



IAN ALMOND

REPRESENTATIONS *of* ISLAM
IN WESTERN THOUGHT

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Ian Almond



CENTAR ZA NAPREDNE STUDIJE
CENTER FOR ADVANCED STUDIES

SARAJEVO
Sarajevo, 2010

Also by the same author:

Sufism and Deconstruction: A Comparative Study of Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi
(Routledge, 2004)

The New Orientalists: Postmodern Representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard
(I. B. Tauris, 2007)

*Two Faiths, One Banner: When Muslims Marched with Christians across Europe's
Battlegrounds*
(I. B. Tauris, 2009)

History of Islam in German Thought: From Leibniz to Nietzsche
(Routledge, 2009)

This Publication is supported by



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FOREWORD

Ian Almond (1969) is a professor of British origin currently teaching English literature at Georgia State University in Atlanta, USA who spent almost half of his life outside of the United Kingdom living in Italy, Germany, Turkey, and now in the United States of America. He is author to four extraordinary and particularly provocative books:

1. *Sufism and Deconstruction: A Comparative Study of Derrida and Ibn 'Arabi* (Routledge, 2004),
2. *The New Orientalists: Postmodern Representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard* (I.B. Tauris, 2007),
3. *Two Faiths, One Banner: When Muslims Marched with Christians Across Europe's Battlegrounds* (I.B. Tauris, 2009), and
4. *History of Islam in German Thought: From Leibniz to Nietzsche* (Routledge, 2009).

Ian Almond is mostly teaching South Asian and postcolonial literature at the Department for English of Georgia State University in Atlanta. He received his master's and doctoral degrees from the British Universities of Warwick and Edinburgh, and before joining GSU he taught in Italy (Universita di Bari), Germany (Freie Universität), India and Turkey where he spent six years at Bogazici University and also taught at others. Along with this, he published

numerous articles in the following journals: *PMLA*, *New Literary History*, *ELH*, *the Harvard Theological Review*, and *Radical Philosophy*.

In his book *Sufism and Deconstruction* Ian Almond is making a connection between the Islamic philosophical tradition, particularly Ibn 'Arabi-like Sufism on one side, and Western modern and postmodern philosophical tradition on the other, namely between Derrida's hermeneutics and overwhelming Sufi rhetorics. He is presenting us with the thesis that the process of deconstruction similar to Derrida's can be found in Ibn 'Arabi's works. In fact, he is bringing the Islamic philosophical tradition in collusion with the attempts that Derrida achieved through the project of deconstructive strategies i.e. offering the critical comparison between Ibn 'Arabi's interpretative strategies and Derrida's work on some fundamental issues like the critique of hegemonic reason, the aporetic value of perplexity, the hermeneutics of the text and secrets of uncovering mystery, while concurrently building on the results found in the Ian Netton's book *Allah Transcendent: Studies in the Structure and Semiotics of Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Cosmology*, published in 1989 in which the author concludes that Ibn 'Arabi's theological discourse and hermeneutics of the text are entirely reminiscent of post-structuralist, deconstructionist reading. In this regard, with the comparison of their strategies, this Almond's work is instigating us to enter the reconsideration of our own conceptual schemes. Doubtlessly, this is an interesting attempt to establish communication among Ibn 'Arabi's ideas through the prism of Jacques Derrida (1930-2004). Although for the ones not familiar with this kind of texts this might seem as an intricate reading, it is indeed worthwhile investing additional efforts towards something that might serve as a possible cure to exaggerated self-confidence of Muslim orthodoxy and equal secular liberalism.

FOREWORD

In his book *The New Orientalists*, through the re-examination of Nietzsche, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jean Baudrillard, Julia Kristeva, Slavoj Žižek and post-modernist writers from Borges to Salman Rushdie and Orhan Pamuk, Ian Almond presents us with post-modernist representations and ‘uses’ of Islam, and instigated fears and hysteria in the post-modernist project of the second phase. Therefore, this is an impressive text questioning some of the main post-modernist figures for some of whom Islam has had a prominent significance due to its geopolitical position.

Finally, *History of Islam in German Thought: From Leibniz to Nietzsche* represents a abridged review of the perceptions of Islam with eight most important German thinkers of 18th and 19th century (Leibniz, Kant, Herder, Goethe, Schlegel, Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche) and offers a fascinating study on the importance of Islam in the very history of German way of thinking and about the manner in which these thinkers often adopted contradictory ideas on Islam and their closest Muslim neighbors. This is therefore a history of the reception of the Muslim world in the works of these thinkers. The book itself starts with Leibniz’s plan to conquer Egypt (1671) and is accordingly ending with Nietzsche’s praise to Islam in his *The Antichrist* from 1888. As the author states in his Introduction the original plan for this book was to write the history of demonization of Islam in the mainstream German thought and that therefore this history of Islam in German thought could be entitled *the anatomy of prejudice*. Still, this book is presenting us with each of these thinkers respectively, without judging or defending them, only truthfully presenting and analyzing their ideas.

