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Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: A life With Islām.

Francesca Bocca-Aldaqr*

Abstract: Goethe’s religiosity appears at the same time profoundly sincere yet escaping confessional labels. It has been claimed that Goethe was Christian, theist, mason, and even a pagan. Our work aims at studying Goethe’s religiosity throughout his life, and in particular in his relationship with Islām. Of all religions Goethe studied and interacted with, Islām is remarkably absent from literary critic, yet he elaborated it throughout his life. We will propose a periodisation which divides his relationship with Islām into four stages, in which specific religious themes echo in his letters and works, most of which have not been pointed out before, such as in the *Faust*. Finally, we will discuss our findings in the context of religious studies scholarship, and approach the issue of what can Goethe suggest for the meaning of a European Islām today.

Keywords: Islām, Goethe, Religious studies, Literary criticism, European Islām

Abstrak: Keagamaan Geothe menunjukkan keikhlasannya, namun pada masa yang sama telah lari daripada label ‘pengakuan’ dirinya yang sebenar. Ada yang mengatakan bahawa Goethe adalah seorang yang beragama Kristian, percaya kepada konsep ketuhanan, mason, dan seorang pagan (beragama kuno/jahiliah). Kertas kerja ini adalah untuk mengkaji keagamaan Geothe sepanjang hayatnya dan khususnya berkenaan dengan perhubungannya dengan agama Islām. Daripada semua agama yang dikaji dan dikaitkan oleh Goethe, Islām merupakan satu agama yang tidak mendapat satupun kritikan daripada pengkritik sastera tersebut, yang beliau mendalaminya sepanjang hayat beliau.

*Director, Institute of Islamic Studies Averro, Piacenza, Italy; Lecturer in Islamic Culture, Italian Institute for Islamic Studies, Milan, Italy; affiliated with the Department of Philosophy, Vita-Salute san Raffaele University, Milan, Italy. Email: Francesca.bocca@me.com.

Penulis ingin mencadangkan satu tempoh yang merangkumi hubungan beliau dengan Islām kepada empat peringkat yang mana agama tertentu dilantunkan dalam surat-suratnya dan dalam hasil kerja-kerja beliau, yang kebanyakannya tidak diberi penekanan dalam penulisan beliau sebelum ini, seperti *Faust*. Akhir sekali, penulis turut membincangkan hasil kajian dalam konteks kelebihan pengajian agamanya, dan menerangkan pendekatan isu kemampuan Goethe dalam mencadangkan makna Islām Eropah pada masa kini.

Kata kunci: Islām, Goethe, Pengajian Islām, Kritikan kesusasteraan, Islām Eropah

Introduction

The literary output¹ of Johannes Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) contains an abundance of religious references (Durrani 1977); the intensity of his spiritual life is evident from his letters, diaries and private conversations. Such references, although might appear diverse and even syncretic, have given rise to a variety of contraposing theories concerning Goethe's religiosity: already in classical works, however, it has been observed that labelling Goethe as either Christian, Jew or Pagan cannot be true in a literal sense (Naumann, 1955). This didn't discourage, amongst others, Christian apologetics to claim Goethe as a proponent of the superiority of Christianity over other religions (Moltmann 1993, 32). More recently, Goethe's spirituality has been re-read as a version of "classical humanism" (Nisbet 2002), stressing the more free-thinking aspects of his spirituality.

Goethe and religions

The methods employed by the proponents of these positions, although arriving at radically different conclusions, are remarkably similar: they either examine themes and characters of Goethe's works (for example, the presence of Greco-Roman virtues and characters as a clear indication of his closeness to paganism), or they start from moral remarks as the

¹ All Goethe's works are cited referring to the Weimarer Ausgabe, in 143 volumes: J.W. von Goethe, *Goethes Werke. Herausgegeben im Auftrage der Großherzogin Sophie von Sachsen*, 143 vols. 1887-1919, reprint, Munich, DTV, 1987. Cited by division, volume and page.

base of religious belonging (for example, Goethe's description of Jesus as a moral ideal to mean an acceptance of Christianity).

We believe that this method is inappropriate to approach Goethe: first of all, given the sheer length of his life and his extraordinary literary output, it is possible to extrapolate either appreciation or criticism towards almost any religious affiliation.

His positions, furthermore, went through considerable re-elaboration during his life, while other influences have been intense but fleeting, occupying him only for a short period of time. For example, it is well-known how, through the influence of Katharina von Klettenberg, Goethe embraced many pietistic aspects of belief during his stay in Strasbourg, in the years 1770-1771 (Bohm 2006), abandoning them immediately afterwards. Elements of open religious adherence, in Goethe's personal life, are remarkably scarce (Safranski 2017).

Finally, another aspect that should be kept in mind, when analysing Goethe's religious references, is the importance of symbols in Goethe's production. Such symbolism have been the object of numerous exoteric interpretations of his belief, the most well-known of which is Steiner's (1900), who made the poet into an antroposophist *ante-litteram*.

Such difficulties on the side of Goethe might seem enough to claim the impossibility of determining his religion, yet there is one other obstacle, this time on the side of the authors trying to investigate his religiosity. The methods employed are usually suitable for identifying literary influences, not religious ones. The presence of a religion, a religious character or a spiritual element in Goethe's works cannot be taken, by itself, as an indication of his belonging to that particular tradition.

