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Goethe's Divan:

Model for a Multicultural Understanding

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# Introduction

In recent years patriotism in Germany is on the rise once more. Besides the arrival of the so called “tide of refugees” in 2015, several terror attacks by the allegedly Islamic terror organisation ISIS throughout Europe have fuelled racist and anti-Islamic sentiments in the country. Although the “process of integration” of Muslim immigrants has considerably improved during the last ten years, they are still facing racism and discrimination. Therefore a common ground from which we can start to tolerate, respect and understand each other is more needed than ever. But integration defined as the assimilation of the new arrivals to the culture of the old-established community cannot be the solution, as it is a one way street, which requires from the immigrants the abolishment of their identities. A mutual understanding between the immigrants and the German citizens, regardless of their cultural background is necessary.

Who would serve this purpose better than Goethe, the pride and joy of German literature, and his later work the *West-East Divan*, an archetype of religious tolerance and open-mindedness? The poems of the *Divan* show that Islam and Christianity resemble one another. A more tolerant approach from the Christians and a liberal interpretation of the Koran by German Muslims could facilitate the intercultural dialogue.

However, in the collective spirit of the Germans Johann Wolfgang von Goethe has always been the incarnation of Germanness; the *Divan* is relatively unknown and remains to a large extent unrecognized even by philologists. Therefore, it is not surprising that the general German public is not aware of the fact that Goethe was an admirer of Mohammad and intrigued by Islam. His *West-East Divan* was, in fact, intended to acquaint the Germans with the alien religion and culture as the later added “Notes and Essays” prove (Goethe, 173-288). But the poet has actually been exploited by nationalists at least since Otto von Bismarck’s ambitions to establish a German Empire (Mommsen, von Arnim 2001). And also today his inclination for the Orient is not acknowledged.

The *West-East Divan* could serve as foundation for a multicultural understanding in Germany. It could be an inspiration for a liberal interpretation of the Koran, as it found its admirers amongst liberal Muslims in all over the world, and hence offer an alternative to the German “Leitkultur” that traditionalists and conservatives are talking about constantly. Reading the *Divan* in German classes could be a first step to introduce contemporary literature that reflects

the multicultural reality of Germany with all its authors from different cultural and social backgrounds.

This paper will therefore deal with the representation of Islam in the *West-East Divan*. First it will be considered in detail, which Islamic principles can be positive models and which have to be looked at critically.

Second, the relationship of Islam and Christianity with regard to monotheism, their symbolism and the relationship between God, nature and man will be pointed out.

And the last chapter will take a look on the prospects for a multicultural discourse in Germany taking into consideration the exploitation of Goethe by politics aiming on “nation building” and the question if, despite everything, the *Divan* can be an example for a multicultural discourse.

# Chapter 1

## Representation of Islam in the Divan

Goethe wrote the *Divan* to express his fascination for Islamic teachings and culture. Unlike most of the Western scholars before him, who studied and analysed the Koran only to find proof for its alleged inferiority to Christianity, Goethe not only tolerated the other believe on account of an enlightened mentality, moreover, “Goethe achieved a truly positive relation to Islam by finding certain major precepts in accord with his own thinking and beliefs” (Mommsen 1967: 15). He considered the Koran a holy book of equal rank with the Bible as both are dedicated to the monotheistic believe and, therefore, direct the individual to reflect upon itself (Mommsen 2001: 17). Furthermore Goethe knew of the original meaning of Islam which made him believe that “we all in Islam live and die”.

The image of Islam that is depicted in the poems of the *Divan*, as well as in the Notes and Essays is a primordial one, as it is purged of the dogmas that have ossified during the nearly 14 centuries since Mohammad’s death. Otherwise, it does not lack of re-interpretations and additions that, however, never infringe the principles of the belief. Here he follows the footsteps of controversial poets like Hafiz, who represented a liberal and tolerant Islam. In spite of his veneration, he doesn’t hesitate to criticise and amend what he finds written in the Koran. His delicacy for the Islamic believes and a profound knowledge about the great Muslim poets of history allowed him to compile the *Divan*, full of poems that bring on both familiar and foreign sentiments and have since inspired both Eastern and Western thinking.

### 1. Islamic principles as positive models

From all the Islamic precepts, starting from the ones that are documented in writing, like the five pillars, to the more subtle ones, this chapter will focus on those that are most present in the poems of the *Divan* and were elementary for Goethe to identify with Islam which are providence and resignation to God’s will, charity, and tolerance. While nowadays most people in the Western world do not believe anymore in providence, charity and tolerance are principles whose social values are growing. For Goethe, all together were the key to God and, therefore, to mental balance and happiness.

