

History of Islam in German Thought: From Leibniz to Nietzsche

Review Number:

939

Publish date:

Thursday, 1 July, 2010

Author:

Ian Almond

ISBN:

978-0415995191

Date of Publication:

2009

Price:

£66.50

Pages:

216pp.

Publisher:

Routledge

Place of Publication:

London

Reviewer:

Suzanne Marchand

This is the book about German Orientalism I felt I could not and did not want to write, and I am very grateful to Ian Almond for having produced it. In a series of eight chapters, Almond, a professor of English at Georgia State University and author of three other books on related topics, discusses sequentially the place of Islam in the works of leading German philosophers and poets from about 1680 to 1890. Very welcome are Almond's in-depth treatments of German thinkers – famously excluded from Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1) – and his reflections on their sources; he has wisely chosen to focus, too, on the German reception of Islam and the Ottoman Empire, the part of the Orient that was most difficult for all Europeans to romanticize. Almond also reminds his readers frequently of the changing nature of European-Ottoman relationships against which works like Leibniz's *Thoughts on the Unfortunate Retreat from Hungary* (1683) were written. All of these things make Almond's book an important contribution to ongoing debates about the continuing validity of Said's model, while his deep knowledge of the writings of all of these well-studied figures (Leibniz, Kant, Herder, Friedrich Schlegel, Hegel, Goethe, Marx, Nietzsche) make the book an interesting and profitable read. It is the first step, though not an entirely unproblematic one, toward a new understanding of European-Asian cultural encounters in the era of *European*, rather than Ottoman or Chinese, empire-building.

Readers who are primarily interested in one or another of these figures can easily turn to the relevant chapter, and find therein a careful and concise discussion of the ways in which Goethe or Marx wrote about the Islamic world. But for the reader more interested in the general topic of Orientalism, certainly most important part of the book is Almond's brief introduction. Here the author discusses the process by which he abandoned his original plan, provoked by Said's critique of Europe's 'discourse on the Orient', 'to write a history of the demonization of Islam in mainstream German thought' (p. 1; we will leave aside for the

moment the question of what ‘mainstream’ might mean here). Almond had to give up the demonization narrative, first of all, in the face of ‘the truly bewildering variety of responses in one thinker to the faith and cultures of Islam, responses which were so zigzagging and contradictory in nature that I was forced to rethink not merely the book, but my entire concept of what an ‘author’ is’ (p. 1). Secondly, his original vision was complicated by the realization that the ‘big thinkers’ drew upon works by historians and philologists some of whom, rather than devoting themselves to defaming the Muslim world, ‘dedicated their energies to correcting European images of the Turk with volume after volume of translated Turkish writings’ (p. 2). Sometimes the philosophers took this Islamophilic scholarship into account; more often, as the author admits at the book’s close, they ‘tried hard not to think about Muslims at all’ (p. 166). Almond concludes that we can no longer claim, as did Said, that “‘What Orientalists ... made available, the literary crowd exploited’” (p. 84). Rather, we have here to do with the development of compartmentalized subjectivities (to which I will return below) and what he calls ‘a filtered Orient’ (p. 3), a series of images produced as the German elite ‘sifted through a variety of Orientalia, taking the nuggets they needed but either overlooking or consciously rejecting anything which conflicted with their requirements’ (p. 3).

I like very much the idea of a ‘filtered Orient,’ a conception that takes into account German thinkers’ openness to non-European cultures, as well as their continuing and undigested prejudices, and their willful disregard of evidence, and thus makes it possible to escape the Saidian notion that before the 1970s, no one was able to think outside his or her continental box. As critiques of the Saidian paradigm now make it virtually impossible to uphold, this may well be the best over-arching concept now available for understanding the great variety of European engagements with the cultures, histories and languages of the vast region to Europe’s East. But we need to figure out how, for Almond, this filtering process works, and what it is that is actually being filtered. A clue here comes only in the final pages, where Almond says that his book has tried ‘to provide an idea of how a history of German thought might look to a Muslim observer – more specifically, to an observer who was only interested in how their [sic] own culture and faith influenced, featured in and interacted with the German philosophical tradition’ (pp. 165–6). This imaginary observer, moreover, is clearly presumed to be one who believes, as does Almond, that his Ottoman Empire is ‘every bit as complex and tolerant’ and we might add, industrialized and democratic, as the Europe of his day. And Almond seems to want to find this relativistic treatment of the Islamic world in sympathetic judgments of that world *as a whole*. The upshot of these assumptions is that negative statements –including comments about Ottoman ‘decadence’, ‘backwardness’, or ‘barbarism’ – even when they are addressed only to *parts* of the Islamic world, are treated as effects of the filtering devices, as mere prejudice. But what if we note that European philosophers regularly made critical indictments of the ‘backwardness’, ‘decadence’, or ‘barbarism’ of some aspects of their own or neighboring states? (Has anyone read recently what Marx said about the Czar, or Schopenhauer about the Catholic Church, or Max Nordau about Ibsen’s plays?) Then we could conclude that some, at least, thought some parts of the European world ‘every bit as degenerate and bigoted’ as the Ottoman Empire – or simply that intellectuals tend to be critical of the cultural worlds around them. What, moreover, if we acknowledge that some of their ‘prejudices’ about the Ottoman world might have *some* basis in reality?