The purpose of the present work is to take a specific religious tradition – the Islāmic one – and show its continuity in Goethe's religious experience, hoping of setting a systematic method for future analyses of other religious influences in his overall spiritual position.

Goethe and Islām

The reasons for choosing Islām as a relevant religion for Goethe's spirituality are many. The first is that, as we will show in our following analysis, it is a religion with which Goethe continuously dealt with – in

his life and works – throughout his life; we believe that continuity is one of the key characteristics an authentic spiritual experience must have.

Nevertheless, even in the most recent discussions of Goethe's religiosity, Islām is completely absent (Nisbet 2002), or at best briefly mentioned (Almond 2017).

Apart from the interest for the scholars of German literature, the study of Goethe's relationship with Islām can be helpful to reimagine the role of Islām in the West; at the times of Goethe, arguably, the Turks were seen as "the others" (Mommsen 1995), just like today Muslims are perceived (Eid 2014). Goethe might actually help opening a new road, as we will discuss later.

The earliest instance of an analysis of Goethe's Islāmic influences is the PhD thesis of S.H. Abdel-Rahim (1969), "Goethe und der Islām" which, unfortunately, has not been published. We believe it is not a coincidence that it was an Egyptian native scholar who opened the door for Goethe's Islāmic influences; Qur'ānic references are not of immediate identification to the Western scholar of literature, and even less so are echoes of Islāmic poetry or sayings of Muhammad (SAW); many times Goethe refers to Islāmic values that are not apparent from an academic reading of the sacred texts, but are fruit of an in-depth, religious meditation.

Abdel-Rahim's work, however, limits itself to discuss the different works in which Islāmic influences are most explicit, namely the Mahomet drama, his translation/adaptation of the Voltaire's *Mahomet*, and the *East-Westerner Divan*. His findings, slightly expanded to include the *Götz von Berlichingen*, have been the subject of research of Katharina Mommsen (2001). Her overall outlook on Goethe's relationship with Islām is, however, limited to the orientalist view of the Islāmic religion; for her, religious figures like Muhammad (SAW) and Oriental characters, such as the poet Hafez, are equally important for Goethe's relationship with Islām. Her work, however, brings a very important method: expanding the search for Goethe's Islāmic influences in his letters and conversations as well, and not only relegating it to his published works.

However, these works do still not respond to the question: What is the role of Islām in Goethe's religiosity? This question is – it is very

important to stress it – different than simply asking: “Was Goethe a Muslim?”. To the second question, Mommsen (2014) responds with a dry “no”, accusing the proponents of a “Muslim Goethe” of misquoting him. Her theory is that Goethe, although respectful of the Muslim religion, was actually more interested in the Oriental aspects, and that his acting as Muslim would equate the norm of the respectful traveller: “When in Rome, do as the Romans do” (Mommsen 2014, 248).

Aims and methods

Our aim is to analyse Goethe’s relationship with Islām with the tools of religious, rather than literary, sciences. To do so, we will employ two methods: in the first part of the article, we will formulate a periodisation of Goethe’s engagement with Islām, through an analysis of his published works as well as the material from his letters, conversations and autobiography. In the second part, we will discuss the topic of Goethe’s religion at the light of those findings, arriving to elaborate on the relevance of Islām for his spirituality, and its relevance for religious sciences at large.

The current work is situated as the conclusion of an analysis we have been conducting. The first step (Bocca-Aldaqr 2019a) was to show how the Qur’ān – a text that is in its nature religious – is the guiding text of the *Divan*, bringing Goethe’s work closer to the field of Islāmic studies. The second step (Bocca-Aldaqr 2019b) has been to analyse Goethe’s letters and highlight the presence and meaning of Islāmic terminology, introducing the religious importance of Islāmic themes to Goethe.

The present work will focus on Goethe’s published works, although his letters, conversations and autobiography will be referred to when necessary.

A proposed periodisation

Our purpose of creating a periodisation to analyse Goethe’s relationship with Islām serves the purpose of analysing religion as a dynamic entity, keeping therefore track of the different aspects of Islām that interested the poet at different times, and his spiritual elaboration of various themes. Another reason for following a strict periodisation, in the first part of the article, is to avoid the risk of being anti-chronological, which can happen when just extrapolating religious material.

The periods differ in many ways, of which four have been the criteria to distinguish them. First of all, the sources used; while the first period is based almost exclusively on the reading of the Qur'ān, the third is encyclopaedic in nature. Periods can also be distinguished on the basis of the dominating interest; in the first phase Goethe was concentrated on the figure of the Prophet (SAW), while on the third it is the style of the Qur'ān to catalyse his attention. Openness also varies; at the beginning of his Islāmic interests, Goethe is more vehement in his criticism of Christian dogmas, while in the second period a much more private meditation seems to prevail. Finally, with each subsequent period, the religious quality of the Islāmic material seems to get more and more important; while in the letters of the first period the references to the Qur'ān are occasional and almost always literal, in the last two he actively resorts to the religion of Islām as a spiritual solace.

Employing those criteria, we have identified four periods, summarised in Table 1. For each, we have proposed a time frame, a theme, and then have shown how Islāmic references are present in Goethe's work. In the last column, we refer to a few of the Islāmic references in Goethe's letters, autobiography and private conversations that were the object of our previous analysis (Bocca-Aldaqr letters).