## 1.1. Providence and resignation

Goethe believed in the Islamic teaching that “[...], jede Kreatur wird zu dem, was sie ist, durch Gottes unergründlichen Ratschluß,” (Mommsen 2001: 165) as the great number of poems in the *Divan* that address this topic show. Right in the first poem of the *Divan*, *Hegire*, we can find a hint at this belief:

Wo sie noch von Gott empfangen  
Himmelslehr in Erdensprachen  
Und sich nicht den Kopf zerbrachen.

But for Goethe providence did not mean that everything in life is predetermined. He understood the devotion to God’s will rather as a way of confident and serene resignation to one’s fate that allows the pious person to keep a mental balance and trust in their future. One of the poems that illustrate these believes is the poem of the pious pearl from the Book of Parables:

Vom Himmel her sank in wilder Meere Schauer  
Ein Tropfe bangend, gräßlich schlug die Flut,  
Doch lohnte Gott bescheidnen Glaubensmut  
Und gab dem Tropfen Kraft und Dauer.  
Ihn schloss die stille Muschel ein.  
Und nun, zu ew’gem Ruhm und Lohne,  
Die Perle glänzt an unsers Kaisers Krone  
Mit holdem Blick und mildem Schein.

The droplet is not only protected by God from all harm, but as an addition, also is being rewarded for its “bescheidnen Glaubensmut” and becomes a pearl that is part of the jewels of a “royal crown”. Therefore this poem is a good example for the resignation to God’s will and actually has its origin in an Islamic parable of the Persian poet Saadi. It is only one of several poems that regard this topic, especially in the Book of Parables.

In another poem about a pearl is shown what happens to the ones that are not humble in their faith. A pearl, haughty because of her noble birth, does not want to be chained together with other pearls to become a necklace. But the jeweller admits that he has to be “grausam” and

pierce the pearl in order to make her part of something even more valuable. Here the jeweller represents God who does not always seem gracious in his ways, but after all knows the purpose of everything that happens and creates thus beautiful and precious things. The pearl, representing a self-centred person, cannot see that she is even more valuable as part of something greater but only sees herself being destroyed.

Goethe felt so strongly about this Islamic attitude that gave his life serenity, as it does to so many Muslims, that he even assumed to put Ferdowsi<sup>1</sup> right. The eminent Persian Poet moans about the course of the world:

Ferdusi spricht

Oh Welt! wie schamlos und boshaft du bist!  
Du nährst und erziehest und tötest zugleich.

Goethe's answer turns the lamentation into an affirmative that is entirely concurrent with Islam (Mommsen 2001: 165):

Nur wer von Allah begünstiget ist,  
Der nährt sich, erzieht sich, lebendig und reich.

As demonstrated by means of the preceding poems providence and resignation in God's will are two central topics in the *Divan* and Goethe had a great empathy for these Islamic teachings. He easily took it up and framed it according to his ideas, never lacking tact and seriousness for the Muslim believes.

## 1.2. Charity

Another important teaching of Islam is charity. Indeed, the obligatory donation to the less privileged (زكاة) is the third of the five pillars of Islam. Of course Goethe, a believing Christian, knew already since his childhood about the commandment of charity that also exists in Christianity. But, for him charity was more than just a way to paradise. As

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<sup>1</sup> Abu'l-Qasem Ferdowsi was one of the most important poets in Persian history and the author of the national epic *Shah Nameh* (Khaleghi-Motlagh, Shahbazi, 514-31).

Mommsen notes, Goethe believed that the profit of generosity lies in the delight of the giving, making the donor himself a recipient in the here and now. In the poems of the *Divan* this topic is treated accordingly, extending the original Islamic motif like in this poem that was inspired by the *Pend Nāmeḥ* of Attar of Nishapur<sup>2</sup>:

Und was im *Pend Nameh* steht,  
Ist dir aus der Brust geschrieben:  
Jeden, dem du selber gibst,  
Wirst du wie dich selber lieben,  
Reiche froh den Pfennig hin,  
Häufe nicht dein Goldvermächtnis,  
Eile, freudig vorzuziehn  
Gegenwart vor dem Gedächtnis<sup>85</sup>.

Furthermore:

Gutes tu rein aus des Guten Liebe!  
Das überliefre deinem Blut;  
Und wenn's den Kindern nicht verbliebe,  
Den Enkeln kommt es doch zugut.

