

## **Religious Portraits: British Women and their Encounters with Persian Islam and Zoroastrianism (excerpt)**

### **Introduction**

The word “travel” is surrounded by a wide semantic field, which is studded with culturally determined meanings and subjective values. As its etymology suggests, it was originally connected to the hardships of a journey, since it comes from the Old French word “travail”, whose former meaning was “labour” or “suffering”. Travelling has gradually abandoned this medieval nuance as transport innovations and mass tourism transformed it into a universal activity. Today, travel is alternatively associated with leisure, business, package tours, freedom, spiritual quests or migrations and it has definitely become a global and globalised phenomenon. In any case, travelling involves the notions of movement and change, which are both the principles and the effects of a traveller’s encounter with a new and more or less different context. On a journey, the traveller’s culture, understood as a complex system of signs, “a mechanism for organizing and preserving information in the consciousness of the community,”<sup>1</sup> confronts and interacts with other semiotic systems. They experience new spatial contexts by the use of perceptions and symbolizing thought, thus creating a phenomenological version of the reality around them and developing their own cultural identities.

The aim of my investigation is to examine the way nineteenth-century British women, who travelled to and resided in Persia, negotiated with a completely different cultural space, with particular reference to sacred space, which consists of meaningful places and objects, myths, rites and symbols. In 1917 Rudolf Otto proposed the study of the sacred as the numinous experience of a “mysterium tremendum”, the revelation of something “wholly other” where awe and fascination intermingle.<sup>2</sup> This phenomenological approach was adopted by Mircea Eliade, who aimed to illustrate the sacred and how it differs from the profane. In *The Sacred and the Profane* he claims that the sacred reveals itself by means of hierophanies, through which men acquire a fixed point in space and time.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the discovery of sacred space has existential values and implies what

---

<sup>1</sup> Yury M. Lotman and Boris A. Uspensky, “The Semiotic Mechanism of Culture,” *New Literary History* 9, no.2 (Winter 1978): 214, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/468571>.

<sup>2</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (London: Oxford University Press, [1917] 1936), *passim*.

<sup>3</sup> Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, [1957] 1959), 12.

Eliade calls a cosmogonic moment.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, he highlights that profane existence, in its homogenous experience of space and time, still presents inevitable “values that to some extent recall the non-homogeneity peculiar to the religious experience of space,”<sup>5</sup> since men tend to fix points of unique quality, but sacred time is a sort of eternal mythical present, which is re-actualized by rites and the experience of sacredness.

Edward Relph draws on Eliade’s conception of sacred space and considers it as a type of existential space, which is “the inner structure of space as it appears to us in our concrete experiences of the world as members of a cultural group.”<sup>6</sup> He points out the fact that existential space is sacred and symbolic in those cultures which still have not attained widespread technological advance, while it is of a more geographical and utilitarian kind in highly industrialised societies.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, nineteenth-century British citizens travelling to Persia were undoubtedly amazed at the encounter with a society where religious and spiritual symbols were so pervasive as well as different from the traditions of their own native culture. As far as religion was concerned, Persia was a source of interest for travellers because of its variety of creeds. Travelogues abound with historical and practical information about Islam, Bábism, Bahá’í Faith, Sufism and Zoroastrianism. I will focus on the representation of Islam and Zoroastrianism in Gertrude Bell’s 1894 *Persian Pictures* and Ella Sykes’s 1898 *Through Persia on a Side-Saddle* and 1910 *Persia and its People*, in order to highlight how experiential, cultural and political influences intermingle in these descriptions. Moreover, I will emphasize how travellers experienced and negotiated with these creeds through the different signs which they encountered during their journey, particularly rites and meaningful places.

## **Bibliography**

### **Primary sources**

Bell, Florence, ed. *The Letters of Gertrude Bell*. London: Ernest Benn Limited, 1927.

Bell, Gertrude. *Persian Pictures*. London: Anthem Press, [1894] 2005.

Richmond, Elsa, ed. *The Earlier Letters of Gertrude Bell*. London: Ernest Benn Ltd, 1937.

Sykes, Ella C. *Through Persia on a Side-Saddle*. London: A.D. Innes & Company, 1898.

<http://archive.org/stream/throughpersiaons00sykerich#page/n5/mode/2up>, accessed on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2018.

---

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>6</sup> Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness* (London: Pion Limited, [1976] 2008), 12.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

———. *Persia and its People*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1910. <http://archive.org/stream/persiaitspeople01syke#page/n9/mode/2up>, accessed on 12<sup>th</sup> January 2018.

### Secondary sources

Affergan, Francis. *Exotisme et altérité*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1987.

Ale-Mohammed, Reza. “An Iranian Passion Play: ‘Taziyez’ in History and Performance.” *New Theatre Quarterly* 17, no.1 (2001): 54-66.

Almond, Philip C. *Heretic and Hero: Muhammad and the Victorians*. Wiesbaden: O. Harrassowitz, 1989.

Arnold, Matthew. “A Persian Passion Play.” In *Essays in Criticism*, 165-94. New York: A.L. Burt Company, Publishers, 1865. <https://archive.org/details/cu31924013206754>, accessed on 9<sup>th</sup> December 2017.

Bennett, Clinton. *Victorian Images of Islam*. London: Grey Seal, 1992.

Caillois, Roger. *L’homme et le sacré*. Paris: Gallimard, 1939.

Daniel, Norman. *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1960.

Eliade, Mircea. *The Sacred and the Profane*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, [1957] 1959.

Gail, Marzieh. *Persia and the Victorians*. London: Routledge, 1951.

Khattak, Shahin Kuli Khan. *Islam and the Victorians: Nineteenth-Century Perception of Muslim Practices and Beliefs*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2008.

Kidwai, Abdur Raheem. *Literary Orientalism: A Companion*. New Delhi: Viva Books, 2009.

———. *Orientalism in English Literature: Perception of Islam and Muslims*. New Delhi: Viva Books, 2016.

Lévy-Bruhl, Lucien. *Le surnaturel et la nature dans la mentalité primitive*. Paris: Alcan, 1931.

Lewis, Bernard. *Islam and the West*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

Lotman, Yury M. and Boris A. Uspensky. “The Semiotic Mechanism of Culture.” *New Literary History* 9, no.2 (Winter 1978): 211-232. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/468571>, accessed on 10<sup>th</sup> January 2018.

Moura, Jean-Marc. *Lire l’exotisme*. Paris: Dunod, 1992.

———. *La littérature des lointains: histoire de l’exotisme européen au XXe siècle*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 1998.

Nash, Geoffrey. “Aryan and Semite in Ernest Renan’s and Matthew Arnold’s Quest for the Religion of Modernity.” *Religion and Literature* 46, no.1 (2014): 25-50.

Otto, Rudolf. *The Idea of the Holy*. London: Oxford University Press, [1917] 1936.

Relph, Edward. *Place and Placelessness*. London: Pion Limited, [1976] 2008.

Rose, Jenny. *Zoroastrianism: An Introduction*. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011.

Smith, Byron Porter. *Islam and English Literature*. New York: Caravan Books, 1977.

Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Space and Place. The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1977] 2007.