Title of Paper: Is Burton Still Relevant?
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Abstract:

Richard Francis Burton has proved a source of fascination for a large number of writers and researchers. Many biographies have been written about his life, with the latest by Jon Godsall, being the most comprehensive to date (if perhaps inclined to make a little too much of various trivial incidents in Burton’s life). To some extent, Burton has lived a double life in literary terms being mostly reviled by postcolonial critics since the time of Said’s Orientalism while, in contrast, almost becoming the subject of eulogisation for some of his biographers (Edward Rice readily springs to mind in this context). Such paranoia on the part of writers about Burton’s life at least indicates a healthy interest in the Victorian period as a whole and the activities of Burton, in particular. But what is so unique about these activities and why do they seem to exert such a profound fascination over contemporaries both for good and for bad?

Keywords: Richard Francis Burton, Orientalism, Sufism, Victorian ideas, Burton’s biographers

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Richard Francis Burton has proved a source of fascination for a large number of writers and researchers. Many biographies have been written about his life, with the latest by Jon Godsall, being the most comprehensive to date (if perhaps inclined to make a little too much of various trivial incidents in Burton’s life). To some extent, Burton has lived a double life in literary terms being mostly reviled by postcolonial critics since the time of Said’s *Orientalism* while, in contrast, almost becoming the subject of eulogisation for some of his biographers (Edward Rice readily springs to mind in this context). Such paranoia on the part of writers about Burton’s life at least indicates a healthy interest in the Victorian period as a whole and the activities of Burton in particular. But what is so unique about these activities and why do they seem to exert such a profound fascination over contemporaries both for good and for bad? In addition, is the present interest in Burton likely to continue for the foreseeable future?

These are difficult questions to answer and, largely, the answers will depend on the continued relevance of the Victorian age to the present and of Burton’s activities within that paradigm. Dane Kennedy has accurately pointed out how the Victorians’ search for truth is still closely linked to our own and how modern western scientific ideas still use many of the perspectives and ideas first formulated by the Victorians. If this is true—as I think it is—then, by extension, Burton and his explorations and anthropological writings and insights will also continue to be studied in the academy. However, in addition to Dane Kennedy’s general point, there is also the question of to what extent the west can better understand the Muslim point-of-view by analyzing the writings of a westerner who, in spite of his profound knowledge of all world religions, openly preferred Islam to any other faith. Such an unexpected adherence on the part of a highly educated Victorian gentleman, raised in continental Europe, obliquely suggests that Islam must include within itself a deep attraction for those people everywhere with an open mind and a tendency towards theistic belief. In a period of world history when the most important and divisive conflicts have a religious coloring and aspect, a study of Burton will continue to be *de rigueur* for those who wish to try and understand the roots of contemporary world conflict.
Yet another reason why Burton still has relevance today is due to his Sufi-like search for ultimate truth and his attempts to synthesize his spiritual needs with his materialistic and scientific outlook. This was only possible due to a very subtle and ambiguous use of various ideas and practical techniques of a spiritual nature that Burton had become acquainted with during his study of the world’s major religions. During his time in Sind (modern Pakistan) Burton carefully applied himself to the study of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam—particularly in its Sufi form. From this eclectic mix, emerged a point of view which distinguished between conventional and absolute reality—as all these religions did and do—allowing the researcher and explorer the possibility to use scientific criteria freely and without any reference to spiritual needs while, in spite of this, being finally cognizant that a spiritual possibility still remained through the belief that all scientific truth only touched upon conventional reality while absolute reality lay beyond in another ineffable realm. This search for truth through subtle techniques of perspective and mind still has relevance for those people today who, in ever increasing numbers, attempt to find a way of uniting science with spiritual insights through Sufism, Buddhism, Vedanta and other spiritual traditions.

In this paper I do not intend to concern myself with the relevance of the Victorians to the modern day. Dane Kennedy and others have done that very thoroughly and the link is now rather well established. Instead, I will focus on Burton’s relevance to the West’s present interest in Islam and, later, to spiritual truth in general.

Burton and Islam is a big topic and, in spite of the abundance of relevant texts, a somewhat ambiguous area of research. It is still unknown—and likely to remain unknowable—as to whether Burton made an actual conversion to a Sufi form of Islam while in Sind. Furthermore, even if he did, we must remain unsure about the extent to which he retained the belief in later life. However, one thing we can be certain about is the profound respect Burton retained for Islam to the end of his days. All of his writings and pronouncements about Islam testify to his high regard for the “saving faith”. For example, in his essay “El-Islami”, started when he was a young man but never finished, there is a strong and undeniable sub-current of praise and reverence for Islam present.
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. ¹

There is the perfunctory equating of Islam with Christianity in the above passage but it is obvious to see where Burton’s true sympathies lie.