This poem from the Book of Proverbs states, moreover, that generosity is something that can be inherited by the descendants and even when it does not fall to one's children it will eventually come up again in the lineage. It is depicted as an ability that one can acquire and pass on to the next generation. In this way charity has yet significance beyond the immediate.

### 1.3. Tolerance

Goethe's tolerant spirit was one of the basic prerequisites that made the creation of the *Divan* possible in the first place. In the Western world tolerance is considered a fundamental value of Christianity and brainchild of the enlightenment, but also the prophet Mohammed preached tolerance to his adherents regarding the other two monotheistic religions, as it states that they

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<sup>2</sup> Farid al-Din Attar was 12<sup>th</sup> century Persian poet and Sufi who is considered to have written the *Pand nāma* and lived in the city of Nishapur (Reinert, 20-25).



all believe in the same one God, and have their origin in the covenant between God and Abraham. Hence, believing in any of the three can bring salvation:

This true religion consists as to matter of faith, in the acknowledgement of the only true God, and in the belief in, and obedience to such messengers or prophets of God, as He has been pleased to send from time to time, with credentials, to reveal His will to mankind, and as to matter of practice, the religion of God consists in the observance of the immutable and eternal laws of right and wrong, together with such other precepts and ceremonies, as God ordained as fit, for the time being, according to the different dispensations in different ages (Galwash, 131).

It is another principle that is part of both, the Christian and Islamic religion.

The probably most important poem that refers to tolerance in the *Divan* equates tolerance with the original meaning of Islam – the resignation to God’s will (*idem*) – as it goes:

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

Indeed, it is written in the Koran that God send 104 holy books to earth that teach the one true religion, one of them was given to Moses, one to David, one to Jesus, and one to Mohammad, therefore, the Islamic religion sees Judaism and Christianity as religions of the same God – Allah. The parts that correspond form, hence, the immutable and eternal laws of Allah; the rest has been modified over time (*idem*). For this reason it can be considered “foolish”, if somebody praises their opinion, because only God is to decide who is a true believer. Another aphorism in the *Buch der Sprüche* reminds us that “An Gottes Tisch sitzen Freund’ und Feinde.” It does not matter how one feels about the other because God does not care about the judgement of a human, but only about who truly believes. The last saying from the *Buch der Sprüche* that should be mentioned regarding the topic is:

Wenn Gott so schlechter Nachbar wäre,  
Als ich bin und als du bist,

Wir hätten beide wenig Ehre;  
Der lässt jeden, wie er ist.

This saying combines once more religious tolerance with the resignation in God's will, and providence, as God "lets each person be" (Bidney, 70).

Goethe admired the way the Koran appealed for religious tolerance, since, at his time, the Christian community considered itself enlightened, despite the prevalent contempt of Islam. His appeal for religious tolerance was probably what caused him to announce in: "... er lehnt den Verdacht nicht ab, dass er selbst ein Muselmann sey" (Link 60: 8)

## **2. Criticism of the Koran**

The first question popping up in the minds of the Muslims readers amongst you might be, why a Christian poet like Goethe should be permitted to criticise the Prophet and the Koran at all?

Of course his criticism could be considered insolent, but Goethe, unlike many other Westerners, applied the same standards to both, Islam and Christianity. Furthermore, he followed the examples of controversial but great Muslim poets like Hafiz. Thus, he finds himself in good company of the more liberal schools of Islam.

Goethe did not shy away from criticising those parts of the Islamic believes that he considered narrow-minded or outdated. Indeed, every kind of orthodoxy was a thorn in his eye, no matter if it was considering Islam or Christianity.

Regarding this, this chapter will focus on the role women assume in Muslim societies and that is depicted in the Koran, the prohibition of alcohol and Islamic orthodoxy in a more general sense.

### **2.1 The role of women**

Although the role of women depicted in the Koran was quite revolutionary for the time of its foundation, this trend was not always continued by Mohammad's imitators. Especially what was depicted in the West about women's rights in Islam was not always backed up by an understanding of the reality of life at the time of Mohammad. On the one hand, Goethe knew about the progressiveness of women's rights in the Koran, but he also saw the oppressive reality many women were confronted with in both Arabic and European countries at his time. Since he was a man of tolerance and reason, he stood up for women and their rights all his

life. Also in the poems of the *West-East Divan* one can observe his sympathies for women, as he sides with the mystical path of the Islam, which has traditionally been more open-minded about women than the orthodox, though his focus does not lie there (Schimmel, 146-147).

Goethe places his criticism in a subtle way, as in the poem *Wink*, which seems to deal with the inculcation against Hafiz, that he was conning the orthodox scholars, since it begins with the avowal of the lyrical narrator that “ein Wort nicht einfach gelte”. The word here is rather depicted as a fan where the real meaning glances through its rods.

