

Goethe and Islam

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Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749 – 1832) is widely known, respected and recognized as one of the greatest writers and thinkers of Europe. He was always inclined to study and understand Orient and tried to get as much information as possible about the east, although his father wanted him to study law. He admired the first travelers to Arabia (Michaelis, Niebuhr) and read everything they published about their trips. He was so much fascinated by the East. Goethe was witnessing a historical crisis in Europe and wanted to take a flight to the orient. He denounced the cold west and lack of spirit in it. He writes:

*Nord und West und Süd zersplittern,
Throne bersten, Reiche zittern,
Flüchte du, in reinen Osten
Patriarchen Luft zu kosten,
Unter Lieben, Trinken, Singen
Soll dich Chisers Quell verjüngen(WA I 41.1 S 88
Escapes you, in pure East
Taste the Patriarch air,
Under loved ones, drinking, singing
Should Chisers source you rejuvenate
Gottes ist der Orient
Gottes ist der Okzident!
Nord und südliches Gelände
Ruht im Frieden seiner Hände.
(West-östlicher Divan, MoganniNameh: Buch des Sängers, Talismane)
God's is the orient
God's is the occident
Northeren and southern lands
Lie in the peace of His hands*

Goethe and Schiller-Archive in Weimar possesses handwritten manuscripts of Goethe's first intensive work the Qur'an-studies of 1771/1772 and the later ones, thus establishing Goethe's interest in Islam to an early date, when a German translation of the Qur'an from the original text into German was printed in his native city, prepared by the Frankfurt Professor Megerlin.

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Even before this book appeared in the autumn book-fair, Goethe got possession of the proof-sheets, possibly because the publisher sent them to him for a review. He was a contributor to the *Frankfurter Gelehrten Anzeigen*, a publication devoted solely to reviews. He was obviously deeply disappointed in Megerlin's work, as he in no way showed himself modern, or even impartial and unbiased. To him, the Holy Book of Islam appeared to be a "book of lies" and Muhammad (SAAS) as a false prophet and anti-Christ.

Goethe had already at the age of 23 written a wonderful hymn in praise of Prophet Muhammad (SAAS). He attempted at learning to speak and write Arabic, as there are a number of papers which contain excerpts in his own handwriting from Megerlin's translation and from Maracci's Latin Koran¹. There he wrote down a considerable number of verses from ten different Surahs. His choice of verses is very revealing. For the first time we can recognize some of those aspects of the Islamic religious doctrine which Goethe considered relevant for him.

These verses of the Qur'an which teach man how he should see nature in all its phenomena as signs of divine laws. The multiplicity of the phenomena indicates the One God. The relation towards nature as the Qur'an presents it connected with the teaching of the kindness and oneness of God - as Goethe writes it down from the *Aayah* of Surah No. al-Baqarah, a concept which certainly did not find its way into Goethe's notes accidentally, for it was precisely the emphatic pronouncement of this doctrine which the poet considered one of the main achievements of the Prophet (SAAS) and it became the main pillar on which Goethe's sympathy and affinity towards Islam was based. Goethe said we should realize "God's greatness in the small" "Gottes Grosse im Kleinen" and refers to the *aayah* of Surah al-Baqarah, verse 26, and Surah al-Hajj verse 73, where the metaphor of the fly is given.

About the unity of Allah Goethe says:

The belief in the one God has always the effect to elevate the spirit because it indicates for man the unity within his own self. (Noten und Abhandlungen zum West-stlichen Divan, chapter Mahmud von Gasna, WA I, 7, 42)

Goethe considered it not to be a mere accident but rather as meaningful incidents, in fact as part of his decree and signs of Allah, when in Autumn 1813 a Napoleonic soldier coming back from Spain, gave him an old manuscript with the last chapter of the Qur'an, An-Nās (114)." Goethe learned Arabic with the professors of Oriental Studies - Paulus, Lorsbach and Kosegarten in Jena and had an urge to understand the Qur'an. He studied

Arabic handbooks, grammars, travel-books, poetry, anthologies, books on the sirah of the Prophet Muhammad (SAAS), different translations of the Qur'an of his time and had a widespread exchange with oriental scholars about these matters. He copied short Arabic *Du'as* by himself and wrote: "In no other language spirit, word and letter are embodied in such a primal way." (Letter to Schlosser on 23.1.1815, WA IV, 25, 165).

In January 1814 he visited a prayer of Bashkir Muslims from the Russian army of Zar Alexander in the protestant gymnasium of Weimar and this he acknowledged on 5.1.1814 (WA IV, 24, 91) in a letter to Trebra he wrote:

Speaking of prophecies, I have to tell you that there are things happening these days, which they would not have allowed a prophet to say. Who would have been allowed some years ago to say that there would be held a Mahommedan divine service and the Suras of Koran would be murmured in the auditorium of our protestant gymnasium and yet it happened and we attended the Bashkir service, saw their Mulla and welcomed their Prince in Theatre. Out of special favour I was presented with a bow and arrows which for eternal memory I will hang above my chimney as soon as God has decreed a lucky return for them.