This would be a tricky, and possibly politically uncomfortable (if not ‘incorrect’) thing to do; one could juxtapose, for example, 19th-century Istanbul and Naples, or Cairo and Marseilles, and produce a picture of equivalent Ottoman and European modernities. Certainly, one doesn’t want to overstate European toleration, or even generalize about it as a whole; Czar Nicholas I was more despotic than his contemporary Sultans, Mahmud II and Abdülmejid I, and even English liberals often held racist views about Jews, Africans, and Irish Catholics. Indeed, rather ironically, *actual* Turkish visitors to Europe were by no means insensible to the forms of ‘backwardness’, ‘decadence’, or ‘barbarity’ abroad in the Muslim world (though they would have identified different sources or causes of these things). Many of them – like Enver Pasha, or Osman Hamdi Bey, for example – were themselves extremely critical of Islam, and of modern Turkish culture, and eager to learn how to modernize their military, medical and cultural institutions by modeling them on European equivalents. But Almond has not studied these visitors, and it seems as if he would rather not mention that in the Ottoman lands, there *were* also periodic stabbings in the seraglio, sultans with multiple wives, massacres of Christians, financial chaos; nor does it seem that he really takes on board the fact that

much of the Orientalist literature *did* have unpleasant things to say about Islam and the Ottomans, not all of them accurate or consistent with one another! One wishes Almond had introduced into his book a little of the real-world perspective available in Paula Fichtner's study of early modern Austrian Orientalism, *Terror and Toleration: The Habsburg Empire Confronts Islam, 1526–1850*.⁽²⁾ Taking such a perspective would make it possible to identify critical comments as more or less well-informed generalizations or critiques, rather than as pure prejudice, or as deviations from a supposedly consistently Islamophilic Orientalist literature. We might even find that critiques of the Ottoman world have their roots in Ottoman subjects' own complaints, a finding that would, again, help us escape the Saidian house of mirrors.

Almond's 'imaginary Muslim observer' model, then, ends up favoring those who tended to give Islam and/or the Ottomans a positive spin, and Europe a negative one. I found, accordingly, the chapters on Marx, Herder, Nietzsche, and to some extent, Leibniz most rich and interesting, as Almond, cutting across the Saidian grain, shows how willing these writers were to praise Arab poetry or Muslim manliness (though in some parts, or compartments, of their works, all of these figures also drew on negative stereotypes, as did Herder, for example, in his theological works, and Marx in rendering 'the Turk' a stumbling block to progress (p. 142)). Less satisfying are Almond's chapters on Kant, Friedrich Schlegel, Goethe and Hegel, in part because for most of these figures, there are very few direct statements to analyze, and the author must push his texts very hard to get them to say anything at all relevant. Sometimes, as in his treatment of Kant's 'fear of Islam,' one feels the claims are much overblown; I suspect that Kant treats Islam cursorily not because he is trying to contain his anxieties, but because he is much less anxious about Muslim *Schwärmerei* than about Christian fanaticism. In fact, it is hard to see how Kant, or Hegel, can fight free of their filters, or escape being blamed for the constraints and conventions of the genres in which they wrote. Almond criticizes Kant for attempting to contain and dismiss Islam when he treats Muhammed dispassionately (p. 50), and though Hegel 'saves no criticism' in describing the Crusaders' murders of the inhabitants of Constantinople and Jerusalem, his critique is said to be 'primarily metaphysical, not humanitarian' (p. 119). Perhaps so; but after all, this is *Hegel* we're dealing with, and, as Marx showed, a metaphysical critique can be deployed for practical purposes with relative ease. Though Almond is more sensitive than his predecessors in his appreciation of the ways in which the same author, writing in a different genre or for a different audience, might portray 'the Turk' differently, we still need to refine the idea of 'a filtered Orient' so that we don't simply criticize authors for not saying what we think they should have said, in the way that we today might say it.