During his life, Burton was often to compare Christianity with Islam in various ways-- and it was invariably Islam that had the better of the confrontation. Burton, for example, was contemptuous of the role of the Christian missionary in West Africa, believing that these missionaries were attempting to thrust a religion that had developed in a particular place and a particular time--for particular people even--on a race that was totally unsuited for its homilies and ‘truths’. Burton’s essential point was relativistic as a look at some of his comments in the first volume of *Two Trips to Gorilla Land* will show:

All races now known to the world have a something which they call right, and a something which they term wrong; the underlying instinctive idea being evidently that something which benefits me is good, and all which harms me is evil. Their good and their evil are not those of more advanced nations; still, the idea is there, and progress or tradition works it out in a thousand different ways. ²

Burton here spells out his willingness to evaluate Western beliefs according to the same yardstick he used to assess more primitive cultures. Such a procedure, as Kennedy has pointed out, was profoundly contrary to the
The Victorian perspective of Christian missionaries. In a letter to Lord Russell in 1864, Burton ironically sets down his belief in the futility of trying to change the African to a Christian point-of-view by citing the case of Tom Honesty IV, a chief on the Cameroon River, who “after conversion to Christianity and to the practice of monogamy died of a confirmed syphilis.” ³

It should be understood that Burton was able to see positive things in the African way of life and spiritual beliefs because he was not heavily invested in the claims of Christianity and was able to view religious activity in the same kind of light as the anthropologist, E.B. Tylor (i.e. as simply a “belief in spiritual beings”). ⁴ In fact, Burton’s views on African culture and religion are very much dependent on his relativistic habit of mind. On the one hand in his book, Wit and Wisdom from West Africa, Burton is able to write:

There is more of equality between the savage and the civilizee--the difference being one of quantity, not of quality--than the latter will admit. For man is everywhere commensurate with man. ⁵

Yet, conversely, the same man was accused of “vile national slander” against the people of Sierra Leone by a black lawyer, William Rainy, in his pamphlet The Censor Censored: or, the Calumnies of Captain Burton (Late Her Majesty’s Consul at Fernando Po) on the Africans of Sierra Leone. ⁶ Burton himself remained unrepentant and insisted in a letter to Lord Stanley that the charges had been trumped up because “I do not hold the black to be equal to the white man and...prefer seeing the missionary at home in Spitalfields than abroad in West Africa!” ⁷
In order to understand this apparent dichotomy, one needs to understand that Burton did not view all cultures and religions as being equal, but did try to assess them all using the same standards. For Burton, Christianity did not represent the one saving faith in perpetual competition with all others. It was merely one religion amongst many; and, as we have are aware, Burton consistently assessed the Islamic religion more highly. For example, the strictures and reservations which Burton applied to Christian missionaries in Africa, did not extend to the natives’ proselytisation by Islam. In volume I of *Wanderings in West Africa*, Burton is able to write: “El Islam has wrought immense good in Africa...it has taught the African to make that first step in moral progress.”  

There are certainly significant clues in Burton’s work that he strongly felt the inadequacies of the Christian faith in relation to what he believed to be the superior Islamic religion. In his essay “El-Islam” which was unpublished during his lifetime, he points out the various shortcomings and shows Islam in the light of being a necessary reformation of a Christianity that had become too full of hatred and self-indulgence:

> About the sixth century of its era the Christian world called loudly for reform. When things were at their worst, Muhammed first appeared upon the stage of life.  

Burton goes on to dispel what he regards as prejudice and misinformation in the West about Islam and Mohammed, and he finishes his essay with an extraordinary assertion of Islam’s continuing strength:
And should Christianity, as it has often threatened, ever meet the Saving Faith in mortal conflict, and the Cross assail the Crescent, in the latest of crusades, the Muslim scimitar, rusty as it is with the rust of ages, will prove the good metal of which it was in the beginning forged. 11

In this passage Burton seems to suggest that in the event of some future final battle between Christianity and Islam the latter faith will stand at least an even chance of victory.

Whatever Burton’s feelings about Islam may have been around the time of his pilgrimage, later in life, though still sympathetic to Islam, he acquired a—for his time, unusual—relativism, which insisted that all religions were products of a particular time and place and had no monopoly on absolute truth (a point of view well-expounded in the “Terminal Essay” to the Arabian Nights ). In 1880, Burton published The Kasidah, a poem that he attributed to a fictional mediaeval Persian Sufi poet, Haji Abdu. 12 In fact, the work was an original piece and contained many of Burton’s deepest ideas about religion, faith, life and death:

There is no Good, there is no Bad; these be the whims of mortal will:
What works me weal that call I ‘good,’ what harms and hurts I hold as ‘ill’:
They change with place, they shift with race; and in the veriest span of Time,
Each Vice has worn a Virtue’s crown; all Good was banned as Sin or Crime: 13

In The Kasidah, Burton presents a view of morality and religion that is a poetic equivalent of the more academic statement in the “Terminal Essay” to the Arabian Nights. All religions are relative and have no claim on absolute truth—though their moral and ethical systems may provide human beings with a good
example.

