Goethe and Islam

Few in our modern world are those, who never heard of Germany's greatest man of letters, Johan Wolfgang von Goethe, nor his magnum opus, Faust, an insurmountable peak of world literature. Fewer, however, are those, who ever heard that the 23 year old Goethe wrote a poem in praise of the Prophet of Islam, nor that the 70 year old Goethe celebrated the night in which the Quran was revealed. Between the two landmarks in Goethe's career, there lie a lifetime interest and systematic study of the language of the Quran and the spiritual life of Islam. The fruit of such dedication was the less known and read of Goethe's works, the West-Oestlicher Diwan, a marvelous collection of poems that reveals admiration to the religion of Islam. Peter-Anton von Arnim, a German Publisher, tells us that in contrast to the Lieder des Mirza Schaffy, a 19th century work of far less quality in the traditional Orientalist fashion, which reached 143 editions in the life of its author, copies of the very first edition of Goethe's Diwan remained stocked till the beginning of the 20th century. The tabooization of Islam in the German literature on Goethe, as described by von Arnim, has not however changed after the publication of Katharina Mommsen's valuable studies on Goethe and the Orient. A book after another continues to draw thick curtains on every intellectual affinity between the Weimar poet and the world of Islam. This article though partly tries to bring some light to the Goethe-Islam connection, does not set for itself the naïve objective of reclaiming Goethe's ideas and works for the world of Islam. Rather, it places the man exactly where he situated himself: Between Orient and Occident.

To move oneself is to the best.

With a mastery of expertise on the Orient and a wide knowledge of Arabic and Persian literatures, Goethe felt himself obliged to dismiss the condescending attitude of Western scholars to Arab poets, as though the latter were dumb students. He was in this sense a continuation of a marginal, yet indissimissible, trend in European writings that started in 1705 with the work of the Dutch Orientalist, Hadrian Reland, ?The Mohammedan Religion? to take a fair attitude towards Islam. Such an attitude made itself felt in another work of Conte Boulainvillier that in 1730 hailed the life and character of the Prophet of Islam. Moreover, Goethe belonged to a very narrow circle of enlightened thinkers of his own time, like Leibnitz, Lessing, and Herder, who transcended the barriers of historical hatred and attempted to give their compatriots a tolerant, incisive, and very understanding view of Islam. Goethe's early study of the Quran, however, was not an outward expression of tolerance that concealed mere scientific indifference to Islam and its Prophet. Quite the contrary, it expressed young Goethe's anguish over the discrepancy between the dry rituals of Protestantism and his innate feelings of religiosity. The Quranic principles of Oneness of God, Prophethood, and charity, which matched his own beliefs, created in him feelings of affinity with Islam. No wonder, Goethe felt a natural liking and strong admiration to the person of the Prophet. His formulation and expression of these feelings were stronger and more challenging than whatever was said about Islam and its Prophet.

Jesus felt pure and in calmness
Thought of the One God;
Whoever makes himself a god
Offends His holy will.
And thus shines what is right,
What Mahomet also attained;
Only by the term of the One

