

Goethe and his Encounter with Voltaire in Moments of Islamic and Orientalist Discourse

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Abstract

Goethe's views on the Orient and Islam constitute a very interesting phenomenon in the context of the Western society of 18th and 19th centuries. While Goethe also was part of the anticlericalism established with the Enlightenment, other than Voltaire, rather than exerting any criticism to religion in itself, he tries to track and recognize the common roots and values of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Especially in his poetical work *West-östlicher Divan* (West-eastern Divan), and through his concept of *Weltliteratur*, he shows a completely different imagology of the Orient compared to the Western society of his time.

Keywords: Enlightenment, Anticlericalism, Orient, Islam, Divan, *Weltliteratur*

1. Introduction: Goethe and his "Encounter" with Voltaire

The "encounter" of Goethe with Voltaire occurred in a literary reality, as the former translated into German the latter's abovementioned dramatic work *Le fanatisme ou Mahomet le prophète*. Goethe's surprisingly positive opinion on Islam was a well known reality to many even in his time, including the duke Carl August, who commissioned him to translate Voltaire's work. The duke was conscious that Goethe – whom he jovially called "Meccanus" due to the poet's sympathy for Islam and the Orient – had to work "against his own nature" for the translation of *Le fanatisme*. On the other hand, Goethe presided at the time the Court Theater (Hoftheater), and he could not reject the order *inter alia* because of the financial dependence of this theater to the Court. Without the significant financial support of Carl August, even the Weimarer Theater wouldn't be able to survive. (Cf. Mommsen, p. 85)

Although Goethe was known as an admirer of Voltaire and saw in him an "*allgemeine Quelle des Lichts*" (the general source of light), there was something he disliked in the French writer and thinker, as he himself states in a conversation with Eckermann: "*Eigentlich [...]ist alles gut, was ein so großes Talent wie Voltaire schreibt, wiewohl ich nicht alle seine Frechheiten gelten lassen möchte.*" (Eckermann, p. 49)¹ Considering this opinion and comparing it with Goethe's translation of *Le fanatisme*, it seems that Goethe has intended to avoid as much as possible in his translation what in his eyes could have been simply "*Frechheiten*" of the source text regarding the description of Muhammad and his religion.

2. Goethe's Translation of *Le Fanatisme*

Thus, he tries, for example, to soften the rough features of the character of Mahomet described by Voltaire (cit. in Mommsen, p. 89) in the following verses:

*Oui, je connais ton peuple il a besoin d'erreur;
Ou véritable ou faux, mon culte est nécessaire.*²

In his text, Goethe produces a translation implying a much softer character addressing positively and in good will the necessities of people (ibid.):

¹ Actually, [...] it's all good what such great a talent as Voltaire writes, though I do not want to accept all of his insolence. (All translations belong to the author)

² Yes, I know your people, they need the error; / No matter if true or false, my cult is necessary. (All translations belong to the author)

*Wer sie und ihr Bedürfnis kennt
Und dies befriedigt, der betrügt sie nicht.
Sie sehnen sich nach neuem Gottesdienst:
Der meine wird ihr Herz erheben. Das
Bedürfen sie.*

The verse of the source text containing the order of Mahomet to Sopir, « *Il faut m'aider à tromper l'univers* », ³ has been simply erased in the target text, as many other verses darkening the figure of the Prophet have been also erased or intentionally altered. (ibid.)

Another example of a rough and threatening character constitute the following verses of the source text (ibid.):

*Il faut rendre la Mecque, abandonner ton temple,
De la crédulité donner à tous l'exemple,
Annoncer l'Alcoran aux peuples effrayés,
Me servir en prophète, et tomber à mes pieds :
Je te rendrai ton fils, et je serai ton gendre.*⁴

While in the target text, Goethe's Mahomet rather than a threatening one, is ready to offer and almost supplicate (ibid.):

*Nein! Komm vielmehr und tritt auf meine Seite
Durch dein Gewicht befestige das Reich.
Verlasse deinen Tempel, übergib
Mir Mekka, sei gerührt von meinem Glauben,
Den Koran kündige den Völkern an,
Dien' als Prophet, als treuer Eifrer mir;
Frei ist dein Sohn, ich bin dein Eidam.*

