



# Sufi, Christian or Buddhist? Richard Francis Burton's “Parameters of Belief”

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## Abstract

Richard Burton has been interpreted and misinterpreted by literary critics as eminent as Edward Said and Louisa Pratt as well as by others such as Rana Kabbani and Reina Lewis. Biographers like Fawn Brody, Edward Rice, Mary Lovell and Jon Godsall have also had their say. Burton has been variously described as imperialist, sexist, gay, obsessed with pornography, racist, plagiarist, sexual libertine, scatologist, expert sociologist, profoundly deceitful and impotent. In spite of this negative press, interest in Burton is always high as his life and times are relevant to many scholars interested in the 19th century origins of modern thought and postcolonial ideas. In this paper presentation I will attempt to get beyond the confused and contradictory portrayals of Burton over the last 50 or so years by looking in some detail at Burton's two long poems: *Stone Talk* and *The Kasidah*. In these works, published 15 years apart, Burton writes under pseudonyms and, as I will argue, is able to express many of his deepest beliefs, especially in *The Kasidah* where he is playing the part of Hadji Abu Al Yezid, a Sufi like-wise man who possesses some startling similarities to Burton himself. What emerges from this close examination of the texts is a sensitive relativist who, while adhering to the scientific method in all his practical dealings, is yet able to consider the possibility that everything we see around us and all our experience of the world might be, finally, nothing more than Maya and illusion.

**Keywords:** Burton, Victorian poetry, Eastern philosophy, Travel literature, Victorian literature, 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophy, Buddhism, Hinduism, Postcolonial literature, Elegies, Sufism, Belief systems, Religion

## 1. Introduction

The inner workings of Victorian explorer Richard Burton's mind, has profoundly interested many of his biographers and critics. Perhaps this is because the man's life seems contradictory in so many ways. Most famous for his love of Islam and his pilgrimage to Medina and Mecca, he was also a self-confessed racist who wasn't averse to using pseudo sciences like phrenology and craniometry to propagate his rather unsavory elitist views; an outspoken critic of Christianity, Burton was yet married to a fervent Catholic from the upper classes for nearly thirty years. Burton was also an iconoclast who made it his business to undermine the intellectual foundations of the Victorians' belief in their own superiority over other races of men. On the other hand, Burton spent nearly all of his adult life serving British imperialism as either soldier or diplomat. No wonder so many people have tried to understand what made Burton tick—though usually without much success. The interpretations have been many and diverse. For Thomas Wright, his first biographer (after Isabel's unreliable eulogization<sup>1</sup>), he was a fraud who didn't deserve the title of translator, having copied his translation of the Arabian Nights wholesale from his long suffering friend, Thomas Paine<sup>2</sup>. For his niece, Giorgiana Stisted, he was a free thinker who had been outrageously misinterpreted by his catholic wife, Isabel<sup>3</sup> (who, against all logic, insisted on believing that her husband had been “half catholic” as well as “half sufi”). More recently, the biographers Fawn Brodie and Edward Rice have regarded Burton as a closet gay<sup>4</sup> and life-long adherent of a mystical form of Islam respectively<sup>5</sup>. Historian, Dane Kennedy has labeled Burton a “relativist”,<sup>6</sup> while feminist critics such as Rana Kabbani<sup>7</sup> and Mary Louise Pratt<sup>8</sup> have deplored the sexist, paternalist and imperialist themes in the writer's work. It is hardly surprising in the light of such profoundly disorienting contradictions, that many of those who have written about Burton have also determined to try and get to the bottom of their man's psyche in order to find some existential explanation for such glaring anomalies, believing that this would, somehow, make the numerous contradictions disappear in a proverbial puff of smoke.

