring, dress of showy colours, fleshy stomach, fat legs, round back, and a peculiar manner of frowning and fawning simultaneously, marked him an Indian. 39

Burton expands on his views of Indians later in the same chapter and his expressed opinions would appear to be exactly in line with those of a conservative English gentleman of the period--perhaps even more strongly negative than those of most. Moreover, many of the strictures expressed about Indians, would appear to extend to ‘oriental’ peoples in general—a collective noun that Burton used far more freely than scholars would today: 40

But of all Orientals, the most antipathetical companion to an Englishman is, I believe, an East Indian. Like the fox in the fable, fulsomely flattering at first, he gradually becomes easily friendly, disagreeably familiar, offensively rude, which ends by rousing the ‘spirit of the British lion.’ Nothing delights the Hindi so much as an opportunity of safely venting the spleen with which he regards his
victors. He will sit in the presence of a magistrate, or an officer, the very picture of cringing submissiveness. But after leaving the room, he is as different from his former self as a counsel in court from a counsel at a concert, a sea captain at a club dinner from a sea captain on his quarter-deck. Then he will discover that the English are not brave, nor clever, nor generous, nor civilized, nor anything but surpassing rogues; that every official takes bribes, that their manners are utterly offensive, and that they are rank infidels. 41

A couple of paragraphs further on, Burton turns his attention to the manners and mores of ‘Orientals’ in general.

Woe to the unhappy Englishman…who must serve an Eastern lord. Worst of all, if the master be an Indian, who, hating all Europeans, adds an especial spite to Oriental coarseness, treachery and tyranny. Even the experiment of associating with them is almost too hard to bear. But a useful deduction may be drawn from such observations; and as few have had greater experience than myself, I venture to express my opinion with confidence, however unpopular or unfashionable it may be. 42

Racist definitions of entire peoples are by no means uncommon in the Pilgrimage. One pilgrim is as ‘coldly supercilious as a Turk, and energetically avaricious as an Arab.’ 43 A servant is ‘the pure African, noisily merry at one moment, at another silently sulky; affectionate and abusive, brave and boastful, reckless and crafty, exceedingly quarrelsome, and unscrupulous to the last degree.’ 44 Such simplistic definitions, certainly show us clearly that Burton’s essential views on many important matters such as ethnicity and racial distinctions were the same as those of the majority of Englishmen of the time. It is hard to square such racist attitudes with Rice’s belief that Burton had converted to Islam.

There is also the question of Burton’s liking for alcohol to be considered. Throughout his pilgrimage, it seems that he carried some whisky in a small bottle.
In addition, during his sojourn in Cairo his ‘departure was hastened by an accident.’ 45 This “accident” was more an act of foolishness based on the love of alcohol and the state it induces. In the Caravanserai, in Cairo, Burton meets Yuzbashi, the Albanian Irregular (a Muslim who, like Burton, was on his way to perform Hajj) who invites Burton to drink with him.

About nine o’clock, when the Caravanserai is quiet, Burton takes a pipe and a tobacco pouch, sticks his dagger in his belt, and slips into Ali Agha’s room…The ‘materials’ peep out of an iron pot filled with water; one is a long, thin, flask of ‘Araki, the other a bottle of strong perfume. Burton writes:

Ali Agha welcomed me politely, and seeing me admire the preparations, bade me beware how I suspected an Albanian of not knowing how to drink….Taking up a little tumbler, in shape like those from which French postilions used to drink la goutte, he inspected it narrowly, wiped out the interior with his forefinger, filled it to the brim, and offered it to his guest with a bow. I received it with a low salam, swallowed its contents at once, turned it upside down in proof of fair play, replaced it upon the floor, with a jaunty movement of the arm, somewhat like a ‘pugilist’ delivering a ‘rounder’, bowed again, and requested him to help himself. 46

The two men get thoroughly drunk and decide to bring Burton’s friend Haji Wali to the scene of the drinking bout. He is successfully summoned, but refuses to drink. At this point, the Albanian decides that he wants to bring a group of dancing girls to the entertainment and reels out of the room, Burton following and remonstrating in his wake. The drunken Albanian stumbles into private rooms and later assaults an Egyptian on the stairs. The next morning the captain of the Albanian Irregulars and the Indian doctor (Burton) are the talk of the
Caravanserai and Burton arranges to make a hasty departure. He concludes:

“Thus it was, gentle reader, that I lost my reputation of being a ‘serious person’ at Cairo. And all I have to show for it is the personal experience of an Albanian drinking bout.” 47

Would a secret convert to Islam continue drinking alcohol with the level of fervour and indifference for religious strictures that Burton demonstrates here? Of course, it is true that Burton refers to drinking as ‘being considered by Muslims a funny and pleasant sort of sin.’ 48 However, new converts would perhaps be unlikely to hold a major stricture of the Islamic religion in such scant regard. Furthermore, it would appear that Burton was a fairly heavy drinker right through his whole life, regarding it as a manly pursuit. Would this have been likely, if Burton had indeed been a sincere convert to Islam?

There are also passages in Burton’s Pilgrimage where he makes reference to Christianity in an inclusive way, apparently including himself in the loose collective noun. For example, in the notes to Chapter Sixteen, ‘A Visit to the Prophet’s Tomb’, Burton refers directly to the Muslim belief in the survival of Jesus on the cross in fairly disparaging terms:

It is almost unnecessary to inform the reader that all Muslims deny the personal suffering of Christ, cleaving to the heresy of the Christian Docetes,—certain ‘beasts in the shape of men’, as they are called in the Epistles of Ignatius to the Smyrnians,—who believed that a phantom was crucified in our Saviour’s place. They also hold to the second coming of the Lord, in the flesh, as a forerunner to Muhammed, who shall reappear shortly before the day of judgement. 49

If this is Burton indulging in the Sufi Muslim practice of ‘taqiya’, then it
The Victorian

seems to come perilously close to willful falsification for its own sake. There would appear to be no overriding reason for Burton to supply this information, nor to so obviously include himself in that reference to ‘our Saviour.’ Whatever, his true allegiance may be, it is clear that Burton is, at least outwardly, affirming his allegiance as a Christian in such passages as these.

Acting as a counter balance to these sections in the Pilgrimage, however, are those where Burton appears to praise and approximate to the Islamic religion far more closely than might be expected from an English Orientalist and scholar. These passages are of the type that might be explained by a fervour for impartial observation but, in their collectivity, they suggest a friendliness towards and a kinship with Islam that was certainly unusual for an English gentleman of the time. Of this type would be Burton’s citation on the Muslim’s attitude towards slavery, a subject which in little more than ten years, was to bring a terrible war to the north American continent.

The laws of Muhammed enjoin his followers to treat slaves with the greatest mildness, and the Muslims are in general scrupulous observers of the Apostle’s recommendation. Slaves are considered members of the family, and in houses where free servants are also kept, they seldom do any other work than filling the pipes, presenting the coffee, accompanying their master when going out, rubbing his feet when he takes a nap in the afternoon, and driving away the flies from him. When a slave is not satisfied, he can legally compel his master to sell him. He has no care for food, lodging, clothes and washing, and has no taxes to pay; he is exempt from military service and socage, and in spite of his bondage is freer than the freest Fellah in Egypt. 50

In a passage such as this, Burton seems very much at home with the idea of personal responsibility to both God and man. This personal dimension might be
usefully contrasted with what he probably regarded as his more public responsibilities.

Burton, at times, appears to give the Arab, and the Badawi in particular, an almost mythical simplicity and righteousness, obviously considered in contrast to a laxity in the morals of so called ‘civilised peoples’. Near the Al Hamra fort, on the way from Yambu to Bir Abbas, the boy Muhammed cheats his fellow travellers of the head of a sheep with which they had wanted to make ‘haggis’. An argument develops, which Burton is able to calm by reference to the fact that Muhammed is a stranger in their country:

With the ‘Demon’s’ voluble tongue and impudent countenance in the van, they opened such a volley of raillery and sarcasm upon the young ‘tripe seller’, that he in his turn became excited—furious. I had some difficulty to keep the peace, for it did not suit my interests that they should quarrel. But to do the Arabs justice, nothing is easier for a man who knows them than to work upon their good feelings. ‘He is a stranger in your country—a guest!’ acted as a charm; they listened patiently to Muhammed’s gross abuse, only promising to answer him when in his land, that is to say, near Makkah…51

Once again, Burton might be seen here as going beyond the neutrality of the academic observer. It is clear that he admires the Arabs for their simple but just morality and values. It is also worth considering Burton’s words to the effect that a man who knows the Arabs can easily appeal to their better nature. Burton himself was such a man and it is perhaps pertinent to ask how he could have become so close to the Arabs without having embraced their traditions and religion?