But the second part of the poem seems to turn the initial admission into yet another criticism against the orthodox branch of Islam by stating that between the rods of the fan “Blicken ein Paar schöne Augen hervor.” In the following verses these eyes are described as “das Schönste” that a woman has to offer. Therefore, this poem can be seen as a criticism against the veil, and the practise of covering the female body, since the eyes of a woman are the most seducing she has to show. The covering of the shape of her body becomes, thus, superfluous. Furthermore, in the Book of Observations Goethe follows Mohammad’s statement, that men should treat women “mit Nachsicht” in a humorous manner. He adds that God “konnte sie [the crooked rib Eve was made of] nicht ganz gerade machen.” This inconsistency of God’s omnipotence gives an understanding of Goethe’s real opinion about the status of women (Mommsen 2001: 256-57).

There are many more examples for the criticism of the role of women in the *West-East Divan*; after all, the main topic is the divinity of the woman; especially reflected in the Book of Zuleika being the largest of all. For Goethe women are in no way inferior to men.

When it comes to women’s rights, the Islamic world has to be reminded of its progressive origins and still existing branches, and should carry on to always improve the status of women in their legislations and societies.

## **2.2 Prohibition of alcohol**

When it comes to the prohibition of alcohol in Islam, it is important to know that originally alcohol was not absolutely forbidden, neither existed a punishment for its consumption (L. Michalak & K. Trocki, 531). The practice of flogging that we know from some countries like Iran was first introduced by Ali, the fourth of the Rashidun Caliphs (Mommsen 2001: 294).

Thus, the existence of *khamriyya*<sup>3</sup> poetry becomes clear. This kind of poetry covers an entire chapter in Goethe's *Divan*, to which he was inspired by the mystical poet Hafiz. The poems are exclusively referring to wine which played an important role in the pre-Islamic culture and traditions of Persia and other Middle Eastern countries (Mommsen 2001: 293). In his poems, Goethe ascribes a number of positive characteristics to wine and its consumption. Already in the entrance poem *Hegira* he states: "Unter Lieben, Trinken, Singen / Soll dich Chisers Quell verjüngen." This motive of rejuvenation by the consumption of wine pervades the *Divan*.

Trunken müssen wir alle sein!  
Jugend ist Trunkenheit ohne Wein;  
Trinkt sich das Alter wieder zu Jugend,  
So ist es wundervolle Tugend.  
Für Sorgen sorgt das liebe Leben,  
Und Sorgenbrecher sind die Reben.

So, the motive of rejuvenation is complemented by the statement that drinking let's one forget their worries which multiply with age.

Goethe himself was at an advanced age when he wrote the *Divan*, and therefore, knew about these advantages.

Another poem in the Book of the Cupbearer points out a third positive characteristic of wine. According to this poem drinking wine can restore the belief in God by giving the drinker "[ein] Herrliches Gefühl der Gegenwart" when the rest of the world turns against him. This poem together with a poem from the Book of the Parsi reveals the pantheistic believes of Goethe, which he also believed to recognise in the Koran and Mohammad's teachings.

Wenn der Mensch die Erde schätzt,  
Weil die Sonne sie bescheinet,  
An der Rebe sich ergetzet,  
Die dem scharfen Messer weinet,  
Da sie fühlt, daß ihre Säfte,  
Wohlgekocht, die Welt erquickend,

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<sup>3</sup> Khamr (خمر) – "The Qur'anic term *khamr* is often translated as wine, but has a broader meaning, from a root that means 'to cover,' 'to cause mental confusion' or 'to disturb the mind'" (Michalak, Trocki, 528).

Werden regsam vielen Kräften,  
Aber mehreren erstickend:  
Weiß er das der Glut zu danken,  
Die das alles läßt gedeihen;  
Wird Betrunkner stammelnd wanken,  
Mäß'ger wird sich singend freuen.

Here the wine serves as a medium that allows the people to experience God's presence in nature (Mommsen 2001: 299). There is a direct parallelism of being drunk on wine and the intoxication with God. But then, there is also a warning that not everybody can handle alcohol. Some persons might choke on it and will not be able to drink moderately. Only the one who is moderate is able to enjoy wine and still respect God. That is not the only warning in the *Divan* against drinking. Elsewhere Goethe points out that one should not drink too much when the lyrical narrator states:

Hafis, o lehre mich,  
Wie du's verstanden!