1. Discovery: 1770-1777

In this formative period, Goethe entered in contact with the Qur'ān, read it, translated it, annotated it, and studied it (Bocca-Aldaqr Qur'ān). The characteristics of this phase are those of discovery: enthusiasm – in particular towards the figure of the Prophet (SAW) – and rebellion for those ideas and dogmas related to the past – for example the issue of crucifixion, as we will explain soon.

In this period, religious Islāmic elements can be found in two works: the *Satyros* (1770, WA I 16, 74), and the *Mahomet* (1772, WA I 39, 187). We should note that a Qur'ānic resonance is also present in the coeval *Götz von Berlichingen* (Mommsen 1972); however, it is a literary, and not religious, influence, and as such not relevant to our work.

The *Satyros* and the *Mahomet*, instead, develop crucial aspects of the Islāmic religion for Goethe. They are also very different in the way the Islāmic influence manifests itself and should be examined as

if one is mirroring the other. The *Satyros*, as we will see, limits itself to criticism of the religiosity surrounding Goethe, coherently with the Qur'ānic arguments, while the *Mahomet* will construct Goethe's new religious vision. In a way, while the *Satyros* has an approach closer to negative theology, the *Mahomet* adopts instead a positive one.

a. *Satyros* (1770)

Up to now, no analysis of the *Satyros* under a religious light has been accomplished, nor an analysis of its Islāmīc contents. The only reference to its theological relevance we could find is in the book *Der Einzige und sein Eigentum* [The Individual and his Property], by Max Stirner (1844), although interpreted in an existentialist light. However, the close proximity between the writing of this text and Goethe's first reading of the Qur'ān should be a clue of the possible presence of religious material.

The play is characterised by a mixing of entertainment and serious matters. The setting is populated by creatures of the Greek tradition (Trevelyan 1981), however, from the title itself – *Satyros oder der vergötterte Waldteufel* [*Satyros, or the divinized forest demon*]– a religious theme is present.

In it, is expressed a deep dislike for the ritual worship of the cross, at the beginning of Act II (WAI 16, 82). The first element of the monologue of *Satyros* is a dislike for the symbol itself and its worship, affirming that he “rather worship an onion” [*Lieber eine Zwiebel anbeten*] than that “image of carved wood” [*Schnitzbildlein*]. The second element, and the main theological point, is concerning God's transcendence, a key Islāmīc doctrine that Goethe found resonating with his personal spirituality. The *Satyros*, indeed, affirms: “God is God, and I am me” [*Denn Gott ist Gott, und ich bin ich*].

Of course, such a position could not have been expressed explicitly by the young Goethe, and therefore it is understandable Goethe's recurring to this symbolism.

Finally, similar observations concerning the cross will also occur in the *Faust* (2c), while the transcendence of God will be a key theme of all of Goethe's religious elaboration, starting from the *Mahomet*.

b. *Mahomet* (1772, 1777)

Mahomet, an unfinished tragedy, has been usually categorized, together with the *Prometeus*, as a representation of the *Titanismus*, proper of the *Sturm und Drang* period of Goethe (Kimura 1961). Another position is to take the *Mahomet* at face value, thinking that the only interest of Goethe was to describe the Prophet (SAW) in a way that resembled the romantic interest in him as a “hero” (Einboden 2014).

Our position is different. Goethe’s interest in Muhammad (SAW) was twofold; in him being a Prophet (SAW) - and therefore the one to whom the Qur’ān was entrusted - and secondarily in his positive human characteristics. The poet “never considered him an impostor” (WA I 28, 294), which give additional emphasis to the religious key in reading the *Mahomet*.

The first part of the tragedy, the Hymn, is a moving monologue in which Muhammad (SAW), before the beginning of Prophecy (which means, before the revelation of the Qur’ān had begun), seeks God in the astral entities, arriving to the conclusion that the only God must be transcendent and therefore beyond creation. This theme is, of course, of central relevance to Goethe who, since his earlier days, saw nature as a means to get closer to God, an omnipotent and transcendent being (WA I 26, 63).

We should also note that the exact same narrative flow is present in the Qur’ānic story of Abraham (PBUH) where, before being a Prophet (SAW), he sought God and, through observation of the astral beings, concluded the necessity of the One God. The story was well-known to Goethe, who translated the surah narrating it from Latin during his first reading of the Qur’ān (Bocca-Aldaqr, Qur’ān).

The second part of *Mahomet* is a dialogue between Muhammad (SAW) and Halima. The context is completely fictional; Halima was Muhammad (SAW)’s wet nurse, and it is unlikely that the two met again in Muhammad (SAW) adulthood, and that she heard his preaching.

In the dialogue, Muhammad (SAW) invites Halima to a pure form of monotheism, without obtaining any result. While keeping a Qur’ānic rhetoric, the frustration of the Prophet (SAW) in seeing his people not understanding his spirituality is very much Goethe’s frustration, who

will confess it to Eckermann when describing to him this phase of his life: “I believed in God, in nature and in the victory of good upon evil; but to the pious souls this was not enough; I should have also professed that three are one, and one is three, but this repulsed my soul’s sense of truth”².