Perhaps Edward Rice has been most guilty of creating a Burton that was to the liking of his own imagination, but had little to do with the actual man. Although Rice can be illuminating on the young Burton in Sind, he too frequently jumps to the conclusion he wants to arrive at—such as his apparent belief in a sexually rampant Burton, constantly “bedding” native women during his expedition with Speke to the lakes of central Africa.<sup>9</sup> More importantly, Rice is dogmatic about Burton's early “conversion” to Islam, believing that circumstantial evidence—which has been examined again and again by many diverse scholars and biographers—incontrovertibly proves that Burton became a Muslim during his time in Sind.<sup>10</sup> Rice's belief in this regard is a mere leap of faith: although Burton's high regard for Islam—especially during the first half of his life—has been well chronicled, there is nothing to prove that he ever actually became a Muslim. Indeed, as Dane Kennedy points out, if conversion to Islam means adhering to the five pillars, such as regular prayer and always fasting during Ramadan, then Burton quite obviously was not a Muslim.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Burton was a heavy drinker all his life and this taken together with his well-documented fascination with sex and pornography, would seem

to suggest that he felt little need to place any religious restrictions on his own personal habits and predilections. In other words, if Burton was indeed a Muslim, as Rice would have us believe, then he was most certainly a very bad one.

Perhaps the most influential misinterpretation of Burton and his ideas in recent times has come from the pen of Edward Said in his famous book *Orientalism*.<sup>12</sup> In this seminal work of criticism, Said puts forward a very particular view of Burton which has become influential in critical circles without—in my opinion—having much real justification. Said portrays Burton as the master of society's codes and rules; as someone who could easily assimilate the traditions and values of a culture (and emulate them) without ever feeling any real sense of connection or alliance with the culture involved. This approach enables Said to account for Burton's well-known love and deep understanding of Islam without having to place him outside the theory of Orientalism that he (Said) develops during the course of that book. Burton is presented as a genuine lover of knowledge and as a great scholar who never at any time had any doubts about where his own essential loyalties lay. His unique skills, subtle and mostly hidden, were always at the service of the imperial center and, it is implied, those religious and cultural values that it was inspired by.<sup>13</sup>

This has proved to be a very influential view of Burton—as it is one which is supportive of the whole postcolonial set of ideas—and many scholars subsequent to Said such as Rana Kabbani and Louisa M. Pratt have taken a similar line. Unfortunately, it is also a point-of-view that is wrong. Burton was not at all someone who easily understood the rules and codes of other societies: a point that can be supported by reference to his unhappiness at Oxford due to the continental manners (acquired during his peripatetic upbringing abroad) which he found impossible to change or adapt once he arrived in England<sup>14</sup> and, also, by his later dismissal from the consul's position at Damascus as a result of boorish hot-headedness and an inability to understand the local rivalries and enmities of the region.<sup>15</sup> In fact, Burton's love of Islam was genuine and not at all part of some imperial sham for the benefit of the British empire and for his own advancement. Certainly, he did not possess the subtle chameleon-like adaptability that Said credits him with in *Orientalism* (for his own purposes, it must be said). Said's determination to praise Burton for qualities he clearly never possessed, casts genuine doubt on his detailed knowledge of Burton and his achievements. Very likely, for Said, Burton was no other than one more awkward example that had to be fitted, somehow or other, into the confines of his theory on Orientalism.

Subsequent postcolonial scholars and critics of colonialism in general, have been less kind even than Said in their writings on Burton. Rana Kabbani in her book *Imperial Fictions: Europe's Myths of Orient* embarks on a startling would-be demolition of Burton, motivated by a clear and strong desire to totally destroy his reputation in all areas of scholarly endeavor. According to Kabbani, Burton is a sadist and misogynist who so loved the East and its ways because he found in them a confirmation of his own perverted attitudes to sex and women. Kabbani seems to take real pleasure in denouncing Burton and even seems to hold him accountable for the high number of British clitoridictimies that took place during the Victorian age.<sup>16</sup> Her essential view about Burton appears to be that his racism, sexism and imperialism can stand as a mirror representation of the racism, sexism and imperialism of the Victorian period as a whole: surely, a grossly unfair conclusion? Why hold Burton personally responsible for all the shortcomings of the age? It would be fairer to reverse the equation and view Burton's ideas in these matters as, to a large extent, belonging to the general cultural outlook of the Victorian period itself.

