
A Voice for Southeast Asian Muslims in the High Colonial Era

The Third Baron Stanley of Alderley

By Helen and Anthony Reid

The years 1873 and 1874 are seen as a turning point in the colonial advance in Southeast Asia, when Britain and the Netherlands aggressively imposed their rule on areas they had decided between themselves to be their destined territories. An 1824 Anglo-Dutch treaty declared that Sumatra was to be a Dutch sphere and the Peninsula (contemporary Malaysia and Singapore) a British one. Another treaty in 1871, following the opening of the Suez Canal, intensified European trade and traffic through the Malacca Straits, and abandoned British objections to the Dutch conquest of Aceh, a sultanate in the northern quarter of Sumatra. In return for this concession, Holland gave Britain its fort at Elmina on the Ashanti coast of West Africa (contemporary Ghana). Within two years, Holland had embarked on a ruinous war to conquer Aceh, the effects of which are still felt today in Aceh's uneasy place within Indonesia. Britain had begun a nasty little war against the Ashanti in Ghana. At the same time, Britain embarked on what has become known as its "intervention" in the small Malay sultanates of the Peninsula, causing the murder of its first British resident placed in Perak and the inevitable punitive war to establish British control in the states bordering the Malacca Straits.

These messy wars were part of the high tide of imposing European colonial rule everywhere where 'disorder' threatened British trade. They were seen by the European powers, which instigated them as a contest between civilization and barbarism, to be a necessary assertion of order in the world. Although today it has become politically correct to denounce these aggressions, at the time very few did so.

But one man did. He attacked the Governments of Britain and Holland repeatedly in the British House of Lords, for invading independent states without cause or legal right, and for exploiting their colonies. Britain's treaty obligations to protect Aceh's independence "had been abrogated without any necessity even on the part of the Dutch, who had no grounds for quarrel with Achin [Aceh], which had done them no injury." In Malaysia, Britain's colonial officials were responsible for "the bloodshed, injustice, and expenditure which have occurred and which may follow later."¹

The author of these and many other attacks on the colonial establishment was the wonderfully eccentric Henry, Third Baron Stanley of Alderley (1827–1903; henceforth 'Stanley'). His travel and diplomatic work in the Ottoman Empire as a young man had affected him so profoundly that he had adopted Islam in Turkey in the 1850s, making him the first Muslim member of Parliament once he inherited the peerage and joined the House of Lords in 1869. Although he never explained the reasons for his conversion, his first major book included an anonymous tract, the themes of which appear to have influenced his whole life. While Christians talked about piety, justice, and tolerance, the Muslims of the Ottoman empire practiced these virtues, even in the face of persistent aggres-

sion by European powers and the Christian minorities of the empire whom they patronized. In particular, they had avoided the modern Western separation of religion from practical policy.

Our religion is neither the rule of the courts of law, nor does it decide on the policy of the state What, then, are to us religion, institutions, and honour—powerful as motives, but distinct in their applications, and sometimes opposed—is for them all contained in that one word, 'Islam.' It is patriotism, legality, tradition, constitution, right.²

After eight years serving as a British diplomat in Turkey, he resigned in 1859, and traveled through Asia to Sri Lanka, Penang, and the Malay States dressed as a Muslim, speaking fluent Arabic and mixing primarily with Muslims. In doing so, he infuriated his parents and created a scandal in the English newspapers. This conduct seemed incomprehensible to his family and colleagues. His father, the Second Baron Stanley of Alderley, wrote angrily to his mother: "His conduct in every respect has been as reprehensible as possible What can he mean by parading himself in our colonies & possessions in the degrading position he occupies?"³

Henry Stanley is remarkable not only as the first English peer to convert to Islam, but for a lifelong quest, regardless of social norms, for a society that would provide equity and respect for all human beings. His contemporaries were often outraged and perplexed by him, though all granted his exceptional skill with languages and readiness to confront English convention. Like most of his family, he was a radical thinker, outspoken, and fluent in several European languages. In addition, he spoke Turkish, some Persian, and was fluent in Arabic, having for some reason asked for an Arabic grammar at the age of twelve.⁴ A council member of the Hakluyt Society,⁵ he provided a number of its translations of Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese travel accounts to the East, which remained standard long after his death.