The final part of the tragedy is the most well-known; it is a dialogue between Ali and Fatima, which Goethe later transformed into a monologue and published under the title *Mahometsgesang* (Kahn 1974). Literary criticism has usually studied it for the uncommon image of the river, to which the Prophet (SAW) is, compared (Elmarsafy 2009, 167). In it, Ali and Fatima are celebrating the success of Muhammad (SAW), while, at the same time, keeping true to his Prophetic mission. We remind that Muhammad (SAW)’s victories have often been read in a violent light, perceiving him more as a military leader than a religious one. In the dialogue, Goethe overturns this myth; the Prophet (SAW)’s actions have a clear soteriological purpose, and the conclusion of his mission is to re-conduct people to God. This is, we note, different than the view of the *Mahometsgesang* being about the Prophet (SAW)’s “trajectory, not his teachings” (Nicholls 2006, 134).

To summarise the characteristics of this first period of Goethe’s engagement with Islām, they revolve around two poles: the criticism of widespread religious practices in his Christian environment and the positive affirmation of values contained in the Qur’ān, as well as teachings from the Prophet (SAW).

2. Elaboration: 1786-1813

In this second period, Goethe’s explicit Islāmic references become more scarce. He begins, in our opinion, a deep process of rendering Islām more personal, for example through a usage of Islāmic vocabulary to express his spirituality, or through a re-definition of other terms to suit Islāmic theological concepts (Bocca-Aldaqr letters). This is the meaning of the “elaboration” he undergoes in this period.

Goethe’s works referring to Islām are three: his notes from the *Italian Journey*, the translation of Voltaire’s *Mahomet*, and finally the first part of the *Faust*.

2 Conversation of January 4th, 1824

a. *The Italian Journey (1786-1788)*

The *Italian Journey* was Goethe's "quest", which should be examined as "a psychological document of the first importance" (Auden 2010). To discuss its religious importance, its soul-searching dimensions should be kept in mind. Goethe left Weimar with a deep sense of dissatisfaction and returned with a clear poetic and human identity.

Recently, Goethe's approach to travelling has been appreciated for its authenticity, when compared to the ostentation of the other tourists of his time (Dainotto 2004). The poet himself described his state of mind, similar to the one of a pilgrim, by calling the *Journey* "Hegire" (WAI 32, 86) after the Prophet (SAW)'s own migration from Mecca to Medina. Subsequently, Goethe will use again this term, to refer not to a physical, but to a spiritual and intellectual pilgrimage (Bocca-Aldaqr letters).

Even though the *Italian Journey* would be published much later than the actual journey, in 1813, it is important to note that Goethe already used the term Hegire to refer to it in his letter to the Duke Carl-August, during the travel, (WA IV 8, 33), and therefore it is to this date that the connection Italian Journey-Hegire must have been established.

b. *Voltaire's Mahomet (1799)*

Goethe's translation of Voltaire's *Mahomet*, commissioned to him by the duke Carl August, has been examined thoroughly by Abdel-Rahim (1969, 143-166). As a matter of fact, Goethe performed an adaptation, rather than a translation, of the drama. His contributions are not simply linguistical, but often time mitigate Voltaire's harshness towards Muhammad (SAW), safeguarding the character of the Prophet (SAW).

Voltaire's opinion of Muhammad (SAW) as a mere impostor clashed strongly with Goethe's belief in his sincerity, as well as with the descriptions he made of him in his own *Mahomet* drama (1b), as well as in the *West-Eastern Divan* (3a, 3c).

Goethe made clear to the Duke that his views were contrary to the ones of the drama, highlighting his work was only accomplished "for duty" (WA IV 15, 8). The response of the Duke, encouraging Goethe in his work, while nicknaming him "Meccanus" (Abdel-Rahim 1969, 147), shows that Carl August was aware of the poet's affinity with Islām.

We do not know whether the Duke noticed the many “free translations” of Goethe, as well as his omissions. While Abdel-Rahim analyses chronologically the differences between the French original and the German rendering, we will limit ourselves to grouping the relevant ones for religious reasons, along two themes; defending the figure of the Prophet (SAW), and defending the religion of Islām.

Goethe’s defense of the Prophet (SAW) is achieved mainly through the choice of words describing his character that are much milder than the original. While Voltaire describes Muhammad (SAW) as “cruel” or “impitoyable” [merciless], Goethe instead limits himself to “Härte” [severity] (Abdel-Rahim 1969, 152). When one of the characters, in the original from Voltaire, spends two lines in praising Muhammad (SAW), Goethe catches the occasion, transforming it in six verses of praise in the German version (Abdel-Rahim 1969, 157). Several passages, in which the Prophet (SAW) was described as committing heinous actions, have been cut from the German version (Abdel-Rahim 1969, pp. 162-163).

The defense of Islām, instead, has to do with more substantial changes that Goethe operated. Voltaire’s Mahomet is an impostor, and therefore his plans are shrouded in secrecy. Goethe, instead, while minimizing Muhammad (SAW)’s plotting, includes dialogues in which he communicates them with his companions (Abdel-Rahim 1969, 152). The most striking defense of Islām as a religion, though, occurs in the fact that Goethe simply omitted to translate some passages into German. Mahomet’s verse “Mon triomphe en tout temps est fondé sur l’erreur” [My triumph is always founded on error]. Similarly, Goethe does not translate the verse “Je viens mettre à profit les erreurs de la terre” [I will always benefit from the error on Earth], substituting it with a verse in which Muhammad (SAW) feels destined to rule the Earth (Abdel-Rahim 1969, 153-154).

c. Faust. First Part (1808)

The last work belonging to this period of elaboration is the *Faust*; in it, aside from mythological and historical elements, a huge amount of Biblical scriptural allusions can be found (Durrani 1977). It is, therefore, surprising how none of the previous referenced works on Goethe and Islām mentioned the presence of Islāmic elements in the *Faust*.