Mary Louise Pratt's book *Imperial Eyes* has become almost a staple textbook of post-colonialism and, as with Said, she seems to give a certain pre-eminence to the travels of Burton. It would appear that the very title of the book itself is a reference to Pratt's rather minute examination of Burton's description of his first sight of Lake Tanganyika when, according to Pratt, the lake is first aestheticized prior to being appropriated for the colonial power by Burton's "imperial eyes".<sup>17</sup> Perhaps it would be at least equally pertinent to observe how Pratt herself constructs the scene from her own epistemological preconceptions, animating it with a kind of mystical immanence which perhaps has little real tangibility beyond her own postcolonial concerns. Certainly, it's perfectly possible to read Burton's account as a simple text of discovery: the explorer's moment of joyous realization as the desired goal is finally reached after many months of uncertainty, hardship, sickness, and personal deprivation.

I have already dealt with some of the Burton biographers such as Isabel Burton and Edward Rice, but Fawn Brodie, Mary Lovell<sup>18</sup> and Jon R. Godsall<sup>19</sup> are others who have constructed "Burtons" (either to a greater or a lesser extent) in their own images. Brodie wrote in the sixties when Freudian psychoanalysis was strongly in vogue and she is determined, in her biography, to trace almost all of the important elements in Burton's personality back to his childhood and early sexual urges. Brodie concludes that Burton was probably homosexual.<sup>20</sup> Mary Lovell's biography, *A Rage to Live*, is far more balanced than Brodie's, but in its determination to view the union of Burton and Isabel as an equal partnership it overemphasizes Isabel's intellectual contribution to Burton's fame. Perhaps this is due to Lovell's deeply felt feminist perspective. Godsall's is the most recent of the biographies and it is mostly accurate and comprehensive. However, Godsall's continuous concern to point out Burton's many lies and deceits (both major and minor) eventually begins to create an unbalanced picture of a Victorian charlatan who was undeserving of the acclaim he received. I am sure this was not Godsall's intent but, in practice, this is sometimes the actual result.

Dane Kennedy's *Highly Civilized Man* is perhaps the most interesting book written about Burton in recent times. Kennedy uses Burton as a fulcrum for an understanding of the Victorian age as a whole, coming to the conclusion that Burton was a relativist: not sincerely believing in any religion as "true", while methodologically being most interested in the accumulation of data with the purpose of constructing reasonable hypotheses in the scientific manner. Kennedy makes a strong case for Burton's relativism, and there is clearly a lot of truth in the picture of Burton that he creates. However, Kennedy too is sometimes guilty, like the others, of making a Burton in his own image (in spite of his ability to clearly see both Burton's racism and anti-semitism). Kennedy's Burton has little of the irrational about him but, it is my belief, irrationalism and an often pig-headed contradictoriness played a large and important part in Burton's personal make up.

From this brief survey of writers on Burton it can be seen that there exists a wide discrepancy of views. Frequently, individual writers have created the Burton they wanted by emphasizing certain points while minimizing the importance