In a letter to his son August from the 17.1.1814 (WA IV, 24, 110) he adds: "Several religious ladies of us have asked for the translation of the Koran from the library." Goethe's positive attitude towards Islam goes far beyond anyone in Germany before. Goethe read the German translation of The Quran loud in front of members of the Duke's family in Weimar and their guests. Being witnesses Schiller and his wife reported about the reading (Schiller's letter to Knebel, 22.2.1815). Goethe always felt the shortcomings of all the translations (Latin, English, German and French) and was constantly looking for new translations.

He published on 24.2.1816: "The poet [Goethe]... does not refuse the suspicion that he himself is a Muslim." (WA I, 41, 86)

In another poem of the *Divan*, Goethe says:

Stupid that everyone in his case
Is praising his particular opinion!
If Islam means submission to God,
We all live and die in Islam.
*Narrisch, da_ jeder in seinemFalle
Seine besondereMeinungpreist!*

*Wenn Islam Gottergebenheitsst,
In Islam leben und sterbenwiralle. (WA I, 6, 128)*

Goethe's interest in the Qur'an inspired him and he was planning to write whole tragedy entitled *Mohomet Gesang*. Only a few passages were jotted down, that represent the most significant homage a German poet ever paid to the Prophet of Islam. It was the personality of the Prophet that mainly interested Goethe in Islam ever since he had planned a Mahomet tragedy in his youth. The meaning of the Prophet is put into the metaphor of the stream, starting from the smallest beginning and growing to be an immense spiritual power, expanding, unfolding, and gloriously ending in the ocean, the symbol for divinity. He especially describes the religious genius in carrying the other people with him like the stream does with small brooks and rivers.

The second thing that interested him was Tawhid or doctrine of the unity, the oneness of God. He expressly points to this doctrine in the hymn at the beginning of the drama. Alone, under the starry skies, Mahomet sings this hymn which begins with the words: "The fervency of this soul I cannot divide among you."

Goethe's interest was aroused in the type and fate of a founder of religion who spread his message not only by the word, as did Jesus Christ, but also by secular means by the sword. The preserved fragments contain famous praise of the Prophet (SAAS) 'The Song of Mahomet, originally meant as a dialogue sung by Ali and Fatima that expressed Goethe's interest in Muhammad (SAAS) as a person. Here Goethe portrays the nature of the Prophet of a spiritual leader of mankind, in the symbol of a stream. He chose this symbol to illustrate how the spiritual power, from the smallest beginnings, grows into a gigantic force, through unfolding and expanding, and comes to its glorious fulfillment by flowing into the ocean, which here is made the symbol of divinity.

This simile is mainly based on the concept that the religious genius carries other people as his brothers, bears them along with him, like the large river, the smaller brooks and streams, on its way to the sea. It is this very motif that is emphatically illustrated. The famous verses where it is said of the river are worth mentioning:

And now; silver-resplendent,
it enters the plain ...
And the rivers of the plain
and the streams from the mountains
shout to him in exultation-Brother!

Brother, take your brothers with you,
with you to your ancient father,
to that everlasting ocean,
who with outstretched arms
awaits us ...
Later it reads, slightly transformed:
Take your brothers from the plain.
Take your brothers from the mountains
with you, to your father!
And Goethe's Mahomet hymn ends
And he carries thus his brothers
all tumultuous with rapture
to their waiting Maker's heart.

Once more in the fragments unity of God is made the central theme, characteristically tied up with the subject of the veneration of nature. Mahomet says here, that God appears to him "at every quiet spring, under each blossoming tree with the warmth of his love". At the same time the Prophet combats the false belief, so prevalent among his people, according to which many gods are venerated "like minor lords". "God has no partners". "If he had any", Mahomet says, "If he had any, would he be God"?

Concerning Muhammad's (SAAS) personality, Goethe was fascinated even by such traits as seemed questionable. On this point we find a detailed account in a passage of "Dichtung und Wahrheit", where he comments on the Mahomet work of his early years. To judge by this passage, the projected drama was supposed to show Muhammad as a general, who often had to employ terrible means to advance his good ends – like any general or conqueror. Thus, in the course of the action, it happens – and I quote – that "the secular world grows and expands, the divine retreats and is tarnished". The end of the tragedy, however, was to let the Prophet appear in full glory. Goethe writes: he was "to depart from this world high souled, worthy of admiration, purifying his doctrine and establishing his empire".