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Had he the whole world overcome.
Goethe’s Qur’anic studies in 1771 and 1772 were a source of inspiration for a work of drama on the Prophet of Islam, a work that was never completed, but whose main ideas could be extracted from some remaining fragments. The opening scene of ‘Mahomet’s Tragedy’ is a heavenly meditation of the Prophet, a meditation Goethe carved on the form of Abraham’s meditation related in the Quran. The words of meditation disclose not only Goethe’s deep understanding of Islam’s central article of faith, the Oneness of God, but also unveils his intense feeling of the religious fervor underlying the act of faith. Overwhelmed by faith, Mahomet cannot put in words his feelings and emotions. He searches in his surroundings for the beloved God, to which such intense emotions are directed, and prays not to be left behind with the misguided. It is neither the sun nor the moon, not even the stars, but it is the creator of all that loves of His creations.
Raise yourself O’ heart full of love to your Creator
Be my Lord, be my God, Thou who loves all your creatures
Thou who created me and created the sun and the moon
The stars and the earth and heavens.
From among the fragments, there is also Mahomet’s Song, a poem glorifying the Prophet of Islam and intended to seal the whole work. It is a dialogue, taking place shortly before the Prophet’s death in the drama, between his daughter Fatima and her husband Ali, the Prophet’s cousin. Goethe’s depiction of the Prophet of Islam in this dialogue attained a level of emotional intensity and strength of imagination unreached by any German poet describing the Prophet. Mahomet is the strong stream sparkling like a star, nourished by kindly spirits from above the clouds, falling with strength upon marble rocks, then towering back towards heaven. Rivers from the plain and streamlets from the mountain cry on him with joy, not to leave his brethren to be consumed by the thirsty sand and to carry them to the everlasting ocean who waits for all.
More than half a century lapsed between Goethe’s unfinished Mahomet’s Tragoedia and his last masterpiece the West-Oestlicher Diwan. However, as Katharina Mommsen informs us, his profound involvement with the Arab world during working on Mahomet’s Tragoedia kept its memories alive in his mind for such a long time. Not only were the slightest details reproduced in Goethe’s autobiography, but the full memories swelled to a complete representation or a Diwan (written record), of the various aspects of the Orient Goethe experienced throughout his intellectual career. In one of the parts of the Diwan titled the ‘?Book of wisdom’, Goethe not only reveals to us the authorial intentions and structure of his work, but most importantly hands us the optimal key to access the text. He confesses that he scattered talismans all over the text in order to create a balanced structure, and therefore advises the reader to prick the text with ‘faith-laden needles’ in order to find the pleasure of good words everywhere. Let me randomly try my faith-laden needle on the text.
The first prick: when one opens the first book of the Diwan called the ‘Book of singers’, Goethe strikes us with its first part’s subtitle, Hegire (meaning immigration). It announces to the reader the meaning of the whole work for Goethe himself, as attested by one of his letters; ‘the new studies I am working on now is a sort of Hegire, an escape from the present age to centuries of the remote past.? In order to lead the human kind to the depths of its origin, Goethe shall flee to the East, where purity and right can still be found, and where the teachings of heavens are still received in the language of earth.
The second prick: as a reply to those who feel angry that ‘God liked it to grant Mahomet protection and happiness’?, Goethe tries to explain, in his notes on the Diwan, the difference between the Prophet and the Poet. Although both are possessed and enlightened by God, each uses the divine gift in his own way. Whilst the poet exhausts the divine gift to win pleasure, honor, or comfortable life, the prophet uses his divine gift to spread his teachings and gather the people around them.
The third prick: the Quran, whose content is to be briefly found in the verses at the beginning of its second chapter, possesses an amazing structure and style. The structure, which repeats itself again and again in every chapter, is based on a contrast between opposites: paradise and hell; believers and deniers; permission and prohibition; stories of Jews and Christians, and so on. To serve the purpose of its content, the Quran disposes of a style that could be described as precise, elevated, amazing, and in several places reaching the maximum of highness.
The fourth prick: it is a stroke of madness that a person praises his own opinion, and quite realistic to submit to the divine will. And since submission to the divine will is named Islam, then ‘in Islam we all live and die’?. Following the same line, God is to be in the Orient and the Occident, and all lands must rest in His Hands. Based on this culture-transcending and universal understanding of Islam, whoever possesses knowledge of himself and others must recognize that Orient and Occident are not to be separated anymore.
Goethe's sensibility finds expression in his decision to publish the Diwan at first without an introduction so as not lose the reader his first good impressions. Later on, he decided to write an afterword to the Books of the Diwan, in the hope of enabling his readers to grow an unmediated understanding of the East. Similarly, Goethe's attitude to the Orient, Islam, and the Prophet, which was free of any colonial possessiveness and condescendence, could not go unnoticed by the famous Muslim poet and philosopher, Muhammad Iqbal. In spite of suffering on the hands of European colonial rule of the Indian subcontinent, Iqbal ignored totally Goethe's European origin. The kind invitation for dialogue and understanding in Goethe's Diwan did not fall on deaf ears, but Iqbal lead the most fruitful and deep dialogue across the ages between the two cultures.

I therefore feel obliged to conclude this article by sending the finest of greetings to the greatest of Germany's men of letters, in the words of Muhammad Iqbal. ?Our souls discover itself when we come into contact with a great mind. It is not until I had realized the infinitude of Goethe's imagination that I discovered the narrow breadth of my own.?  

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