The most negative portrayals of Stanley's character come from his own family, revealing their dismay at his rejection of all that was to them sacred. As heir he was destined to uphold a distinguished family name: the Stanleys of Alderley trace their origins back to the Norman Conquest and many had held important positions in government. But the rest of his family was also given to defiance of convention. To quote Stanley's nephew Bertrand Russell, it was

. . . a large family of exceptional vigour, healthy, boisterous, argumentative, each with his or her own very definite opinions on religion and politics and each disagreeing with all the others Family gatherings used to alarm me but they enjoyed it.⁶

The ten siblings held strong but opposed religious beliefs, ranging from liberal Anglican to Roman Catholic, Muslim to agnostic. Some members of the family fought for religious education in schools, others for secular education. As Peter Stanley declared

in his biography of the family, "All the sons [of the second Lord] were eccentric, with lively minds, great literary sense, downright rude, quarrelsome, indifferent to public opinion and skilled in picking people's weak points."⁷

In addition, Stanley's mother, Henrietta Stanley, was intelligent, outspoken, and intolerant of anything she saw as superstition or racism. Coming from an Irish family of Jacobite refugees, she had spent her youth in Italy and France and was multilingual. In her later life she was very active in the education of women, secular education in general, and a founder of Girton College, Cambridge.

Stanley himself did not document his personal life—even his family complained about the impersonal nature of his few letters home—but from his later writing it is apparent that he found life in the semi-colonial foreign service increasingly intolerable. His parents were shocked to hear from Lord Malmesbury that he had made the bold decision to resign, followed by newspaper gossip that he was traveling in Asia dressed as a Muslim, under the name "Sheikh Morad."⁸

None of his family, nor, apparently, anyone else in British society, could understand why he had become a convert to Islam. Their angry response to news of his conversion focused on his having turned away from his fellow countrymen to mix with foreigners, which was seen by some of his family as a betrayal of British values and Christian beliefs. His 'defection' particularly shocked his father:

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There is a paragraph in the Morning Post about that wretched fool Henry, saying he was at Penang living entirely with Mahometans & dressed in their dress. He was, it said, living with a certain Sheikh Salim Bangadie, speaking Arabic perfectly & avoiding the society of Europeans. Is he mad or what is he?

He has never, through his life, lived with his equals or sought the society of those he ought to associate with. His love of travel is merely a desire to escape from European society—he has no object, no view, in traveling; he does not care for countries in connection with their former state or historical interest. I believe he never saw a place in Greece or in Turkey except in connection with those brutal & beastly Turks.⁹

In fact, Stanley showed a passionate interest in other ways of ordering society, which infuriated his father. His more forgiving sister Kate wrote that she had received a very long letter from Stanley, stating that he was furious with the newspapers for criticising his "calling on the Governor of Ceylon in Mohammedan dress", and explaining that "he wore a long cloak and turban for convenience sake . . . going to Ceylon was quite accidental, but being there he did not think it worthwhile to stay away from Sir H. Ward because he had no dress coat or black hat."¹⁰ She reminded her mother that, "he has a totally different code of conduct and morality to ours."¹¹

Stanley did not openly defy his parents. As eldest son, he was ultimately unwilling to sacrifice his inheritance, and returned home within a year to an outwardly conventional lifestyle, while remaining

a Muslim. A remarkable example of the strict privacy he enforced about his personal life is a secret affair he maintained over the next few years with Fabia, a Spanish woman he had met in Constantinople. In 1862 he secretly married her under Islamic rites in Algeria, then again in Constantinople, followed by a civil Islamic marriage in Geneva. Later they were married under Anglican rites in the UK, and eventually under Catholic rites to meet Fabia's religious scruples. Since his family had already opposed several earlier marriages he had wished for, the ladies in question not being considered suitable, he did not tell the family of his marriage until his father died. The underlying reason was the conviction that his father would never accept it. This was borne out when he did come clean after succeeding his father, causing "the utter consternation of the whole family. His mother and two of his brothers formed a close alliance against him and were for a long time irreconcilable."¹²