And later on it says:

Wenn man nicht lieben kann,  
Soll man nicht trinken.

So, people who cannot drink moderately or do not love, but are rather full of hatred and aggression should not drink. Indeed, Michalak and Trocki state that "problems [with alcohol] arose when some of the followers [...] came to prayer having consumed alcohol to the point of drunkenness." Before it was just not endorsed, as Mohammad said regarding alcohol and gambling, "There is in both great sin and some benefit for people, but their sin is greater than their benefit" (Robertson, 95). Therefore, it can be said that the consumption of alcohol should not be entirely condemned, as long as it is not going against reason and the ones who drink do not neglect their duties or cause discord.

# Chapter 2

## Relation between Islam and Christianity

Islam and Christianity are more similar than most of the faithful of both religions are willing to admit. Not only are both monotheistic, but they also share the same origin, the Ten Commandments and several prophets. Nevertheless, today the lives of the believers seem to be quite incompatible. This chapter will discuss the relationship of Islam and Christianity in particular with respect to the question of monotheism, the symbolism of light and fire and the triangular relationship of God, nature and man.

### 1. The question of monotheism

Both, Islam and Christianity are considered monotheistic religions, since they teach the faith in the One God, who made a covenant with Abraham. However, one essential Christian teaching is the veneration of Jesus as the Son of God, coupled with the Holy Trinity of God, which seem to contradict the idea of monotheism, and thus, is harshly criticised by Muslims. According to Mommsen Goethe disapproved of this dogma as well and went so far as to compare the Cross of Christ with an Abraxas stone<sup>4</sup> in the unpublished poem *Süßes Kind, die Perlenreihen...*:

Und nun kommst du, hast ein Zeichen  
Dran gehängt, das, unter allen  
Den Abraxas seinesgleichen,  
Mir am schlechtesten will gefallen.  
  
Diese ganz moderne Narrheit  
Magst du mir nach Schiras bringen!  
Soll ich wohl, in seiner Starrheit,  
Hölzchen quer auf Hölzchen singen?

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<sup>4</sup> In the antiquity, charms, amulets and gems with the inscription Abraxas or Abrasax, presumably a compound of Greek and Hebrew letters referring to the divine, were believed to bring good luck. But they depicted hybrid creatures with a rooster's head, snake legs and human arms (Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Sozialforschung).

In the poem *Segenspfänder* Goethe describes Abraxas as follows:

Hier soll meist das Fratzenhafte,  
Das ein düstrer Wahnsinn schaffte,  
Für das Allerhöchste gelten.

This shows just how much he disapproved of the idea of Jesus as Son of God and the use of the Cross of Christ by the Church.

Further on, however, the poem “*Süßes Kind, die Perlenreihen...*” goes:

Jesus fühlte rein und dachte  
Nur den einen Gott im Stillen;  
Wer ihn selbst zum Gotte machte,  
Kränkte seinen heiligen Willen  
  
Und so muß das Rechte scheinen  
Was auch Mahomet gelungen;  
Nur durch den Begriff des Einen  
Hat er alle Welt bezwungen.

It is clear that Goethe considered the dogma of Jesus as the Son of God as a serious threat to the ability of monotheism to unite the world, and here, he refers to Jesus own words that never mentioned him as the Son of God but rather as a prophet of God.

Regarding monotheism, it is of concern to mention the concept of the 99 Attributes of Allah (اسماء الله الحسنى). According to Islam, Allah has 100 names of which only 99 are revealed in the Koran. If someone memorizes all of them, including the 100<sup>th</sup> they will enter paradise.

The names are attributes like “the Just One” (القيسط) or “the Merciful” (الرحيم). In the poem

*Talismane* the lyrical narrator calls Allah by the name “der [...] Gerechte” and states “Sei von seinen hundert Namen / Dieser hochgelobet! Amen.”

By attributing 100 names to Allah, the Islamic religion unites the plurality of the creation in the Unity of God, and therefore, solves the problem of the ambiguity of a single god in relation to the distinct authorities of pagan gods and goddesses. Also in the Christian belief

God is sometimes referred to with names similar to these attributes, but, only in Islam they play such a crucial role in religious teachings.

## 2. Symbolism of Light and Fire

Another aspect that is shared by Islam and Christianity is the symbolism of light and fire. God often appears in some form of light or fire; e. g. the burning bush of Moses. In Islamic as well as in Christian tradition fire is the symbol of the presence of God's spirit and divine inspiration.