Voltaire's Mahomet is cruel and ruthless because of his own will (ibid.):

*Fier citoyen, vieillard inexorable,
Je serai plus que toi cruel, impitoyable.*⁵

In Goethe's translation, Mahomet's cruelty is imposed by the adversary (ibid.):

*Geh, stolzer Bürger, eigensinn'ger Greis!
Du forderst selbst zur Grausamkeit mich auf,
Zur unbezwungenen Härte.*

In spite of the natural limits imposed to the translator by the source text, the target text produced by Goethe is expressive enough to illustrate often an important difference between Goethe and Voltaire: while the latter describes the Prophet as an inherently cruel and deceiving character, Goethe seems to intentionally soften all this, in order to bring to the German public a character of an impostor deceiving just for the "good" of his people, with a cruelty imposed mostly by the external circumstances.

3. *Le Fanatisme* as an Anticlerical Work

Although expressing in several occasions his disapproval for the content of this work of Voltaire, Goethe justifies somehow the author by pointing out to that feature of the tragedy that while depicting Muhammad and Islam, in fact it intended to attack the Catholic Church, as well as fanaticism of religions in general, with the aim of ardently supporting the idea of a *natural religion*. And Goethe was not the only to perceive Voltaire's attitude in this way. Napoleon also said:

³ You have to help me to deceive the universe.

⁴ You have to surrender Mecca, abandon your temple: / Of credulity give to all the example, / Announce the Alcoran to frightened peoples, / serve me as a prophet, and fall at my feet: / I'll give you back your son, and I'll be your son-in-law.

⁵ Proud citizen, old inexorable, / I'll be cruel, ruthless more than you are.

"Il (Voltaire) atteint Jésus-Christ dans Mahomet." (Napoleon, Gourgaud, *Journal*, 18 May 1817. Cit. in Daniel, p. 312.) As Goethe met the Emperor in Erfurt and discussed with him on the translation of this work, Napoleon expressed his dislike about the tragedy, and between them took place the following conversation (Prieur, p. 215):

L'Empereur rétorqua :

- Je n'aime pas cette pièce, c'est une caricature !

- Je suis de l'avis de Votre Majesté, j'ai fait ce travail à contre-cœur. Mais dans cette tragédie, dans ces tirades contre le fanatisme, ce n'est pas l'Islam qui était visé, mais l'Église catholique.

- Les allusions, dit Napoléon, sont tellement voilées que cet impertinent a pu dédier son œuvre au pape... qui lui a donné sa bénédiction.⁶

And in fact, even though the play was since the beginning suspected of antiroyalism, Benedict XIV stated to have read it "*con sommo piacere*" and accepted politely and quite diplomatically Voltaire's obviously ironical dedication of the work to him (Cf. Daniel, p. 310; Mommsen, p. 80.).

4. Goethe's *Mahomet* Drama

Beside the *à contrecœur* translation of Voltaire's *Mahomet*, Goethe reveals in his autobiographical notes *Dichtung und Wahrheit* a plan of his youth years to write an own *Mahomet* drama. Unlike Voltaire, and contrary to the content of medieval canon influencing until modernity the opinion of the Western society on Islam, Goethe didn't consider Muhammad as an impostor: "*so entwickelte sich bei mir der Vorsatz, an dem Leben Mahomets, den ich nie als einen Betrüger hatte ansehen können...*" (Goethe, MA, 1, p. 671)

But coming to the issue of "cruelty", like Voltaire, Goethe didn't approve what he considered violence in the rise of Islam. Thus, he informs us to have conceived in his young age an own Mahomet drama depicting negatively acts of violence in the life of the Prophet, and in the same way like Voltaire he applies the literary fiction without trying to be historically accurate. But there is an essential and significant difference between Mahomet of Goethe and that of Voltaire. This difference, as it was remarkable also in the German translation of *Le fanatisme*, consists in Goethe's viewing the Prophet's violence as imposed by external – social and political – factors rather than internal ones. What imposes violence and fraud is simply the truth. The Prophet himself doesn't wish the violence and at the end of the script he even reflects and purifies his teaching (ibid. p. 672):