On the entry into Madinah, Burton’s caravan is met by a bustling throng of
relations and friends—and once more, Burton feels the compulsion to comment

on the kind and affectionate nature of the people:

Truly the Arabs show more heart on these occasions than any Oriental people I know; they are of a more affectionate nature than the Persians, and their manners are far more demonstrative than those of the Indians…The general mode of saluting was to throw one arm over the shoulder and the other round the side, placing the chin first upon the left and then upon the right collar bone, and rapidly shifting till a ‘jam satis’ suggested itself to both parties. 52

Another passage from the notes to the same chapter, shows the Arab
again from a perspective that suggests an understanding or even empathy

with their inwardness:

The Arabs, who suffer greatly from melancholia, are kind to people afflicted with this complaint; it is supposed to cause a distaste for society, and a longing for solitude, an unsettled habit of mind, and a neglect of worldly affairs….I have remarked that in Arabia students are subject to it, and that amongst their philosophers and literary men, there is scarcely an individual who was not spoken of as a ‘Saudawi’…..My friend Omar Effendi used to complain, that at times his temperament drove him out of the house,--so much did he dislike the sound of the human voice,--to pass the day seated upon some eminence in the vicinity of the city. 53

Once again, Burton the man, seems to be drawn to the sensitive personality of the Arabs.

When Burton reaches Madinah, many of his observations appear to convey
the certainty of a ‘true believer’ rather than the aloof intellectual approach of the academic traveller. Thus, in speaking of the Prophet’s Mosque and the way the Prophet would spend his days there, Burton’s prose becomes almost reverential:

In this Mosque Muhammed spent the greater part of the day with his companions, conversing, instructing, and comforting the poor. Hard by were the
abodes of his wives, his family, and his principal friends. Here, he prayed, at the
call of the Azan, or devotion-cry, from the roof. Here he received worldly
envoys and embassies, and the heavenly messages conveyed by the Archangel
Gabriel. And within a few yards of the hallowed spot, he died, and found a grave.

This is a very moving evocation and, one might say, utterly unlike the dry
statement of fact and possibility that might have been made by an uninvolved
observer (Burckhardt, for example). Are Burton’s Islamic affiliations here, under
the pressure of his once in a lifetime trip, beginning to show beyond his usual
practice of ‘taqiyah’?

While in Madinah, Burton takes time out to examine the character of the
Madani—and much of what he says rings with admiration for these simple sons
of the desert.

Added to this pride are indolence, and the true Arab prejudice, which even
in the present day, prevents a Badawi from marrying the daughter of an artisan.
Like Castilians, they consider labour humiliating to any but a slave; nor is this, as
a clever French author remarks, by any means an unreasonable idea, since
Heaven, to punish man for disobedience, caused him to eat daily bread by the
sweat of his brow. Besides, there is degradation, moral and physical, in
handiwork compared with the freedom of the desert. The loom and the file do not
conserve courtesy and chivalry like the sword and spear; man ‘extends his
tongue,’ to use an Arab phrase, when a cuff and not a stab is to be the
consequence of an injurious expression. Even the ruffian becomes polite in
California, where his brother ruffian carries his revolver, and those European
nations who were most polished when every gentleman wore a rapier, have
become the rudest since Civilization disarmed them.

This is clearly a very personal statement and amounts to a virtual panegyric
in favour of the warrior’s noble and simple life. Burton was also anxious to
protect the Arab Muslim from criticisms concerning his treatment of women and
the practice of polygamy. In particular, he attends to the phenomenon of the
harem, which intrigued Europeans:

Europe now knows that the Muslim husband provides separate apartments and a distinct establishment for each of his wives, unless, as sometimes happens, one be an old woman and the other a child. And confessing that envy, hatred, and malice often flourish in polygamy, the Muslim asks, Is monogamy open to no objections? As far as my limited observations go, polyandry is the only state of society in which jealousy and quarrels about the sex are the exception and not the rule of life...

In quality of doctor I have seen a little and heard much of the haram. It often resembles a European home composed of a man, his wife, and his mother. And I have seen in the West many a ‘happy fireside’ fitter to make Miss Martineau’s heart ache than any haram in Grand Cairo...