A common motif that has its origin in pre-Islamic Persia and was then adopted by Sufism is the one of the butterfly and the candle. In this parable the butterfly is drawn toward the flame of the candle as the believer is toward the divine truth. Ultimately the butterfly, not able to resist the appeal, bursts into flames and unites with the fire as the believer wishes to unite with God. This motif inspired Goethe to one of the most beautiful of the *Divan's* poems *Selige Sehnsucht*:

Sag es niemand, nur den Weisen,  
Weil die Menge gleich verhöhnet,  
Das Lebend'ge will ich preisen,  
Das nach Flammentod sich sehnet.

In der Liebesnächte Kühlung,  
Die dich zeugte, wo du zeugtest,  
Überfällt dich fremde Fühlung,  
Wenn die stille Kerze leuchtet.

Nicht mehr bleibst du umfangen  
In der Finsternis Beschattung,  
Und dich reißet neu Verlangen  
Auf zu höherer Begattung.

Keine Ferne macht dich schwierig,  
Kommst geflogen und gebannt,  
Und zuletzt, des Lichts begierig,  
Bist du, Schmetterling, verbrannt.



Und solange du das nicht hast,  
Dieses: Stirb und werde!  
Bist du nur ein trüber Gast  
Auf der dunklen Erde.

This parable as such does not exist in Christian tradition; however, it should be comprehensible as fire plays an important role for divine revelations in the Bible.

### 3. Triangular Relationship of God, Nature and Man

The relation between God, nature and man in the *Divan* was already mentioned in the chapter about the prohibition of alcohol. This chapter will now explore this topic further, since it plays an important role in Goethe's life and runs through the entire *Divan*.

Since his youth, Goethe had a pantheistic view of the world. One of his early works, *Die Leiden des Jungen Werther* is full of manifestations of God in nature. What he found studying Islam provided confirmation of his beliefs. Mommsen states, Goethe based the *Divan* poem "Freisinn" on the 21 verse of the 98 surah, which he found in the journal *Fundgruben des Orients*: "Er hat euch die Gestirne gesetzt / Als Leiter in der Finsternis zu Land und See" (157-58). Therefore, God does not only offer spiritual guidance, but directs the believers also physically through the stars. This surah also refers to the story of Abraham who recognized God in the starry sky. The story can be found in the holy books of all the Abrahamic religions and marks a crucial moment in the relationship between God, nature and man, as God manifests in nature and becomes thus perceivable by man. However, the poem does not only retell the surah, but also adds the aspect of beauty as the stars please the eye.

Er hat euch die Gestirne gesetzt  
Als Leiter zu Land und See,  
Damit ihr euch daran ergetzt,  
Stets blickend in die Höh.

The aspect of the beauty of God's work in nature can be found as well in the poem about the peacock's feather that lays in the Koran. It says that one can learn God's greatness in little from both, the feather and the stars: "An dir, wie an des Himmels Sternen, / Ist Gottes Größe im Kleinen zu lernen."

Apart from the poems regarding the pre-Islamic Persian traditions like “Wenn der Mensch die Erde schätzt...” that was already discussed in the chapter about the prohibition of alcohol, however, Goethe does not cross the clear line that Islam draws between nature as creation of God and God the metaphysical being. In Islam God’s greatness can be experienced in the creation, but God is never part of the physical world.

# Chapter 3

## Prospects for a Multicultural Discourse in Germany

As the previous chapters have shown, Goethe's works, and in specific the *Divan*, offer an open-minded world view and a positive, thus, not uncritical insight into the world of Islam for the ones who study them genuinely. Certainly it will be always an external view, as Goethe never visited the Orient nor converted to Islam, but his works show a great admiration for Muhammad and the Koran, and an extraordinary understanding for the poetical aspects of the Koran. He, moreover, never shied away from criticising Christian dogmas and contemporaries whenever they acted against religious tolerance or the human reason.

However, it is obvious that considering contemporary authors with different cultural backgrounds like Rafik Schami<sup>5</sup> is vital for a truly intercultural dialogue.

### 1. Goethe's Exploitation for a German Leading Culture

In recent years, the speak of Goethe and his works in connection with words like "German *Leitkultur*<sup>6</sup>" or "*Germanness*" has once again increased, however, it goes back to the beginning of the last century.

During his speech on the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the German Unity in 2010 the then German president, Christian Wulff declared that, besides Christianity and Judaism, "Islam has now also become part of German identity."<sup>7</sup> This could have been an important moment in the history of German migration politics, but the president was harshly criticised for this attempted venture. One of these critics, the SPD politician Thilo Sarrazin, had just published his book *Deutschland Schafft Sich Ab* in which he states that

Wegen der Einwanderer aus islamischen Herkunftsländern und ihrer mutmaßlich anhaltend hohen 'Fertilität' werde in 50 Jahren niemand mehr Goethes vielleicht berühmtestes Gedicht *Über allen Gipfeln ist Ruh* kennen (Link 60: 8).