of others. As a consequence of this, and in a (possibly hubristic) attempt to get closer to what Burton really thought, I next intend to look in a detailed way at Burton's two long imaginative poems published 15 years apart from each other: *Stone Talk* in 1865<sup>21</sup> and *The Kasidah* in 1880.<sup>22</sup> I should emphasize from the beginning that there is a wide discrepancy in quality and intent between these pieces: *Stone Talk* often hardly rises above the level of doggerel, while *The Kasidah* is a fine attempt in the Eastern elegiac tradition which Fitzgerald's *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* had made so popular. If *The Kasidah* finally fails in its attempt to create a lasting poetic contribution to the ideals of pantheistic pessimism, it is mostly due to the repetitive nature of the material. After a few basic concepts have been laid out, *The Kasidah* is mostly concerned with finding the perfect couplet to express the thought. In consequence, there is a lot of repetition as Burton struggles to say again what he's already said before in a way that can hardly be bettered. However, the poetical merit of these works will not be my concern in the present essay. I intend to look at them as potential sources of information concerning Burton's most deeply held ideas and attitudes. Why should we expect to find out anything about such things in these two works of fictional narrative? Well, first of all, both were written under pseudonyms and, therefore, give a certain amount of license for the expression of views which may be different or unusual; that Burton possessed some odd attitudes for his time, is supported by the wide range of antagonistic views he expressed over his long working life. We might reasonably surmise that while some of his contentious views—his polygenism and his anti-semitism for example—were explicated in his normal writings, other more deeply personal beliefs may have been more fully expressed in his two long poetical works.

*Stone Talk* and *The Kasidah* are two very different works both in quality and intent. *Stone Talk* is a humorous piece full of sardonic irony while *The Kasidah* is a genuine attempt at proving Burton's poetic ability through a moving invocation of the Hadji's pantheistic views. Nevertheless, in both I believe Burton expresses many of his own most deeply held ideas. The rather ridiculous Brahmin in *Stone Talk* is given free rein to express the most extreme beliefs and it is at least interesting that some of them—such as the idea that the planet would be better off without humanity on it—had even occurred to Burton. We certainly will not be able to take all ideas expressed in *Stone Talk* as Burton's own because the aim is essentially to lampoon, shock and amuse. In spite of this, it is still interesting to follow Burton's sometimes absurd lines of reasoning and attempt to isolate those ideas which may have been his own. In contrast to *Stone Talk*, *The Kasidah* is a serious and high-minded poem. Burton's philosophical Hadji is clearly very similar to himself and, as Burton struggles to give poetic longevity to his creation, it will not be surprising if the level of personal sincerity is high. First, I intend to look in some detail at *Stone Talk* and see what can be gleaned from it of a personal nature. After that, I will examine the more biographically fertile ground of *The Kasidah*.

## 2. Stone Talk

The ridiculous premise of *Stone Talk* is that a drunken Dr. Polygott, Ph.D is engaged in discourse by a paving stone that is, in fact, the reincarnated spirit of a Hindu Brahmin. As Gavan Leroux points out in his introduction to the 2007 Burtoniana edition, "Stone Talk is best read as obfuscated autobiography, for its reflections of Burton's highly idiosyncratic concerns; it is interesting now for its insights into Burton himself."<sup>23</sup> It is in this latter spirit that I will examine the poem.

As an initial point of some importance, it can be stated that during the stone's early narrative of its reincarnated history down the millennia, a strongly scientific and Darwinian perspective is emphasized:

How from the Monad's starting point,  
Began a chain whose latest joint  
Ever put forth another link,  
Till matter learned to speak and think;  
How 'scaped from the primeval sea,  
Grass became herb, herb shrub, shrub tree;  
How fishes crawled to birds, and these  
To beasts (like you) by slow degrees.<sup>24</sup>

At the time of *Stone Talk* Darwin's *Origin of Species* was little more than five years old and the publication of *The Descent of Man* lay six years in the future. Nevertheless, in 1865 Burton clearly embraced the idea of evolution. This is reinforced a little further on by a reference to apes as the ancestors of man:

Ah, what a sight were you when first  
By freak of matter Adam burst  
Through Simian womb! Scant then man's prate  
Of human nature's high estate.<sup>25</sup>

Interestingly, Burton seems strongly aware that men in general and Victorian England in particular (given its role as colonial master) needed to mythologize and heroicise their less than glamorous past.

Now you have tales enough to hide  
Your origins and salve your pride.<sup>26</sup>

Burton is also keenly aware of how language is finally the ultimate civilizing force: the crucial source of all future elaboration.