We will point out two passages that have clear Qur'ānic allusions and that are relevant to the overall religious themes of the Faust as well.

The first explicit reference is in the *Prolog in Himmel* [Prologue in Heaven], in which a dialogue takes place between God and Mephisto (WA I 16, 22). Mephisto proposes to God a deferment, a period of time in which he could act on Earth, tempting humans. God grants it to him, stating that man is prone to error as long as his earthly life continues. A very similar dialogue happens in the Qur'ān (7:14-17), in which Satan "said, "Reprieve me until the Day they are resurrected." [God] said, "Indeed, you are of those reprieved." [Satan] said, "Because You have put me in error, I will surely sit in wait for them on Your straight path."

The second passage is Faust's monologue, when, in Marta's garden, he is interrogated by Gretchen concerning his faith (WA I 16, 172-173). She is reluctant in conceding herself to him, and therefore asks him, with more and more pressing questions, his stance on religion. Faust begins by reassuring her that he "wouldn't rob anybody oh his sentiment or his church", but Gretchen isn't convinced, asking him: "Do you believe in God?". Faust's response is a long monologue, in which he tries to defend his faith in God, with particularly Qur'ānic expressions: God is the one who supports everything ("*Allerhalter*", Qur'ān 20:6), the one who encompasses everything ("*Allumfassender*", Qur'ān 6:103). Faust then moves on to formulate rhetorical questions, in which the signs of nature become proofs of the omnipotence of God; this is the case for the curvature of the heavens ("*wölbt sich der Himmel nicht dadoben?*", Qur'ān 13:2) and the solidity of the ground ("*liegt die Erde nicht hierunter fest?*", Qur'ān 31:10).

Interestingly, the response of Gretchen is a sharp: "you are not Christian" ("*du hast kein Christentum*").

3. *Maturity: 1814-1819*

This period in Goethe's life, overlapping with the composition of the *Divan*, was dense with Islāmic studies. Differently from the first period, it is much more thoroughly documented. Goethe's meticulous notetaking of his activities and readings in his diaries is a very precious source in understanding the extent of his involvement in Islāmic studies. A complementary source is the critical apparatus of notes and essays

[*Noten und Abhandlungen*] that Goethe decided to append to the lyrical material of the *Divan*.

In the past, we have analyzed Qur'ānic influences in the *Divan* (Bocca-Aldaqrē, Qur'ān), concluding that their ubiquity, as well as the depth of reflection on the main themes of the Book, which strongly suggests Goethe's usage of the text with a spiritual, rather than only literary, involvement.

Mommsen (2014, Chapter 5) noted that in the *Divan*, however, dissent from Islām is also present. We agree. Goethe's involvement with any religious tradition is personal, critical, and sometimes generating dramatic tensions, almost conflicts. The presence of dissent – which, we argue, is limited to matters of law, and never of creed, concerning Islām – does not invalidate the authenticity of the religious experience.

What characterizes this period, from a religious perspective, is the codification of the term “Islām” as abandonment [*Ergebung*] to God, a virtue that Goethe struggled to practice in his daily life, as witnessed by his letters (Bocca-Aldaqrē, letters)

a. Poems of the Divan (1814-1819)

When observing religious themes in the *Divan*, it is useful to trace their origin in the previous periods that we have identified. We will limit ourselves here to religious themes of the *Divan* that have their origin in Goethe's previous periods, referring for a more complete analysis to other publications (Abdel-Rahim 1969, Bocca-Aldaqrē Qur'ān)

The first theme we analysed was the figure of the Prophet (SAW), first with the composition of *Mahomet*, in 1772, and second with the translation/adaptation of Voltaire's *Mahomet*, in 1799. In the *Divan*, the view of the Prophet (SAW) view is coherent with the previous works of Goethe, as has already been observed (Leder 2001).

The second theme is monotheism, which served as reading key for the *Mahomet*, as we mentioned before, and which is the nucleus of *Faust*'s religiosity. We should mention that Goethe's position towards religions in the *Divan* has been already analyzed (Preisker 1952). The reading of the *Divan* as a Christian work, in which several others religious traditions flow into, is however fundamentally incorrect.

Although Christ is present in the lyrics, the Christology of the *Divan* is fundamentally Islāmic (WA I 6, 288-289; Bocca-Aldaqrē Qur’ān).

The third theme regards the word *Hegire*, the term Goethe referred to in the Italian journey and his letter for his soul-searching experience (2a). In the years of the composition of the *Divan*, Goethe uses the word *Hegira* to refer to his studies of Islām and Arabic (WA IV 25, 154), and then titled “*Hegira*” the introductory poem of the *Divan* (WA I 6, 5).

b. Literary Review (1816)

A supplementary source to understand the religious state of mind that produced the *Divan* is a short article, in the form of an author’s review, which Goethe produced for the *Morgenblatt*, a literary journal. As it was published in 1816, many of the poems would have been already composed, while the *Notes and Essays* wouldn’t have.