Burton even suggests that Arab chivalry rather than mediaeval Christianity has had a shaping impact on modern sexual relations:

Were it not evident that the spiritualizing of sexuality by sentiment, of propensity by imagination, is universal among the highest orders of mankind,—c’est l’etoffe de la nature que l’imagination a brodee, says Voltaire,—I should attribute the origin of ‘love’ to the influence of the Arabs’ poetry and chivalry upon European ideas rather than to medieval Christianity. Certain ‘fathers of the Church’ it must be remembered, did not believe that women have souls. The Muslims never went so far.

Under the guise of answering criticism against Islam, Burton here makes some comparisons and comes down clearly on the side of the Muslims. Westerners may criticise them for polygamy but, according to Burton, it actually creates fewer tensions between the sexes than monogamy.

Furthermore, as Burton states, at least the Muslims never contended, as did some early Christians, that women never had souls.

After concluding Hajj, Burton and his friends return to Makkah and repair to the Haram in order to hear the sermon. This is the occasion for another passage of high praise for Islam and Burton concludes it with the affirmation that despite
having seen religious ceremonies of many faiths from all over the world, he had never seen anything as wonderful as this.

The vast quadrangle was crowded with worshippers sitting in long rows, and everywhere facing the central black tower: the showy colours of their dresses were not to be surpassed by a garden of the most brilliant flowers, and such diversity of detail would probably not be seen massed together in any other building upon earth. The women, a dull and somber-looking group, sat apart in their peculiar place. The Pasha stood on the roof of Zemzem, surrounded by guards in Nizam uniform...Nothing seemed to move but a few Darwayshes, who, censer in hand, sidled through the rows and received the unsolicited alms of the Faithful...Then the old man stood up and began to preach. As the majestic figure began to exert itself there was a deep silence. Presently a general ‘Amin’ was intoned by the crowd at the conclusion of some long sentence. And at last, towards the end of the sermon, every third or fourth word was followed by the simultaneous rise and fall of thousands of voices...59

Burton does not tell us here what the preacher actually said. Perhaps, far back, he could not even hear very well. The important point in the picture he paints is the magnificent spectacle, of a great mass of people all acting in unison in the pursuit of a religious ideal. It would seem significant that he so clearly identifies it as the most moving religious sight he has ever witnessed.

In the next chapter, ‘Life at Makkah, and Umrah’, Burton touches on the subject of Pilgrimage ceremonies and compares them to European folk customs:

Of Pilgrimage ceremonies I cannot speak harshly...what nation, either in the West or in the East, has been able to cast out from its ceremonies every suspicion of its old idolatry? What are the English mistletoe, the Irish wake, the Pardon of Brittany, the Carnival, and the Worship at Iserna? Better far to consider the Makkan pilgrimage rites in the light of Evil-worship turned into lessons of Good than to philosophize about their strangeness, and to blunder in asserting them to be insignificant. Even the Badawi circumambulating the Ka’abah fortifies his wild belief by the fond thought that he treads the path of ‘Allah’s friend.60

It is certainly significant that Burton’s tendency is always to be ambiguous
towards past and present criticisms of Islam. It would be difficult to find a
single passage in the Pilgrimage that is clearly critical of Islam as a religion,
rather than of the practices of individual Muslims.\textsuperscript{61}

Burton is also indulgent about the Islamic tradition that Abraham and his son built
the Ka’abah:

As regards the Makkān and Muslim belief that Ibrahim and his son built
the Ka’abah, it may be observed the Genesitic account of the Great Patriarch has
suggested to learned men the idea of two Ibrahims...Muslim historians all agree
in representing Ibrahim as a star-worshipper in youth, and Eusebius calls the
patriarch son of Athar; his father’s name, therefore, is no Arab invention. Whether
Ishmael or his sire ever visited Makkah to build the Ka’abah is, in my humble
opinion, an open question. The Jewish Scripture informs us only that the patriarch
dwelt at Beersheba and Gerar in the south-west of Palestine, without any allusion
to the annual visit which Muslims declare he paid to their Holy City. At the same
time Arab tradition speaks clearly and consistently upon the subject, and
generally omits those miraculous and superstitious adjuncts which cast shadows
of sore doubt upon the philosophic mind.\textsuperscript{62}

Here Christian belief is relegated to the level of being a ‘Jewish Scripture’ and
Islamic ideas on the matter are portrayed as clearly more reliable--just as earlier
Burton took pains to suggest equivalence between Christianity and Islam and
even to present Islam as another Christian reformation.