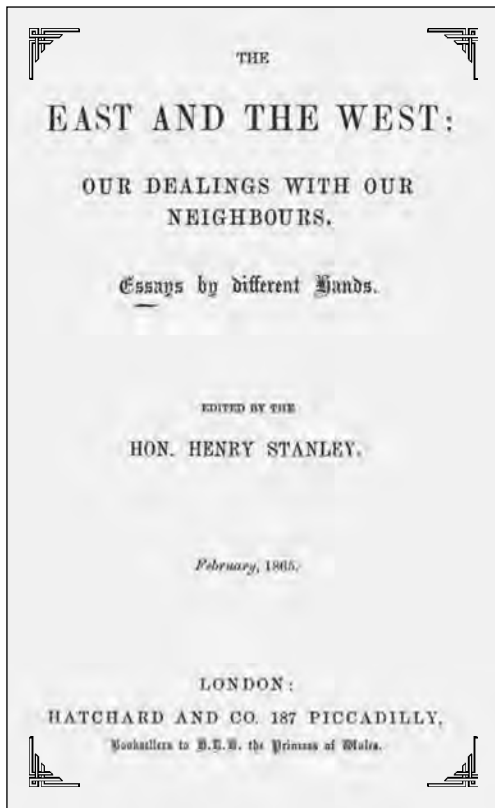
Stanley succeeded his father in the House of Lords, immediately after the latter's death in 1869, achieving his long-held ambition to join Parliament. His life then became increasingly focused on his interventions in the House of Lords. Unfortunately he was partly deaf as a result of his travels, and not an effective speaker, so that the Hansard record of his speeches often noted, "His Lordship was very imperfectly heard." His interventions in Parliament were nevertheless invariably well-researched and pungent, arising from personal experience in the Foreign Office as well as extensive travels in the

East. After entering the House of Lords, he spoke out regularly and at length, attacking what he saw as injustice and inefficiency, particularly in the Colonial Office.

From his visit to Penang in 1859, Stanley would have learned about the British abrogation of their treaty with Aceh. The disastrous Dutch attack on the sultanate in 1873 began his career as official critic. Stanley celebrated the "ancient independence" and sometimes "brilliant" history of the sultanate. He pointed out its strategic position, and observed that its fall would ruin Britain's reputation, upset the Malays, and would in addition be bad for commerce, especially the pepper trade. Typically, he blamed the Colonial Office for the decision to abrogate the treaty, which had not been debated in the House. That decision, he declared, discriminated between European and Asiatic subjects, whereas the Queen's Proclamation on assuming the government of India had stated that, "all shall alike enjoy the equal and impartial protection of the law."¹³

Another major issue that Stanley raised several times in Parliament related to what, he claimed, was the maladministration of the Colonial Office in the Straits Settlements. He attacked the incompetence and corruption of residents and spoke against the looming annexation of the Malay Peninsula, believing that this would ultimately benefit a few merchants and traders, rather than the Malay people as a whole.

Stanley's disapproval of British colonial administration is apparent in a book of essays he edited in 1865, *The East and the West*. Often, no author is given for these essays; most seem to be his



A full view version of *The East and the West: Our Dealings with Our Neighbours* can be found on the Google Book Search site: http://books.google.com/books?vid=0Kb5uiUqkDqQNr&id=H8BAAAQAQAJ&printsec=titlepage&dq=The+East+and+the+West&as_brr=1.

the fourth chapter, 'Islam as a political system', opens with lines from *Missionary Researches* by Smith and Dwight:

*Never in the course of their history have Mahometans been brought into contact with any form of Christianity that was not too degenerate in its rites, its doctrines, and its effects, to be worthy of their esteem.*¹⁴

European Christians, too, had given a very bad impression of their religion by their aggression, deceit, and greed, and had done much to destroy the image of Christianity among the Muslims. The author claimed that Islamic legal systems were more efficient and equitable, enforcing law and order in the community according to Islamic and international law.