"Nachdem sich also Mahomet selbst bekehrt, teilt er diese Gefühle und Gesinnungen den Seinigen mit; seine Frau und Ali fallen ihm unbedingt zu. Im zweiten Akt versucht er selbst, heftiger aber Ali, diesen Glauben in dem Stamme weiter auszubreiten. Hier zeigt sich Beistimmung und Widersetzlichkeit, nach Verschiedenheit der Charaktere. Der Zwist beginnt, der Streit wird gewaltsam, und Mahomet muß entfliehen. Im dritten Akt bezwingt er seine Gegner, macht seine Religion zur öffentlichen, reinigt die Kaaba von den Gözenbildern; weil aber doch nicht alles durch Kraft zu tun ist, so muß er auch zur List seine Zuflucht nehmen. Das Irdische wächst und breitet sich aus, das Göttliche tritt zurück und wird getrübt. Im vierten Akte verfolgt Mahomet seine Eroberungen, die Lehre wird mehr Vorwand als Zweck, alle denkbaren Mittel müssen benutzt werden; es fehlt nicht an Grausamkeiten. Eine Frau, deren Mann er hat hinrichten lassen, vergiftet ihn. Im fünften fühlt er sich vergiftet. Seine große Fassung, die Wiederkehr zu sich selbst, zum höheren Sinne machen ihn der Bewunderung würdig. Er reinigt seine Lehre, befestigt sein Reich und stirbt."

But as in the case of Voltaire, it seems that there is a change of attitude in the later Goethe. He never wrote Mahomet's drama planned in his younger age, while in the years of his poetic maturity (1819) he wrote the famous *West-eastern Divan*, a work of completely different nature and content compared to the abovementioned drama plan. While of his Mahomet drama was conserved only the poetic and mystical dialogue between Ali and Fatema, *Mahomets Gesang*, with Mahomet depicted metaphorically as a small stream of water flowing out of the rocks and growing to an immense spiritual power ending to the ocean (Goethe, HA 1, p. 42-43; Mommsen, p. 49-50):

⁶ The Emperor said: 'I do not like this play, it's a caricature!' 'I am in the opinion of your Majesty, I did this job reluctantly. But in this tragedy, in these tirades against fanaticism, it is not Islam that was intended, but the Catholic Church.' 'The allusions, said Napoleon, are so veiled that this impertinent could dedicate his work to the Pope... who gave it his blessing.'

ALI
*Seht den Felsenquell
Freudehell
Wie ein Sternblick!*

FATEMA
*Über Wolken
Nährten seine Jugend
Gute Geister
Zwischen Klippen im Gebüsch.*

ALI
*Jünglingfrisch
Tanzt er aus der Wolke
Auf die Marmorfelsen nieder
Jauchzet wieder
Nach dem Himmel*

FATEMA
*Durch die Gipfelgänge
Jagt er bunten Kiesel nach,*

ALI
*Und mit frühem Führertritt
Reißt er seine Bruderquellen
Mit sich fort.*

*Drunten werden in dem Tal
Unter seinem Fußtritt Blumen
Und die Wiese
Lebt von seinem Hauch...*

5. Goethe's Islam

It seems that in his attitude toward Islam, Goethe was positioned mostly very distant from the Christian medieval canon that survived also in the Western society of his day. Especially in his *West-eastern Divan*, which constitutes an interesting document of interreligious and intercultural symbiosis and the best illustration of his idea on *Weltliteratur*, he never mentions any charge of deceiving or cruelty regarding the Prophet of Islam. On the contrary, he is very harsh against such accusations as he puts in the mouth of the Prophet the following verses (Goethe, HA 2, p. 50):

*Ärgert's jemand, daß es Gott gefallen
Mahomet zu gönnen Schutz und Glück,
An den stärksten Balken seiner Hallen
Da befestig' er den derben Strick,
Knüpfe sich daran! Das hält und trägt;
Er wird fühlen, daß sein Zorn sich legt.*

With the approach of a Muslim lyrical I, Goethe demonstrates in his *Divan* a very special attitude toward the holy book of Muslims, going much further even in respect to the most sympathizing attitudes in the Western society of his time (Goethe, WA I, 6, 203):

*Ob der Koran von Ewigkeit sei?
Danach frag' ich nicht!
Ob der Koran geschaffen sei?
Das weiß ich nicht!
Daß er das Buch der Bücher sei,
Glaub' ich aus Mosleminen-Pflicht.*