Having now looked at the various arguments concerning Burton’s motivations
and beliefs in some detail and also having examined the more relevant sections
of Burton’s Pilgrimage which seem to bear on this issue, is it possible to come to
any definite and sure conclusions?

The materials which seem to suggest that Burton was a typical English
gentleman of the nineteenth-century in his beliefs on colonialism and the benefits
of British rule, certainly do not contradict, in themselves, the possibility that he was also a secret Sufi Muslim. Burton was a proud Englishman who believed his compatriots to bring sound and stable rule to those parts of the world they colonised—and in this regard one might consider Burton’s earlier remarks about the British at some point needing to establish a protectorate over the Holy Places of Islam. If Burton was a secret Muslim, sympathetic to the Shi’a persuasion, then he might be eager for his countrymen to take over Makkah and Madinah, in order to protect them from the very real threat of the Wahhabis who had already caused so much damage in Madinah. Perhaps it would even be possible for him to believe in some reciprocal process, where in reward for extending a protecting hand over Madinah and Makkah, the British would eventually be the first of the European great powers to embrace Islam. At the very least, Burton might have believed that British control of Makkah and Madinah would result in greater harmony and understanding between two great peoples. No evidence for such a belief can be extrapolated directly from the materials available, but some might think that it is a reasonable conclusion based on the weight of circumstantial evidence. Of course, this would seem contrary to Said’s view of Burton as an agent of empire, able to understand the rules and codes of alien societies without necessarily attaching himself to them. However, even if we grant that there is some truth in Said’s view, it does not necessarily contradict the possibility that, for a time at least, Burton saw himself spiritually as being a Sufi Muslim. It was not necessary for such a belief to come into open conflict with his plans to help
England and advance his own position within its social structure.

It is quite possible then, to assume that Burton’s very real patriotism and belief in Empire did not in themselves exclude the possibility that he was also a Muslim at the time of his Hajj journey, reconciling contradictions in his own mind, by reference to the secret practice of ‘taqiya’. The references to Christianity, Jesus, and occidental beliefs in the Pilgrimage are not so frequent, nor so heart-felt, as to make one feel sure that Burton was undoubtedly being sincere. He had many reasons, as we have already seen, for portraying himself as a daredevil adventurer in foreign lands, whose wish to help his mother country thrust him constantly into mortal danger. Any dishonesty implied in this attitude, as we have seen, might be explained by reference to the Ishma’ili belief in ‘taqiya’. He belonged to a sect of Islam that positively prided itself on dissimulation and secrecy. Of course, whether this was enough to really convince a mind as complex and contradictory as Burton’s in the long run, is a moot point.

Perhaps the strongest support for Burton’s possible conversion to Islam is provided by his frequent eulogies of Islamic practices and traditions in the Pilgrimage, many of which we have considered in some detail. Is it probable that a man who could complete the Hajj in the company of Arabs from Madinah and Makkah, who spoke Arabic well and was able to recite large portions of the Qu’ran from memory—a man who was often more knowledgeable than the local Arabs themselves about Islamic theology—was no more than a Christian
adventurer, concealing his true beliefs beneath a cloak of Islamic respectability?

The probability seems strong that Burton was able to travel in Muslim lands for such long periods, in the company of Arabic Muslims from Madina and Makkah, because in his own heart of hearts, he considered himself to be their brother in the faith of Islam.

If indeed Burton did consider himself to be a Muslim at the time of the Pilgrimage, this does not necessarily mean that this faith undoubtedly endured throughout his whole life. Burton’s spiritual journey was certainly a very long and tortuous one and he probably adhered to several differing beliefs throughout his lengthy search for a spiritual home. However, it would probably be fair to say that Islam appears to have had the deepest and most long lasting affect on his psyche.
In the article that follows I will not be treating of Burton’s long association and eventual feud with Speke. Nevertheless, Burton’s obstinacy in continually disputing the truth of Speke’s discovery of Lake Nyanza as the source of the Nile is indicative of how perverse Burton could be when confronted with facts he didn’t like. Dane Kennedy writes: “Meanwhile Burton had begun to make a case for Lake Tanganyika as the true source of the Nile, suggesting that the river intersected other bodies of water to the north, such as Lake Nyanza, as it wended its way to Egypt and the Mediterranean. His self-serving argument was almost entirely speculative and seemed inspired in large measure by spite…” See The Highly Civilized Man (123).