In a letter on 10th June 1772 Goethe confessed to Herder about his passionate search for ways to achieve what he called "mastery" and genuine "virtuosity". It was the Greek poet Pindar who was to become his guide here, and' this is chiefly what his letter deals with. But at the end of this acknowledgement of Pindar he writes: Ichmögtebeten, wie Moses im Koran: Herr machemir Raum in meinerengen Brust. "I would like to pray like Moses in the Koran: Lord, make room in my narrow breast". Here Goethe quotes the 20th Surah of The Quran. The essential meaning of this becomes clearer, when one reads the continuation of this Surah. It says here: "O Lord, make

room in my narrow breast. Make also my task easy. Loosen the ties of my tongue". This proves to us that the verse from The Quran in the letter to Herder was also expressing the idea of longing for "mastery", for lightening of his "task", for, the loosening of his tongue, that is, for the final release of his creative powers in the right way. Goethe's simultaneous reference to The Quran and Pindar in this connection throws a sudden light upon the poet's evaluation of the former even at that time.

Goethe has great faith in God and firm belief in the decree of God. As a participant in the war of 1792 against France he said that this belief in the decree of God has its purest expression in Islam; "The religion of Mohammed (SAW) gives the best proof of this." (WA I, 33, 123). He also believes in His wonderful and inconceivable guidance and thus, "submits to absolute will of God. He has the conviction, that no one may avoid his once assigned destiny." (WA I, 7, 151ff)

This is substantiated by his reaction to the accident of the coach at the time when he started his third journey to Marianne von Willemer (July 1816), who he intended to marry after Christiane had died about which he felt extremely unhappy. Goethe took this as a clear warning not to pursue his wish anymore and completely refrained from his original intention. After that Goethe wrote:

And thus we have to remain inside Islam, (that means: in complete submission to the will of God) ... (WA IV, 27, 123).

When in 1831, cholera appeared and killed many people he consoled a friend:

Here no one can counsel the other; each one has to decide on his own. We all live in Islam, whatever form we choose.

In December 1820 Goethe wrote thanks for the gift of a book of aphorisms of his friend Willemer and says:

It fits ... with every religious-reasonable view and is an Islam to which we all have to confess sooner or later. (WA IV, 34, 50)

Goethe was very impressed about the fact that Allah speaks to mankind by prophets and thus he confirmed the prophet Muhammad (SAAS). In 1819 Goethe writes (referring to Sura "Ibrahim", *Aayah* 4) "It is true, what God says in The Quran: We did not send a prophet to a people but in their language." (Letter to A.O. Blumenthal, (28.5.1819, WA IV, 31, 160) referring to the same *Aayah* Goethe repeats in a letter to Carlyle: The Koran says: God has given each people a prophet in its own language. (20.7.1827, WA IV, 42, 270)

Goethe is fascinated by Saadi's metaphor of the "fly in love" flying into the light where it dies as the image for the Sufi. In this regard here especially the poem of the *Divan* about the butterfly flying into the light "Blissful yearning / Selige Sehnsucht" whose earlier titles were "Sacrifice of the self/Selbstopfer" and "Perfection / Vollendung". In the chapter about Rumi, Goethe acknowledges the invocation of Allah and the blessing of it:

Already the so-called mahometan rosary [prayer-beeds] by which the name Allah is glorified with ninety-nine qualities is such a praise litany. Affirming and negating qualities indicate the inconceivable Being [Wesen]; the worshipper is amazed, submits and calms down. (WA I, 7, 59)

Goethe affirmed the rejection of the unbelievers' challenge to the Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) to show them miracles where he says:

*Wunderkann nichttunsagt der Prophet
Das groeste Wunder ist das ich bin (WA I, 6, 476)*
Wonders I cannot do said the Prophet
The greatest miracle is that I am.

While affirming the prophethood of Mohammad (SAAS), Goethe refuses the Christian view of Jesus and confirms the unity of Allah in a poem of his *Divan*:

Jesus felt pure and calmly thought
Only the One God;
Who made himself to be a god
Offends his holy will
And thus the right (ness) has to shine
What Mahomet also achieved;
Only by the term of the One
He mastered the whole world
*Jesus fuehlte rein und dachte
Nur den Einen Gott im Stillen;
Wer ihn selbst zum Gott machte
Traenkt es einen heil'gen Willen.
Und so muss das Rechte scheinen
Was auch Mahomet gelungen;
Nur durch den Begriff des Einen
Hat er alle Welt bezwungen. (WA I, 6, 288 ff)*
*Und nun kommst du, hast ein Zeichen
Drangehdngt, das unter allen...*

*Mir amschlechtesten will gefallen
Diese ganz moderne Narrheit
Magst du mir nach Schiras bringen!
Sollich wohl, in seiner Starrheit,
Hvlzchen quer auf Hvlzchensingen?
Und sogarnoch starker:
"Mir willst du zum Gott machen
Solche in Jammerbild am Holze!*

Besides Jesus and Muhammad (SAAS) in the following verses Goethe also names Abraham, Moses and David as the representatives of the Oneness of God. It is a known fact that Goethe felt a strong dislike for the symbol of the cross. He wrote:

And now you come with a sign...
Which among all others I mostly dislike?
All this modern nonsense
You are going to bring me to Schiras!
Should I, in all its stiffness,
Sing of two crossed wooden pieces?