Stanley's concerns were essentially related to issues of social justice, religious values, and human rights. He spoke out against slavery and the unjust treatment of non-British subjects in general. He was not rigidly Muslim in his beliefs, and in his later years was particularly supportive of the established church in his lands, including Anglesey in Northern Wales, and gave generously but anonymously to poor clergy for the maintenance of their parishes. One stipulation he made regarding the restoration of the Llanbadrig Church, for example, was that the new church should include Islamic elements such as blue tiles and mosaics, and geometric patterns of blue, red, and white in the stained glass windows.¹⁵

Stanley's religious position is well demonstrated by his decision to translate Abbé Felicité de Lamennais' famous *Essai sur l'indifférence en matière de religion* (1817). This treatise was an attack on the enlightenment tradition of toleration and liberal individualism, which Lamennais believed was leading Europe towards spiritual

own work. They describe injustices in British colonies such as India, Australia, New Zealand, and the Malay States, as well as in China. Moreover, the authors claimed the system of foreign jurisdiction, or 'extra-territoriality,' followed by European colonial regimes was fundamentally unjust, allowing Europeans to flaunt the laws and culture of a country in which they were residing, and often to go unpunished for criminal activities.

The unnamed author (presumably Stanley) of

death. Nevertheless, the book was a watershed for modernity in religion by its firm rejection of the royalist connection of French Catholicism in favour of a purely religious authority. It thus seemed to build a bridge between religious commitment and democracy, the latter becoming the keynote of Lamennais' later years. It was Stanley's fellow-Muslim and friend, the prominent Turkish scholar and westerniser Ahmed Vefyk Pasha, who gave him a copy of the book in 1862 and suggested he translate it. Stanley also discussed the matter with the Chief Rabbi of Constantinople before undertaking the translation the same year. It was not published until 1895, when Stanley saw the Church of England as needing the same sort of reformist commitment, in the face of what he called the "utilitarian morality" of the Rationalists.¹⁶

As stated in his obituary, Stanley was an extraordinary person in many ways: ". . . together with marked eccentricities and peculiarities, he combined a warm heart, and no small measure of native shrewdness . . ." He was remarkable in his quest for a more equitable social system, his belief that Islam provided such a system, and his defiant pursuit of his religious beliefs in the face of the disapproval of virtually all his family and class. ■

NOTES

1. House of Lords, *Parliamentary Debates* (3rd Series, July 28, 1873, col. 1078; February 28), 1876, col. 1001.
2. 'Islam as a Political System' [anon., 1833], 140–1, in *The East and the West: Our Dealings with our Neighbours*. Essays by Different Hands, ed. Henry Stanley (London: Hatchard, 1865).
3. Edward Stanley, 2nd Lord Stanley to Lady Stanley, 4/9/59 in Nancy Mitford, ed. *The Stanleys of Alderley—Their Letters Between the Years 1851–1865* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1939), 264–5.
4. *Ibid.*, xiii.
5. The Hakluyt Society was founded in the UK in 1846 for printing rare and unpublished accounts of voyages and travels. Stanley translated five volumes for it, including de Morga, Correia, and Magellan.
6. Bertrand and Patricia Russell, *The Amberley Papers: The Letters and Diaries of Lord and Lady Amberley* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1937), 13.
7. Stanley, Peter, *The House of Stanley from the 12th Century* (London: Pentland Press Ltd, 1998), 400.
8. Anthony Reid, *The Contest for North Sumatra: Atjeh, the Netherlands and Britain 1858–1898* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1969), 75.
9. Lord Stanley to Lady Stanley, 4/9/59, *The Stanleys of Alderley*. The point about historical interest is particularly unfair against a man exceptionally erudite historically, but suggests the narrow Greco-Roman-British definition of that concept comes from his father.
10. Kate Stanley to Lyulph Stanley, 1/1/59, *The Amberley Papers*.
11. *Ibid.*, 27/8/69.
12. *The Amberley Papers*, 19. After her death it became known that Fabia had already been married when she contracted all these marriages to Stanley, making them invalid.
13. House of Lords, *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd series, July 28, 1873, col. 1080.
14. *The East and the West*, 334.
15. See <http://www.cemaes-bay.co.uk/historical/lilanbadrig.htm>.
16. Lamennais, Abbé F. de, (1817), *Essay on Indifference in Matters of Religion*, translated by Lord Stanley of Alderley (London: John Macqueen, 1895). The reference is to the Translator's Preface, x.

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