Pali or Hebrew (each tribe tries  
To prove its own the primal speech)<sup>27</sup>

Hebrew is denigrated as “a pauper dialect”—perhaps pointing to a latent anti-semitism that was to be most clearly manifested in the aftermath of Burton’s disastrous consulship in Damascus.

From line 644 on, there begins a long meditation by the Brahminic stone on how much better off the earth would be if it were once and for all rid of man who has deprived the animals of their habitats.

“Now, man! Suppose the globe once more  
Had some convulsion as of yore---  
Enough to exterminate the pest  
Of nature and to spare the rest---

What a glad scene my mental eye  
Through the dark future doth espy! <sup>28</sup>

It is not easy—especially for Victorian imperialists—to imagine a world lacking the presence of the human species. European Cartesianism even doubted if an external world existed at all if there wasn’t a human mind to perceive it! Burton shows a pessimistic and realist side of his personality in considering the possibility of a world without humanity (and regarding such a state of affairs as desirable).

In the best and most sustained sequence of poetic language in the poem, Burton states his idea that there is nothing particularly factual about facts:

Facts are chameleons, whose tint  
Varies with every accident:  
Each, prism-like, hath three obvious sides,  
And facets ten or more besides.  
Events are like the sunny light  
On mirrors falling clear and bright  
Through windows of a varied hue,  
Now yellow seen, now red, now blue. <sup>29</sup>

This touches on Burton’s relativism and belief that groups of men and women will always twist “facts” in the way that is most suitable to them. Perhaps an even more extreme philosophical point is present here: there is no such thing as facts! Facts are merely a conglomeration of atoms or particles that give the illusion of conveying truth: they have come together gratuitously for an instant before changing into something else. Humans, however, insist on ossifying these wandering particles, accrediting meaning to them, and even believing in their universal applicability. It is natural from this that Burton should put forward an ambiguous attitude towards “truth” itself:

“Truth, sir’s a lady strangely made,  
As centaur, Pan, merman or maid;  
In general, a Protean dame  
Never for two brief hours the same. <sup>30</sup>

Burton here states his belief that men can never agree about the nature of “truth” because it will always change—and continue to change--according to what each man’s own self-interest might be:

Why need I prove that each man’s thought  
Is each man’s fact, to others nought?  
Yet, mark me, no one dubitates  
Himself, or owns he errs. He rates  
Against his fellows’ folly, they  
At his; and both are right I say. <sup>31</sup>

This is surely very interesting. In what sense could people with completely different answers to the same question both be right? Presumably, only in a relativistic way. Both beliefs may be considered “correct” if their function is not absolute truth, but the welfare of the person or persons propagating the belief. This interpretation would certainly be in line with Burton’s belief, frequently expressed, that cultures and religions develop idiosyncratically with the purpose of instilling strength and longevity into particular groups of people.

The stone is also highly critical of England’s colonial role, seeing its empire as nothing other than “plunder on the largest scale”.

See India, once so happy, now  
In scale of nations sunk so low---  
That lovely land to which were given  
The choicest blessings under heaven,  
Till ravening Saxon, like simoom,  
With fire and sword brought death and doom. <sup>32</sup>

It is profoundly thought provoking that Burton, frequently interpreted as an arch imperialist and orientalist, is able here to clearly appreciate the tenuous nature of England's claim to empire. It would seem that Burton's relativism made it impossible for him to hide from himself the opportunistic nature of England's claim on the rest of the world. England had conquered an empire because it could and, while Burton as an individual Englishman might do all he could to uphold and even expand that empire, philosophically he was unable to deceive himself about the "civilizing" benefits of that control for the native inhabitants.