In fact, by bringing his works in collusion, particularly philosophy and literature, Ian Almond tries to reverse this certain form of collective amnesia that is present in the modern world, namely the collective amnesia that is making people believe that Islam is deeply

non-Western and hostile to Christian West and, according to him, the first thing we need to do is to stop with this manner of Muslim and Jewish portrayal (the use of phrases like: “war against terror”, “war against drugs”, “clash of civilizations”, etc.) and this has been the subject of debate in his book *Two Faiths, One Banner: When Muslims Marched with Christians Across Europe’s Battlegrounds*, where in Europe, in the very heart of the Western world, Muslims and Christians were often comrades-in-arms, building alliances again and again in order to fight their countrymen together. In this regard, Ian Almond is in fact making us aware of the times when Christians and Muslims often fought on the same side during determining moments of European history, offering us at the same time the Islamic history of Europe from Andalusia, to Sicily, Turkey, Crimea.. of mostly wrongly set facts of this rich, complex, and above all, common history. Therefore, the offered insights have deep consequences for our understanding of global politics and current contentious issues, as well as religious history and the future set up of the EU.

Questioning the work of these pronounced thinkers in his project of provocative analysis of consequences and implications of such “uses“ of Islam in post-modernist context, Ian Almond is in fact clearly indicating his belonging to the constellation of thinkers whose time is only bashfully appearing on the horizon of a growing cooperative conversation instigating thus our encouragement for at least one of these four of his extremely intellectually inspiring studies to appear shortly in its Bosnian edition aside from this series of public lectures held at the University of Sarajevo comprising of the following five chapters.

1. Deconstructing Luther’s Islam: The Turk as Curse or Cure? The paper examines Luther’s attitude towards Islam and, in particular, towards the Turk, whose success against the Catholic Habsburgs Luther appropriated in some interesting ways, effectively seeing

the Ottomans as the divine schoolmaster's rod. The ambiguities inherent in Luther's treatment of Islam, not just the paradoxical logic of 'my enemy's enemy is my friend', but also the kinds of problems Luther runs into when trying to account for some of those points on which Islam bears some resemblance to protestant Christianity (predestination, mistrust of icons/images, refutation of pope). Ultimately, what emerges is that the figure of the Turk is both a poison and cure, an enemy but also a possible source of (worldly) succor.

2. *Nietzsche's Peace with Islam: My Enemy's Enemy is my Friend* This article examines the many references in Nietzsche's work to Islam and Islamic cultures, and situates them in the general context of his thought. Nietzsche's praise of Islam as a '*ja-sagende semitische Religion*', his admiration for Hafiz, his appreciation of Muslim Spain, his belief in the essentially life-affirming character of Islam, not only spring from a desire to find a palatable Other to Judaeo-Christian-European modernity, but also comment on how little Nietzsche actually knew about the cultures he so readily appropriated in his assault on European modernity. Nietzsche's negative comments on Islam – his generic dismissal of Islam with other religions as manipulative thought systems, his depiction of Mohammed as a cunning impostor, reveal in Nietzsche not only the same ambiguities towards Islam as we find towards Christ or Judaism, but also a willingness to use the multiple identities of Islam for different purposes at different moments in his work.

3. *Tales of Buddha, Dreams of Arabia: Joyce and Images of the East* This article attempts to examine and compare the presentation of the Orient in two separate texts by Joyce, the short story "Araby" and *Ulysses*. Whereas the attitude towards the 'East' in the young Joyce is essentially Romantic and almost transcendental (the Orient as a kind

of afterlife where everything will be better), in *Ulysses* we see a more intelligent awareness of the Orient as a Western construct – a gallery of exotic images which has little to do with reality. Where the semantic emptiness of the Orient in “Araby” produces a sense of woe and melancholy, the author of *Ulysses* affirms the emptiness and appears unperturbed by the absence of any reality behind the various Buddhas, camels and bellydancers that appear in the novel.