In this review, Goethe describes his interior travel to the East, stating: “The poet does not reject and suspicion that he himself might be a Muslim” (WA I 41, 86). He proceeds outlining the contents of the respective books.

There has been quite some controversy on this particular statement by Goethe; in particular Mommsen (2014) has accused those who take it to mean Goethe’s adherence to Islām to “manipulate the text”, and arriving to “incorrect conclusions”. We will propose a different interpretation in the Discussion, in the light of all four the periods of our division.

c. Notes and Essays (1819)

In the notes and Essays, Goethe’s Islāmic reflections are much more evident and open compared to the lyrical material. As they have already been the source of deep analysis (Abdel-Rahim 1982), we will just briefly sum them before continuing to the final period. Goethe discusses the style of the Qur’ān, finding its complexity fascinating (Mommsen 1964). He also discusses many of his contemporaries’ positions regarding Islām and, although never openly stating his own in detail, one can deduce his deep appreciation for this religion and culture (Golz 1999, 132).

At the same time, we are puzzled as to how the importance of Islāmic material has been downplayed when discussing Goethe’s

own belief, and on the basis of the very same essays (Plathow 2012). Others, rightfully so, have argued that “riddles and masquerades belong to the *Divan*’s poetics”, and therefore the Essays could be useful for understanding what is authentically Goethean, beyond the Oriental play that permeates the lyrics (Purdy 2015).

In the notes, Goethe identifies the connection between ‘*das Sinnliche*’ [meaning both “sensory” and “sensuous”] and ‘*das Übersinnliche*’ [transcending the “*sinnliche*”] as the foundation of the poetry of the Orient, and his own (Bell 2000); the overall role of poetry is one of “elevating” the human beyond earthly domain, to a Heavenly one (Bell 2000, Bocca-Aldaqré letters). The statements that seem to confirm Goethe’s partaking in the Islāmic experience are those praising the Prophet (SAW) (Abdel-Rahim 1982), to which the pinnacle is the well-known statement: “And what should prevent the poet himself from riding Muḥammad’s miraculous horse and travelling through the heavens? Why should he not, full of veneration, celebrate the holy night, in which the Qur’ān was revealed, complete, to the Prophet (SAW) from above? »³” (WA I 7, 152-153, discussed in Mommsen 1964)

4. *Spirituality: 1820-1832*

The last phase of Goethe’s involvement with Islām is mainly spiritual in characters. All the themes have matured, as we have outlined in the previous sections, and Goethe’s experience of the Muslim religion becomes more “lived” in his day-to-day life.

The event that triggered this shift, we propose, was the publication of the first collection of poems of the *Divan*, after which Goethe, as stated in a conversation with Eckermann, wasn’t completely satisfied (dated to January 14th, 1827, see point 4b). The poet was unsatisfied with the “Oriental” aspects of his poetry, wishing instead to deepen the aspects of the “Muslim religion” that he found “befitting my age: Unconditional surrender to God’s will, the joyous observation of the rotating and recurring movement of Earth, as well as love, affection between two worlds, all reality purified, all symbols dissolved» (WA IV 33, 27).

3 WA I 7, 152-153.

a. *Second edition of the poems (1820-1826)*

This spiritual tension can be found in the second edition of the *Divan*; as we have already observed, in them the Qur'ānic references are less literal and more personal (Bocca-Aldaqrē Qur'ān). We will limit ourselves to an example of such tension; the transfiguration of sexual forces.

One of the earliest criticisms that Goethe made to Christianity, and in particular to monastic life, is the negative opinion of human sexuality. It recurs, explicitly, in the *Satyros* (WA I 16, 90) and in the *Götz von Berlichingen* (WA I 8, 14), where the figure of the hermit/monk is pitied for his chastity which is a “force of habit” [*Gewohnheitsposse*] in the words of *Satyros*, and, in *Gotz*, by the words of Martin himself, a monk, “a state which condemns the best instincts [...] in name of a misunderstood desire of getting closer to God” [*eines Standes, der die besten Triebe, [...], aus mißverständener Begierde Gott näher zu rücken, verdammt*]. These earlier remarks were not formulated under an Islāmic light at first, while in this last period Goethe adopts the image of the sensual aspects of the Muslim Heaven as deeply consonant to his sensibility. In this way, even eroticism gains a religious dimension; the beloved (Suleika/Marianne, Abdel-Rahim 1982) is transfigured into a *ḥouri* (WA I 6, 257), and the moment of union on Earth becomes a mirror of the blessed union in Paradise (WA I 6, 253).

b. *Conversations with Eckermann (1823-1832)*

In the *Gespräche*, or *Conversations* (Eckermann 1836-1848), Goethe's secretary, Johann-Peter Eckermann, transcribes the occasional colloquia between him and the poet, in the last years of the latter's life. Although technically not authored by Goethe, the poet's intentions of transmitting his own view and image, while at the same time serving as a mentor to Eckermann – and the following generations of readers – are primary.