One of the nice things about Almond's book is that he does, in the space of a very concise book, sketch the historical contexts in which his writers worked; but this historian, at least, wishes he had really taken changes in of ideas over time, and across the many different genres in which these authors wrote, more seriously. Almond recognizes, for example, why Goethe and Friedrich Schlegel developed more powerful prejudices against Islam after the Napoleonic wars; in the first instance, the Greek Wars of Independence and the Restoration convinced the poet that the Ottoman Turks were reactionary suppressors of what he believed to be modern, secular quests for freedom. In the case of Schlegel, as Almond nicely puts it, after his conversion and his political shift to the right, he discovered that his 'substantial knowledge of Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic' had become excess baggage – and he had to jettison it, or at least the pieces of it that he had used to criticize European culture (p. 106). But rather than embracing the notion that individuals' worldviews might really change over time, or that there might be some consistency in liking Arabic (secular) poetry and disapproving of the Sultanate's religious policies, Almond favors the view that these figures 'ultimately' held contradictory ideas, in which negative conceptions consistently got the upper hand (cf. p. 2, p. 86, p. 102). In fact, rather than seeing the increasing number of contradictory statements in the 19th century as a function of the accelerating pace of changes in the Ottoman Empire (or as a function of the massively increased accessibility of news, images, and scholarly publications in Europe), Almond sees an increasing tendency on the part of European writers to 'compartmentalize problematic and narrative-upsetting information.' This leads him to posit 'a correlation between the *Romantik* cultivation of a multi-chambered self ... and the ability to construct an imaginary Europe of tolerance and sophistication, abiding in blissful denial of an Ottoman world on its borders every bit as complex and tolerant as its European neighbours' (pp. 164–5). It is possible that this was happening: but it is also possible that the object ('the'

Islamic world) under scrutiny *was* contradictory in nature. Once again, the context matters, and it would have been nice to have more of it.

There is one more area that Almond might have profitably explored, and that is the ‘Germanness’ (or perhaps, non-Germanness) of the figures he treats. His subjects all wrote primarily in German, and are perhaps the major thinkers of the era 1680–1890 – though a case could be made for the inclusion of others, such as Lessing, Schopenhauer, Schelling, and Schleiermacher; personally, I would have liked to have deeper treatment of some of those who were both orientalists and cultural figures of note, like J. D. Michaelis, Friedrich Rückert, Julius Wellhausen, and Joseph von Hammer-Purgstall, referred to in the index simply as ‘von Hammer.’ Perhaps exploring what it is that these ‘Germans’ did and did not share might have also helped Almond understand the filtering process, and to explain why it was that in the end, the tradition didn’t have very much to say about Islam, or said contradictory things about it. It would also have been helpful to have some sense of what religious and historical subjects *did* figure large in the works of these thinkers. I think Almond’s conclusion would have been that much Central European ink was spilt in discussing Christianity and Judaism (often the subject of Islam arose in connection with studies of this other, crucially important, ‘Semitic’ people), or about the ancient Greeks. For some, like Herder and Friedrich Schlegel, the ancient Indians were important, at least for a time; for others, the medieval Germans took center stage. In general, German intellectuals thought more about Europeans than non-Europeans, more about Near Eastern than Far Eastern peoples, more about poetry, mythology, theology and philosophy than about science or economics, and more about ancient than modern peoples. Islam was sidelined – or treated chiefly by liberals, Jews, or diplomats – partly because this religion was relatively new and still alive and well, and partly because the Turks were so near, and had so recently conquered bits of Central and Southern Europe. As we perfect our studies of the ‘filtered Orient,’ we will need to add these elements into our understanding of the shape and functioning of the filter.

We have much work to do to tease out what ‘mainstream’, middle-class Germans read and thought about Islam in the modern period, and why they didn’t care *more* about an Ottoman world that was indeed rich in history, culture and languages, and was, moreover, virtually on their doorsteps. But, thanks to Ian Almond, we now have a concise and interesting account of the diverse directions the leading intellectuals pursued, and inspiration to investigate more fully how and why they did or did not think deeply and seriously about the Islamic world.

Notes

1. Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Paula Fichtner, *Terror and Toleration: The Habsburg Empire Confronts Islam, 1526–1850* (New York, 2008).[Back to \(1\)](#)

Other reviews:

German History

<http://gh.oxfordjournals.org/content/28/2/230.full> [2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/939#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/4871>

[2] <http://gh.oxfordjournals.org/content/28/2/230.full>