Also in Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre Goethe quite frankly wrote that it is a "cursed insolence ... to play with secrets that are hidden in the divine depth of suffering" One should rather "cover it with a veil".

Finally, in the poem of the Seven Sleepers of his Divan Goethe calls Jesus a prophet: "Ephesus for many years/ Honors the teaching of the Prophet Jesus (AS) (WA I, 6, 269).

In 1816, he wrote and published the following sentence referring to himself:
The poet does not disapprove suspicions that he is a Muslim.

If this was the only reference that Goethe made to Islam, it could be considered an anecdote, a character color in his palette of oriental interests. But his work is full of serious and profound passages about Islam, The Quran, the Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) and the Muslims. For example; If Islam means submission to God, we all live and die in Islam.

At the age of 70 Goethe writes (Notes and Essays to the Divan, WA I, 17, 153) that he intends "to celebrate respectfully that night when the Prophet was given the Koran completely from above" He also wrote: "No one may wonder about the great efficiency of the Book. That is why it has been

declared as uncreated by real admirers" and added to it: "This book will eternally remain highly efficacious/effective" (WA I, 7, 35/36)

At the age of 70 years, the poet declared quite publicly that he was considering "devoutly celebrating that holy night in which the Koran in its entirety was revealed to the Prophet from on high.

Conclusion

After examining the material evidence above and recognizing its corroborative proofs in the writing of his close friends, Thomas Carlyle and Schiller it is possible to come to a clear conclusion without ambiguity or doubt. Everything contained in his scientific writings, especially *Zur Morphologie* stands as a lifetime's propagation of the view that the universe is the creation of a Divine Being and that the Creator has no connected aspect to His creation. While he lived his life in a non-Muslim country, he wholeheartedly adopted and declared commitment to the double *Shahada* and confirmed that there can be no god but Allah, the One, and that His messenger, and seal of the messengers was Muhammad, may Allah bless him and give him peace. Uninstructed in *Salat*, *Zakat*, *Sawm* and *Hajj*, he nevertheless proudly and with deep emotion took the rare opportunity to attend the *Juma'a*. In all this it is clear that he saw Islam as his own Deen (Religion).

From the several renowned and confirmed Hadith in *Muslim*, *Bukhari* and the *Sunnan* collections it is known that confirmation of Allah and His messenger was itself the indisputable door of Islam, and the key to Paradise.

Thus it can be clearly accepted that Europe's greatest poet, and the glory of the German language and intellectual life is also the first of the Muslims in modern Europe, re-awakening in the hearts of people desire for knowledge of God and His messenger, a knowledge that had lain dormant since darkness had descended on Islamic Spain.

In the light of his dazzling confirmation of the Prophet (SAW), he should be known among the Muslims as Muhammad Johann Wolfgang *West-Oestlicher Divan* and of course many poems of the *Divan* are clearly inspired by and relate to different verse of The Quran (see Mommsen, p. 269-274.

*Herrlich ist der Orient
Übers Mittelmeer gedrungen;
Nur wer Hafis liebt und kennt
Weiß, was Calderon gesungen.²*

Goethe had read J. v. Hammer's translation of Hafis "Diwan" and came to write a Divan" in reply where Goethe says:

"Whether the Koran is of eternity?"

I don't question that!
That it is the book of books
I believe out of the Muslim's duty.
*"Ob der Koran von Ewigkeitsei?
Darnachfrag' ich nicht ! ...
Das er das Buch der Buecher sei
Glaub' ich aus Mosleminen-Pflicht"* (WA I, 6, 203)

Goethe bought original Arabic manuscripts of Rumi, Dschami, Hafiz, Saadi, Attar, The Quran-Tafsir, Du'as, an Arabic-Turkish dictionary, texts on matters like the freeing of slaves, buying and selling, interest, usury and Arabian scripts from Sultan Selim.

References and Notes

¹Latin translation of The Quran was published in the year 1698 by Father Ludovico and Maracci and it was a first step towards better understanding of The Quran. Thus whole text of the Quran was now available to Europeans in a Latin translation. (The first German translation of this Latin Quran text was published as early as 1703, and opened up the world of Islam to any interested German layman.) In 1705 Hadrian Reland's "De Religionen Mohamedica" appeared and attempted the first honest appraisal of Islam. In 1734 George Sale published an English translation of the Koran, which soon thereafter was translated into German.

²Goethe, *JWV West östlicher Divan*, S 60.