Proceeding to the Islāmic elements in the *Conversations*, they are of two types; in the first, Goethe tries to introduce Eckermann with some lesser-known aspects of the Muslim world, in an attempt to mentor him culturally, while in the second the reflection is authentically religious. We will present one example for each.

The first type occurs in the conversation of April 11th, 1827, which is a discussion of the educational systems of Islām. Goethe defines the curricula of the Muslims “remarkable”. He observes that their

educational system “starts by strengthening the conviction – which is the basis of their religion – that is that nothing can happen to man, that it wasn’t long before established by an all-powerful divinity.” This is, of course, the doctrine of *qadar*, that Goethe himself held in very high esteem (Mommesen 1982; Bocca-Aldaqr Qur’ān). Its effect is to make Muslims “equipped and tranquil for life”. Goethe also shows a remarkable knowledge about the dialectic methods of Muslim education: “In philosophy, the Muhammadans begin their teaching from the premise that there is nothing whose contrary couldn’t be convincingly argued”. The fruit of this aspect is “a great agility of thought and word”.

Moving to the second type of Islāmic reference in the *Conversations*, it occurs on March 8th, 1831; its theme is the absolutely unfathomable essence of God. To explain it, Goethe resorts to the Islāmic doctrine of the names of God, which are a topic that he was studying in the same period, according to his diaries (WA III 10, 235). Goethe starts by asking Eckermann: “What do we know of the idea of the Divine, and

what can our limited concepts ever say about the Highest Being?”. He brings, to illustrate his point, an example from the Muslim world: “Even if I invoked him, as the Turk does, with one-hundred names, I wouldn’t ever encompass Him, as I wouldn’t have said anything of his infinite attributes.”

As the Colloquia have been abundantly used to discuss Goethe’s religiosity (Bell 2000; Osten 2002; Naumann 1952), we strongly believe the Islāmic elements should be taken into account as well.

c. *Faust. Second Part (1832)*

Faust represents the concluding work by Goethe, and the one which composition and interest pervaded his whole life. Goethe himself defined his work “an obvious puzzle”, and an appropriate literary criticism of this work, therefore, should take a different approach, based on the coupling between revelation and concealment (von Molnár 2002). Following this exegetical suggestion, we will therefore propose a few aspects of the puzzle that might be indeed of Islāmic origin.

The matter of Goethe’s self-identification with Faust has been insightfully discussed (Brown 2014), and therefore it is befitting that the same themes highlighted in our previous periodisation would now re-echo in the *Faust*.

The main topic which should be addressed is Faust's salvation (Henning 2013). The theodicy of the Faustian Lord is, at a first reading, incomprehensible. An attentive critic like Citati (1990) has observed that the salvation of Faust is incompatible with the Christian dogma. In the words of Citati, Faust is saved because he has "an original nature oriented towards goodness", and because, despite all his sins and mistakes, it remains "pristine" (*ibid.*, p. 239). This description, however, is the exact definition of the doctrine of the "original predisposition" – *al-fiṭrah* – in Islāmic theology. The aspect of man's nature being inclined towards salvation, and towards recognition of God, is the exact same topic we mentioned when discussing the *Mahomet* drama, in this very article (1b).

Another aspect in which the interests of religious and literary studies conflate, is the wealth of symbols that pervade the Faust (Emrich 1957); as the Islāmic imagination was so well-known to Goethe, in it might be some aspects of the "obvious puzzle". One example: the "good king", described in the first act, shows two characteristics that resonate with the image of the Prophet (SAW). The king's face is "like the moon [*Mondgesicht*]" (WA I 15.1 42), and Muhammad (SAW) "resembled, in his face, the full moon" (Schimmel 2014). The head of the king, furthermore, is adorned with a turban, a symbol that Goethe deeply identified with the Muslim world; in the *Divan*, it is described as one of the "four graces" donated by God to the Arabs (WA I 6, 12).

Discussion

Although the question of Goethe's religiosity is far from settled, in the last years no new theories have emerged. Even more recent and authoritative works on Goethe's religiosity, however, continue to neglect Islām totally (Plathow 2012). Recent works on other aspects of Goethe, although not focused directly on his religiosity, have proposed nevertheless new readings of his spirituality. For example, in an analysis of his naturalistic writing, his approach to sciences has been read as analogous to Einstein's "cosmic religion" (Amrine et al. 2012). Often, they list qualities of Goethe's religiosity that are unequivocally Islāmic, but without providing a coherent framework. For example, Goethe's dislike of the symbol of the cross, of mediation in the relationship with God, or of the doctrine of the original sin. When an explanation is proposed, it is usually in the line of Goethe's "debt to the Enlightenment"

(Nisbet 2002, p. 221), although many religious views of Goethe, such as predestination and eternity of the souls, are not coherent with this explanation.

The question of Goethe's religiosity is nevertheless crucial today, not only for providing a key for the interpretation of his works, but for the understanding of the complex life of one of the most important figures in Western culture and, in a wider contextualization, for the issue of the belonging of Islām in the West.

We hope, with the periodisation above, to have contextualised better and brought to light new elements that link Goethe and the Muslim religion. What remains to be made is to discuss such elements into a coherent view of Goethe and Islām.

Once understood the limits of the current view of Goethe's religiosity, we can ask: how does our analysis differ then from older works on Goethe and Islām? The distinguishing points are three: continuity in time, harmonization of public and private, and explanation of symbols.