This admiration for the Koran wasn't limited only in his poetry and literary work, but also in his personal feelings. Thus, he writes in the age of seventy that he intended, „ehrfurchtsvoll jene heilige Nacht zu feiern, wo der Koran vollständig dem Propheten von obenher gebracht ward.“ (Cit. in Mommsen, p. 11)

It seems that interesting parallels may be drawn between Voltaire's idea on *natural religion* and Goethe's concept of Islam as a kind of world religion, above cultural and geographical limitations, maybe well fitting to his concept of a *religion of nature*. He is strongly focused on Islam's etymology as "submission to God" and poetizes this in his *Divan* as follows (Goethe, WA 1, 6, p. 128):

*Närrisch, daß jeder in seinem Falle
Seine besondere Meinung preist!
Wenn Islam „Gott ergeben“ heißt,
In Islam leben und sterben wir alle.*

With the same concept, Goethe would try to comfort Louise Adele Schopenhauer after the plague epidemics of 1831, as he wrote her: „Hier kann niemand dem anderen rathen; beschließe was zu thun ist jeder bei sich. Im Islam leben wir alle, unter welcher Form wir uns auch Muth machen.“ (Goethe, WA 4, 49, p. 87) And maybe in this context is to be understood also his statement, that the Poet (Goethe) "...lehnt den Verdacht nicht ab, daß er ein Muselman sei." (Goethe WA 4, 33, p. 123)

6. Goethe's Attitude toward the Church and Christianity

It is not to be excluded that Goethe's opinion on Islam, as in the case of Voltaire's positive assessments on this religion, may be influenced by his interest to provide a more effective criticism against the Church and Christianity. And in fact, Goethe doesn't hide his negative opinion on the Church: „Es ist gar viel Dummes in den Satzungen der Kirche. Aber sie will herrschen, und da muss sie eine bornierte Masse haben, die sich duckt und geneigt ist, sich beherrschen zu lassen. Die hohe reich dotierte Geistlichkeit fürchtet nichts mehr als die Aufklärung der unteren Massen. Sie hat ihnen auch die Bibel lange genug vorenthalten.“ (Eckermann, 3, p. 797)

Also against some official and basic Christian doctrines he had a lot to object. He didn't hesitate to mention as the ugliest things to his feelings "Rauch des Tabaks, Wanzen und Knoblauch und Kreuz", and the same symbol of cross he would call in his *Divan* "ein Jammerbild aus Holze" (Goethes Werke, HA II, p. 123). Trinity and the deified nature of Jesus were unacceptable to him.

But he seems also very far from being an "antichrist", and an antireligious approach was not part of his attitudes. In spite of rejecting the divinity of Christ, Goethe affirms him as a prophet, using in his respect an almost Islamic expression such as "Friede sei dem Guten" (Goethes Werke, WA 1, 6, p. 296). Beside this, he synthesizes both Jesus and Muhammad with other prophets familiar to the Judeo-Christian and Islamic tradition in an interesting poem of the *Divan* with the following content (Goethes Werke, HA 2, p. 122-123):

*Abraham den Herrn der Sterne
Hat er sich zum Ahn erlesen;
Moses ist in wüster Ferne
Durch den einen groß gewesen.*

*David, auch durch viel Gebrechen,
ja Verbrechen durch gewandelt,
Wußte doch sich loszusprechen:
„Einem hab' ich recht gehandelt“.*

*Jesus fühlte rein und dachte
Nur den einen Gott im stillen:
Wer ihn selbst zum Gotte machte
Kränkte seinen heil'gen Willen.*

*Und so muß das Rechte scheinen
Was auch Mahomet gelungen;
Nur durch den Begriff des einen
Hat er alle Welt bezwungen.*

7. Conclusive Notes

In conclusion, it may be remarked that like Voltaire, Goethe too had a clear anticlerical predisposition that can be considered also a natural product of the Enlightenment period. But in his regard to Islam, he expressed himself in essential differences from Voltaire and other Enlightenment authors. Goethe, in support of his anticlerical attitudes, doesn't deny what he considers values of revealed religions. On the contrary, he synthesizes Islam, Judaism and Christianity in an own ecumenicity, apologizing Islam and correcting also his approach to Christianity based on an Islamic view and Scriptures.

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