There are also references to Burton's possible Sufism in the poem:

What is a soul but life derived  
From life's Eternal Fount deprived  
Of power to gain its upward source  
Or leave unbid the prison-corse? <sup>33</sup>

Burton had studied Sufism under the Isma'ilis in Sind and it was their profound belief that the soul was like a bird constantly in search of the higher spiritual home from which it had come. Importantly for Burton's relativism, Sufic spiritual insights lay beyond conventional notions of truth and falsehood, good and bad—which were perceived as being infinitely malleable. In other words, it is at least possible that Burton's Sufism might actually have been a primary source for his relativism. At the most profound level, perhaps he just didn't invest too much of his spiritual identity into conventional ideas about morality and "truth".

*Stone Talk* also speaks at length about the ills of capitalism, the deviousness and cupidity of English politics and politicians; the immorality of slavery and the foolishness of fashion. Overall, one gets the impression of a Richard Burton enjoying himself and paying back old scores, safe and secure, far from home (the poem was probably composed in West Africa where Burton was working at the time of the poem's composition). However, as can be seen from the present examination, although the essential aim of *Stone Talk* may have been comic, there is a fair chance that during the course of composing more than 3000 lines, some of Burton's deepest beliefs may have been revealed.

As stated at the beginning, we must be careful in accrediting to Burton the ideas and statements of fictional characters. However, given the 'mouthpiece' nature of Burton's reanimated stone, it would not be surprising if during the course of such a long diatribe, many of Burton's own beliefs were revealed. In particular, a profound relativism runs through the poem—which is also typical of Burton's own intellectual life. A deep pessimism is also present which, in spite of Burton's adherence to the English ruling class, makes itself most felt in the insistence on the opportunism and rapacity of colonial dominance and the belief that nations conquer others only for their own gain and profit. Finally, there is just a hint that mystical Sufism might provide spiritual insights that lie beyond the contrasting moralities and practical beliefs of conflicting men and societies.

Let us now continue our quest to find at least some few elements of Burton's highly individual belief system by examining *The Kasidah* in some detail.

### 3. The Kasidah

The *Kasidah* provides a more interesting source for Burton's ideas than *Stone Talk*. In the first place, it lacks the latter's comical and fantastic intent. Secondly, Burton is writing under the pseudonym of a Muslim wise man, Haji Abdu Al Yazdi: and it is well known and generally accepted by scholars that Burton possessed a profound sympathy for Islam and its beliefs. Consequently, this should be a sober-minded Burton providing the reader with insights into what he liked and admired most about this foreign faith. Finally, in *The Kasidah* Burton was attempting to write real poetry; something that certainly wasn't true of the rhyming doggerel of *Stone Talk*. Given the juxtaposition then of Muslim beliefs with high poetic intent we might reasonably expect to find more of the true Burton in *The Kasidah* than in *Stone Talk*.

After an atmospheric opening and many couplets in the pantheistic style of Omar Khayyam, Burton begins to touch on his own relativism and belief that the diverse societies of men in the world make God in their own image and out of their own self-love.

Man worships self; his God is Man; the struggling of the mortal mind  
To form its model as 'T would be, the perfect of itself to find. <sup>34</sup>

A little later, Burton makes his relativistic take on morality even clearer:

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'. <sup>35</sup>

This is very much in tune with what we know of Burton the pioneering anthropologist, interested in every belief system he encountered and eager to show that none of them had any absolute claim on truth.

Burton goes on to develop his point (under the guise of the learned Haji) that all morality is relative and changes both from society to society and even within the same society itself.

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. <sup>36</sup>

This must have been a disturbing thought indeed for a conservative and expansionist English imperialist society which wished to impose its own vision of the world on its subject races.

Burton makes it clear that conscience itself, the quality that so many religious thinkers of the time believed separated us from the animals, was something that developed only after evolution and language had separated man, in his own estimation, from the natural kingdom.