The first aspects regards the important religious characteristics of continuity; the first interest of Goethe in Islām happened when he was in his early twenties, and it continued up to a few weeks before his death.

Continuity, though, shouldn't only be temporal, but also between the different spheres pertaining to a person's life. In this article, we have highlighted how Goethe's Islāmic religious references can be found in his works, while previously we have shown their presence in his letters and private conversations (Bocca-Aldaqr letters).

Finally, the presence of an Islāmic religious component has helped to identify symbols and references that had been ignored up to now.

The last point to discuss, therefore, is Goethe's religious belonging. As we mentioned (3c), some authors criticised harshly the idea of a "Muslim Goethe" (Mommsen, 2014), while others do admit the authenticity of his spiritual engagement with the Muslim world (Abdel-Rahim 1989), yet without discussing it in the context of Goethe's religiosity.

We believe that this topic is intertwined with the complex issues of religious and cultural identities. The issue of what a European Islām

means is a hot topic in Muslim theology (Ramadan 2013) as well as in academic discourse (Cesari 2007).

Goethe, by engaging directly with the Muslim sources and incorporating them in his religious experience has, with the strength of his example, given a possible response. For him, Islām is not a religious denomination whose belonging is ratified by the fulfilment of some obligation, or the pronouncement of a creed. Islām is rather a spiritual attitude of “abandonment” [*Ergebung*] to God, that can be achieved through the humble observation of nature (as does the *Mahomet* by gazing at the sky), through the affirmation of uncompromising monotheism (as does *Faust*, or the *Satyros*) and, finally, through a Hegira, a continuous state of seeking, of which the *Divan* is the best example.

It is with this conception of Islām that the researcher must deal, when trying to answer the question: was Goethe a Muslim? Only under this light it is possible to reconcile Goethe’s statement: “I am only seeking to hold onto Islām” (WA IV 33, 240) with his verses: «If Islām means submitting to God, / In Islām we all live and die” (WA I 6, 128), together with his appreciation and incorporation of other religion traditions, from the pagan to the Christian.

Conclusion

Many aspects of Goethe’s belief that have been previously read as being part of a subjective view of religiosity, can be read in a coherent frame knowing that they belong to Islām, as we attempted to do in explaining Goethe’s theory of salvation, or divine transcendence. We believe that the analysis shown here can compensate a widely overlooked aspect of Goethe’s religiosity.

We have shown how the interest for the Muslim religion is the reason for Goethe’s self-identification, or Hegira, with the Oriental elements of his later poetry, and not the other way round. This overturns the primary role given to Hafez (Einboden 2014) or to the cultural dimension of the East (Almond 2017) in Goethe’s later poetic production.

The elements shown in our work are therefore relevant to the field of cultural studies; Goethe’s effort in overcoming the East-West dichotomy has already been observed, through the usage of the term “Hegira”, and the figure of Hatim, the poet’s alter-ego in the *Divan* (Weber 2001). Such intercultural approach, paired with the Islāmīc elements shown in the

periodisation above, can be useful in approaching another, even more urgent, dichotomy: Islām and the West. As an intercultural translation of the *Divan* has already been accomplished (Bidney 2010), we wish a religious one will follow soon.

The last discipline that could benefit from a more in-depth understanding of Goethe's relationship with Islām is literary criticism, and in particular German studies. The early roots of Goethe's interest in the Islāmic faith, as well as his effort in translating the key Muslim terms into German, as well as the Qur'ān, could be sources to be connected to his later production. The *Divan*, therefore, should be read as a religious, as much as a literary work. Also, a more in-depth analysis of the *Faust* should be accomplished, in search for Islāmic symbols that might help decipher the "obvious puzzle".

Although by no means a conclusion, a further prompt for discussion – both academic and practical – is the possible belonging of Islām in European culture. The position of Goethe seems to bypass common stereotypes of what it means to be a Muslim; by defining Islām as a religious state, and incorporating Islāmic attitudes and narratives in his works and private spirituality, Goethe shows a way of engagement with Islām that is neither syncretic, nor an erasure of one's other identities. To the theologians now the task of discussing if Goethe's Islām is, indeed, a possible European Islām for today.

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Table 1. A scheme of the four periods of Goethe's engagement with Islām, their characteristics and references in his works.

Period	Characteristics	Islāmic references and influences	
		In the published works	In the personal sources ¹
1770-1777 Discovery	- Religious struggle - Interest in the figure of Muhammad (SAW)	Satyros (1770) Mahomet drama (1772) Mahometsgesang (1777)	Dichtung und Wahrheit Letters Koran-Auszüge
1786-1813 Elaboration	- Seeking: the travel as Hegira - Indirect meditations on Islāmic sources	Voltaire's Mahomet (1799) Italian Journey (1786-1788) Faust I (1808)	Letters Letters to Goethe
1814-1819 Maturity	- Systematic studies of Islāmic - theology - Studies of Arabic language	Divan (first edition, 1819) Review (1816)	Diaries Letters
1820-1832 Spirituality	- Interest in more spiritual, less oriental themes - Elaboration on the theme of predestination (qadar)	Divan (second edition, 1827) Faust II (1832)	Diaries Letters Conversations with Eckermann

(Footnotes)

1 (Adapted from Bocca-Aldaqr, 2019b)

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