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<sup>5</sup> German-Syrian author who writes novels and fables based on the experiences he made as an immigrant in Germany (Khalil, 202)

<sup>6</sup> *Leitkultur*, ursprünglich die Idee eines gesamteuropäischen, liberal, demokratisch und staatsbürgerschaftlich geprägten öffentlichen Raumes (Lexikon der Globalisierung, 228)

<sup>7</sup> Wulff, Christian. "Vielfalt schätzen – Zusammenhalt fördern." Rede zum 20. Jahrestag der Deutschen Einheit. Bremen. 3 October 2010

He also quotes Goethe on several occasions. He uses Goethe's statement, the Islamic religion "läßt ihren Bekenner nicht aus einer dumpfen Beschränktheit heraus" to prove that it is not possible for Muslims to match the modern European values (Goethe, 142). However, this statement from the *Divan's* Notes and Essays is mere descriptive, as it compares the three monotheistic religions with the polytheistic religion of the ancient Greeks and Romans, and Hinduism. Within this context it becomes clear that "dumpfe[n] Beschränktheit" or, as Bidney translates it, "dulling narrowness" refers to the strictly regulated life of the Muslims, rather than their ability to reason. Another Goethe-quote from the Notes and Essays, this time regarding the Koran, which Sarrazin shortens, and thus, misinterprets: "Der Stil des Koran ist seinem Inhalt und Zweck gemäß groß, streng, furchtbar." He omits the half sentence "stellenweise erhaben," which is essential to understand what Goethe truly intended to convey. By omitting this crucial part, the German adjective "furchtbar" is being understood as "terrible" instead of "fearsome", what it also can mean.

This is only one of many possible examples on how Goethe is being exploited as a lead figure of nationalist ideas. It is a practice that has been around since the Third Reich. According to Bahr, *Faust* was read by German soldiers as an exhortation to hold out during the Second World War (3). Although Thomas Mann tried to revise the image of Goethe already in his "Lotte in Weimar", published in 1939, it was rejected by the literary critics even after the war. Instead the image of Goethe that had been propagated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century was officially reintroduced in East and West Germany during the celebrations of Goethe's 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1949 (Bahr, 4-7). This also allowed both German states to foster a Goethe cult that compensated for the ideologies of the Third Reich, evading working on the crimes of the past, or in Bahr's words: "Wenn man sich schon nicht auf Deutschland berufen konnte, so doch auf Goethe, und die Beschäftigung mit dem Klassiker wurde als automatische Rehabilitierung progagiert" (10).

The problem of the misinterpretation of Goethe's works and its exploitation is probably characterized in the so called "work immanent approach"<sup>8</sup> that was prevalent in Germany in the 50s and 60s of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This approach of interpreting literature related to the reader's sentiment on the text, without considering the period and circumstances in which it was written can be dangerous when coupled with political ideas. It could explain, though, the way Sarrazin interprets Goethe and how he justifies his results, as this method was taught at

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<sup>8</sup> (in Bezug auf die Deutung eines literarischen Werks) aus sich selbst heraus, ohne literaturgeschichtliche, biografische o. a. Bezüge herzustellen oder in die Interpretation einzubeziehen (Werkimmanenz, Duden online)

German schools when he was a child: “Ich bin etwas ganz anderes [als ein Philologe]: Nämlich ein lesender Laie, der Deutsch versteht, auch Goethe-Deutsch, und beim Textverstehen seine eigenen Verstandeskräfte bemüht” (60: 10). To “use one’s own mind” without considering the origin of a text is exactly what work immanent approach means. This example shows that, still today, it is imperative to become aware of the risk that comes with the idealization of Goethe or as Alewyn expressed it: “Zwischen uns und Weimar liegt Buchenwald.” Germany must not praise Goethe without reminding Hitler, since humanitarianism and atrocity are both part of the German identity (Link 60: 9). And finally, Goethe also can be considered a “hero” considering the definition of Breger (60: 23):

Obwohl in Widerspruch zum säkularisierten Staat und zur Zivilgesellschaft nimmt die rituelle Personenverehrung zu. Mit z.B. Übertragung eines Personennamens auf einen leblosen Gegenstand (Straße, öffentlicher Platz) oder eine Institution wird ein Geist des / der Geehrten unterstellt, der weiterlebt als Asphaltstreifen oder Schulgebäude.