The veracity of Speke’s earlier claim was finally shown to be true in 1875 when Stanley successfully circumnavigated Lake Nyanza.

Perhaps we should not take Bartema’s (often spelt “Vartema”) “eye-witness” account too seriously as he seems to have been most interested in telling a good story. At one point he speaks of seeing unicorns near the Ka’aba: “On the other side of the Caaba is a walled court, in which we saw two unicorns, which were pointed out to us as a rarity; and they are indeed truly remarkable. The larger of the two is built like a three-year-old colt, and has a horn upon the forehead about three ells long. This animal has the color of a yellowish-brown horse, a head like astag, a neck very long, with a thin mane; the legs are small and slender, like those of a hind or roe; the hoofs of goat. These two animals were sent to the sultan of Mecca, as a rarity of great value.” See Edward Robinson, ed. Calmets Dictionary of the Holy Bible (London: Samuel Etheridge, 1812).
William Martin Leake, Acting Secretary of the African Association, makes it clear in his preface to Burckhardt’s book on Syria, that the Association had encouraged Burckhardt to study in Syria in order to prepare himself for travels in Arabian lands: “The Association having had the good fortune to obtain a person of Mr. Burckhardt’s education and talents, resolved to spare neither time nor expense in enabling him to acquire the language and manners of an Arabian Musulman in such a degree of perfection, as should render the detection of his real character...extremely difficult.” See John Burckhardt, Travels in Syria and the Holy Land (London: Association for Promoting the Discovery of the Interior Parts of Africa, 1822) 1.


5 It is very clear that Burckhardt’s account is far more detailed and objective than Burton’s.


7 The Pilgrimage to Makkah 648.

8 Travels in Arabia 263.

9 Travels in Arabia 263.

10 Travels in Arabia 297.
11 The Pilgrimage to Makkah 475.

12 The Pilgrimage to Makkah 477-478.

13 Edward Rice, Captain Sir Richard Francis Burton: A Biography

14 Rice 202.


16 Rice 236.

17 The Pilgrimage to Makkah 18

18 Rice, 206.

19 Rice 207.

20 Rice 232.

21 Rice 232.

22 Orientalism, 195.

23 Orientalism 195-196.

24 Orientalism 196.

25 Orientalism 196.

26 Rice 127.

27 Rice 123-124.

28 Rice 286-328.


31 The Pilgrimage to Makkah 603.

32 The Pilgrimage to Makkah 648.

33 The Pilgrimage to Makkah 672.

34 The Pilgrimage to Makkah 672.

35 The Pilgrimage to Makkah 685.

36 The Pilgrimage to Makkah 474-475.

37 The Pilgrimage to Makkah 25.


39 The Pilgrimage to Makkah 41-42.

40 Initially, only the Near East and the Indian sub-continent was well-known to Europe; consequently, all Asians tended to be classed as “Orientals”.

41 The Pilgrimage to Makkah, 43-44.

42 The Pilgrimage to Makkah 45.

43 The Pilgrimage to Makkah 171.

44 The Pilgrimage to Makkah 169.
The Pilgrimage to Makkah 136.

The Pilgrimage to Makkah 139.

The Pilgrimage to Makkah 143.

The Pilgrimage to Makkah 140.

The Pilgrimage to Makkah 344.

The Pilgrimage to Makkah 66.

The Pilgrimage to Makkah 259.

The Pilgrimage to Makkah 292.

The Pilgrimage to Makkah 307.

The Pilgrimage to Makkah 362.

The Pilgrimage to Makkah 449-450.

The Pilgrimage to Makkah 529.

The Pilgrimage to Makkah 529-530.

The Pilgrimage to Makkah 530. Burton is probably referring to a supposed decree of the Council of Macon in 585 A.D. A declaration that women never had souls was, almost certainly, never made at this council and the belief that it was is almost certainly due to a misinterpreted jest. See, Michael Nolan, “Do Women Have Souls”, p.1.


Pilgrimage 666-667.

Pilgrimage 677.

Most of Burton’s scorn is reserved for Indians (see Pilgrimage 43-44).
BIBLIOGRAPHY

a) First Editions of Burton’s Works


**b) Other Editions of Burton’s Works**


The Victorian


c) Works About Burton