A careful consideration of Burton’s attitudes to Islam in particular and religion in general, is informative on the process of how all men and women, both the educated and the simple, might find spiritually nourishing insights in Islam which provides some counter-balance to the complexities and uncertainties of the modern world. Moreover, Burton’s belief that, for the African continent at least, Islam had a more useful and relevant belief system to offer than Christianity might help to explain the continued growth of Islam throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries at a time when Christianity has been in decline.

Burton’s ambiguity in religious terms also contributes to making him a fascinating and relevant figure for contemporary study. If he had clearly made a conversion to Islam and subsequently seen all history and phenomena from an Islamic perspective, he would probably have less relevance than he currently does have to modern concerns in the western world. It is his very ambivalence, with one foot in the Western camp and the other in the Islamic world, that makes what he has to say so fascinating for contemporaries: especially as this ambiguity and ambivalence is allied to a recognizably post-modernist, post-structuralist type of relativism which still appears “modern”. Therefore, the next step is to examine this relativism and ambivalence in more detail and to enquire more deeply into its nature and origins.
Ironically, Burton is often viewed as an atheist or agnostic due to his (for the
time) unusual relativism. However Burton’s by now well-documented,
relativism actually grew out of the particular brand of Ismaili Sufism he studied
during his time in Sind and it is extremely unlikely that he didn’t believe in
some kind of higher, transcendental truth throughout his life. Claiming, as some
have done, that Burton undoubtedly made a secret conversion to Islam in its
mystical Sufi form is to be too dogmatic in an area in which we do not have
sufficient evidence to be one hundred per cent sure. However, at the very least,
Burton’s intensive study of hidden and secret forms of religious practice suggest
a seeker after “truth”.

This conclusion is bolstered by his marriage to a fervent Catholic and his
comments about needing a wife who believed in a higher truth. Why would this
matter if he had no system of beliefs himself? Wouldn’t it, in fact, be a major
inconvenience to be joined in marriage with a woman who espoused strong
religious beliefs if Burton had himself been an atheist and, generally speaking,
anti religion?

Burton, in fact, had come to the conclusion, through long study, that
religion was an important part of the human psyche and provided the basis of
morality. However, his study of mystical Sufism, Buddhism and the various
yogas of the Hindu tradition (particularly Bhakti, Jnana, Raja and Karma)
caused him to come to the conclusion that no religion was exclusively “true”—
though as an individual, he might have his personal preference. All religions were both true and untrue at the same time. The highest form of truth and insight lay beyond language and thought in an ineffable realm of absolute enlightenment. However, in order to reach this sacred place, humanity needed to climb the steps or rungs on the ladder of conventional religious ideas, which also gave them a strong moral base for their lives. Mystic Sufism, Buddhism and Hinduism all contain the idea that final and highest truth is beyond the capacity of most people to understand and put into words: only through a lifetime of secret practice might an individual eventually reach a realization of highest truth—which was beyond language and thought. In the meantime—and always for the majority of people—conventional religion and its stories performed a useful service by keeping adherents on the right track and providing them with a code of morals by which they could live their lives. Bhakti yoga in Hinduism for example, emphasizes the finding of contentment through worship and love. From a Bhakti point of view, all the monotheistic religions would come into this category. For more determined practitioners there were the yogas of knowledge (jnana) and one-pointed meditation (raja). The Hinayana and Mahayana split in Buddhism between sutra and tantra contains the same belief, while mystical forms of Sufism also believe in a higher state of enlightenment beyond the forms and words of conventional worship.

I believe it was this higher, ineffable state of enlightened truth that Burton believed in rather than any particular religion—though he had his own natural
The Victorian preference for Sufism as a means of arriving at a profound and ineffable level of realization. This commitment is made apparent in his long poem *The Kasidah* where Burton, writing under the guise of a Muslim wise man, expresses many of his own deepest beliefs.

Believe in all things; none believe; judge not nor warp by “Facts” the thought; See clear, hear clear, tho life may seem Maya and Mirage, Dream and Nought.

This “I” may find a future life, a nobler copy of our own, Where every riddle shall be ree’d; where every knowledge shall be known.

Where ‘twill be man’s to see the whole of what on earth he sees in part; Where change shall ne’er surcharge the thought; nor hope deferred shall hurt the heart.

Burton here expresses his own impotence to put into words the things that are most important. Like Wittgenstein in *Tractatus*, he must simply pass over them in silence—simply because they are ineffable.

In conclusion, I would contend that Burton’s contemporary relevance lies in his tolerance for all religious faiths (sending a powerful message of brotherhood and peaceful cohabitation in the world) combined with his search for ultimate, ineffable, truths relevant to masses of people everywhere. At a time when more and more individuals look to find and benefit from the most essential pith instructions of Sufism, Buddhism and the various meditational techniques of India, Burton’s will continue to be an inspiring example for some people to follow.
NOTES


6. William Rainy, *The Censor Censored: or, the Calumnies of Captain Burton (Late Her Majesty’s Consul at Fernando Po) on the Africans of Sierra Leone* (London: printed for the author, 1865). Rainy was a West Indian from Dominica who was recruited for government service in Sierra Leone.


11. Ibid. 346.