In his article in the journal *kultuRRevolution* Breger lists seven types of German identity of which one is the “Kulturdeutsche”, a person who gains their sense of Germanness by identifying with the great German minds of history (Goethe, Schiller, etc.), and at the same time marginalizes the Nazi period (idem.).

All these factors must be considered when referring to Goethe and his works.

## **2. Goethe’s Significance for the Multicultural Discourse**

Regarding the almost “traditional” exploitation of Goethe for political aims, it is legitimate to ask if it is at all wise to relate the multicultural discourse to Goethe. But as he cannot be avoided, it is necessary to put him into perspective, as this paper tried in the first two chapters. This last part will focus on the significance of Goethe for a multicultural discourse in Germany.

As it was shown before, Goethe was an admirer of Mohammad and his teachings of Islam and he believed in the true meaning of Islam as devotion to the One God. Another important aspect for this discourse is that in Goethe’s life and works tolerance and, in specific, religious tolerance was always an important topic. However, Goethe saw in the Holy Books only poetic, hence, symbolic messages of the One God (Link 60: 8). This idea was based on the

pantheistic concept of God he found in the philosophical teachings of Spinoza. At his time it was a quite scandalous approach, as was the positive view on Islam (Mommsen, 38). In Goethe's life and works tolerance and, in specific, religious tolerance was always an important topic. Also for this message he found confirmation in the Koran as it was already shown in the first chapter.

However, Goethe saw in the Holy Books only poetic, hence, symbolic messages of the One God (Link 60: 8). This idea was based on the pantheistic concept of God he found in the philosophical teachings of Spinoza. At his time it was a quite scandalous approach, as was the positive view on Islam (Mommsen 2001: 38).

Nowadays a symbolic interpretation of the Bible is commonplace in religious education at German schools, but this approach is not unknown in Islam either. Link states the symbolic interpretation of the Islam already existed before the Enlightenment (60: 38). Ironically, an examples from the recent past is Iran before the interventions of the US, France and Britain (who secretly supported Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic) in 1979 following the oil crisis. And just recently Saudi Arabia gives more and more rights to its female citizens, thanks to the advanced economic conditions.

Regarding Goethe, Link expresses the hope that:

[...] die Freude vieler Muslime darüber, dass der größte deutsche Dichter ein positives Islambild hatte und alles andere als ein >>Islamkritiker<< war, kann sie durchaus zu einem mehr symbolischen Verständnis des Koran anregen (60: 39).

It becomes clear that religious tolerance is more important than ever, as the world and, in specific, the German society becomes more and more pluralistic. The religions themselves call for tolerance and, regarding the differences, a symbolic view on the Holy Books can reconcile the parties.

As the military interventions in the Middle East offer a hotbed to Jihadist terrorism, attacking the West from the outside, the animosity against Muslims in Germany destabilizes the society from the inside (Link: 60, 39). Fear and mistrust are understandable reactions in the face of terroristic attacks in Germany and Europe and incidents like the one in Cologne on New Year's Eve 2015, but it is never wise to act on pure emotion. Tolerance is an important piece of the jigsaw of a multicultural German society.

# Conclusion

As it was discussed in the previous three chapters, Goethe's *West-East Divan* conveys a positive, yet critical view on Islam. Many poems throughout the collection call for religious tolerance and give the reader confidence and trust.

At the same time the *Divan* motivates the reader to use their own mind and rethink religious dogmas, as the role of women and the absolute prohibition of alcohol are criticised. On the other hand, similarities between Christianity and Islam are pointed out and differences are qualified. Therefore, within its limits as a collection of poems, the *Divan* encourages the reader to further study on religion and to discuss with people of different beliefs in an unbiased way.

As it was pointed out, the fact that Goethe, as a figure of German literature, has been exploited for political aims cannot be a reason to abolish his works. On the contrary, it becomes even more necessary to study his works, especially those that clearly show his open-mindedness, and emphasise this aspect in the public discourse. This is the only way to prevent further exploitation.

Finally, it is obvious, that Goethe's works can only play a minor part in the multicultural discourse in Germany, since there are many works of contemporary authors that are more relevant for today's society but much less known by the public. These must be stronger promoted by the German government. After all it is important to recognise the legitimacy of modern German authors with different cultural backgrounds as an important part of the literary society of Germany.

The best approach would be to deal with both Goethe and contemporary immigrant authors in German classes in order to provide the younger generation with a fully comprehensive picture of the German literary landscape including not only different social classes but also the past and the present of the country.

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