The moral sense, your Zahid-phrase, is but the gift of latest years;  
Conscience was born when man had shed his fur, his tail, his pointed ears.<sup>37</sup>

Such a bald statement of belief in conscience as a corollary of language, evolution, and social activity must inevitably have outraged more conventional thinkers of the time. According to "Haji Burton", Soul, like Conscience, has been created in the minds of men only after his separation from the rest of the animal kingdom:

Where was his Soul the savage beast which in primeval forests strayed?  
What shape had it, what dwelling place, what part in nature's plan it played?  
This Soul to ree a riddle made; who wants the vain duality?  
Is not myself enough for me? What need of "I" within an "I"?  
Words words that gender things! The soul is a newcomer on the scene;  
Sufficeth not the breath of Life to work the matter-born machine?<sup>38</sup>

Burton next goes on to make the point that ideas about absolute truth, morality and eternal souls are merely the result of a highly sophisticated society that has developed far beyond its original lowly beginnings.

Life is a ladder infinite-stepped, that hides its rungs from human eyes;  
Planted its foot in chaos gloom, its head soars high above the skies.<sup>39</sup>

We may pride ourselves on the fact that we, unlike the animals, are creatures of reason and intellect but, according to Burton, this is only to mask the knowledge of where our true beginnings lie.

Reason and Instinct! How we love to play with words that please our pride;  
Our noble race's mean descent by false forged titles seek to hide!<sup>40</sup>

Just as we are really a part of the animal kingdom and all our beliefs concerning our special status are false, so human conceptions of heaven and hell are erroneous and based on our narcissistic need to view ourselves as special.

There is no Heaven, there is no Hell; these be the dreams of baby minds;  
Tools of the wily fetisheer; to 'fright the fools his cunning blinds.<sup>41</sup>

Belief in a particular faith is a mere accident of birth: we follow the belief system of the land we are born into:

Again: in Hind, Chin, Franguestan that accident of birth befell.  
Without our choice, our will, our voice: Faith is an accident as well.<sup>42</sup>

But if all civilized concepts of morality, heaven and hell, good and evil are false, what can make life worthwhile? According to Burton (in the guise of Haji Abdu) to live a genuine life a man must be honest, face these difficult truths, and search to advance his own self-worth and knowledge.

With ignorance wage eternal war, to know thyself forever strain  
Thine ignorance of thine ignorance is thy fiercest foe, thy deadliest bane;  
That blunts thy sense, and dulls thy taste; that deafs thine ears, and blinds thine eyes;  
Creates the thing that never was, the Thing that ever is defies.<sup>43</sup>

In this conception of knowledge and self-growth as the most important aims of life, Burton is perhaps not too far away from his younger contemporary, Nietzsche, who while declaring that God was dead advocated the birth of a new Superman.

To seek the true, to glad the heart, such is of life the HIGHER LAW,  
Whose difference is the man's degree, the man of gold, the man of straw.<sup>44</sup>

Nevertheless, there is another trend present in Burton's thought; one that was inspired, at least to some extent, by his early study of Sufism in Sind. What about the possibility that life itself is no more than an illusion, the Maya spoken of by the Indian Hindu sages? In this case, while we should play the game according to the rules of the illusion, good, bad, heaven, hell, even life itself, are all just intrinsically unreal things and, as with the Buddhists and Sufis, the real aim is to recognize its insubstantial nature and move beyond it into the ineffable light of final enlightenment and truth.

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.<sup>45</sup>

If this duality in Burton was truly present in his psyche (as I believe it was), we might be more accurate to describe the subject of this essay as “half Sufi and half relativist” than—as in Isabel Burton’s oft quoted words—“half Sufi and half Catholic”.

#### 4. Summary

In summary, it may be said that through the study of these two texts, we have been able to, arguably, obtain some deeper insights into the psyche of Richard Francis Burton. This psyche was profoundly skeptical of conventional ideas on morality, difference, religion, sexuality and power. For these reasons, in spite of his own well recorded activities to further the spread of the British Empire during Victoria’s reign, Burton might well, in retrospect, be considered as a predominantly progressive force who helped make manifest the essential equality between the British “masters” and the colonial peoples they ruled over.

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#### Notes

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