4. *Muslims, Protestants and Peasants: Ottoman Hungary 1526-1683* The chapter basically examines the kinds of inter-faith strategies which Muslims and Christians embarked upon - in this case, in a common Protestant-Turkish struggle against the Habsburgs. In particular, it focuses upon the whole question of Ottoman Hungary, and how the Ottomans made use of Christian divisions in order to assist their own fight against the Catholic Austrian Habsburgs. Most striking is the example of Imre Thokoly, the Hungarian prince who helped lay siege to the city of Vienna with the Turks in his own struggle against Austrian imperialism.

5. *Two Versions of Islam and the Apocalypse: The Persistence of Eschatology in Schlegel, Baudrillard and Žižek* This brief article deals with the persistence of a single motif — the medieval Christian association of Islam with the Apocalypse — in the vocabulary of an early modern thinker (Schlegel), and its reappearance in the geopolitical mindscapes of two postmodern philosophers (Žižek and Baudrillard). The medieval motif has two variants: a thirteenth-century Franciscan version (one which sees Muslims as unconvertible signs of the Apocalypse to come) and a seventeenth-century Protestant millenarianism (in which the Muslim becomes an anti-Papist ally whom Protestant Christendom can form a coalition with, convert and ultimately march together with onto Rome).

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Essentially, the author argues that in his essay on the first Gulf War, Baudrillard reveals himself to be a Franciscan, whilst Zizek's approach in his treatment of both 9/11 and his book on Iraq is that of a Calvinist.

Finally, we would like to express our special gratitude to the British Council in Sarajevo and its director Mr. Michael Moore without the support of whom this project and the visit by Mr. Ian Almond in the period from 23 to 30 May 2010 would not have been possible. Also, we would like to pay our due respect to the team of translators who invested additional efforts so that these five lectures would be available in our language before his arrival, so that we would have them in our language and available for wider audience of the region.

And last, but not the least, we would explicitly like to express our due gratitude to the organizer who in this time of Bologna 'exam fever' at our Faculties still managed to organize and motivate our professors and students to take active part in the implementation of this valuable and inspirational project entitled "Representations of Islam in Western Thought", which for now we will have in its original English version, but shortly hopefully in its Bosnian counterpart as well. Not least worth mentioning is the fact that our colleague, thanks to the British Council in Ljubljana, previously visited Ljubljana (Faculty of Philosophy of the University of Ljubljana and Averroes Institute), supporting thus additionally the intercultural exchange among the communities of Ex-Yugoslavia.

Mojmilo/ Sarajevo, May 9th 2010

Nevad Kabteran

AUTHOR'S PREFACE

What do we understand by the term 'representation of Islam'? What does it mean to investigate the depiction of the Muslim world – be it the faith, the cultures, the believers, the literature – in non-Muslim discourse? How would studies of the representation of Muslims by non-Muslims differ from their logical inverse – Muslim representations of Christians and Christianity in texts from Turkish or Arabic literature?

The term has, by now, practically established a genre of its own. Academic books and articles abound in the study of the Muslim world's portrayal in areas as different as sixteenth century French literature, contemporary cinema, British children's education syllabi, German drama, medieval thought, many of them preceding Edward Said's landmark investigation of French and British Orientalist portrayals of their subjects. As a consequence, I'd like to consider some of the things I understand such studies to entail.

First of all, to examine the depiction of the Muslim in Western discourse is to examine the West. To consider the scimitar-bearing Turks and veiled women of Western Oriental landscapes is to consider the anxieties and desires of the gazer, not the gazed upon. This is not to say the Muslim is merely a blank screen upon which the West simply projects whatever facet of itself it happens to be

displaying ; the relationship, particularly in those cultures (such as the former Yugoslavia) where non-Muslims have direct experience of Muslims on an everyday basis, is much more symbiotic than a mere case of projection. However, if desire is built into the representation of the Other, then the constitution of that Other will tell us, to some degree, exactly what the Same desires. Whether it is terror or titillation, the kind of Muslims we encounter in a society's culture reveals a great deal about what that society fears and yearns for.

A fact which explains the almost ubiquitous Good Muslim/Bad Muslim paradigm, the Muslim 'we' can talk to and the Muslim we cannot. Almost every film about the Middle East, both past and present, seems to supply some version of this dualism – the moderate and the fanatic, the haters and the lovers of the West. The possibility that the real Muslim may well be an unthinkable mixture of both – someone who watches MTV, but also resents the economic dominance of foreign capital over his country; someone who drinks Coca Cola and reads Dan Brown, but also despises the worst elements of US foreign policy – such a possibility is seldom allowed to overturn the Good Muslim/Bad Muslim paradigm, which like all such paradigms exists to enable the society in question to deal comfortably with its opposites. A newspaper like the New York Times has adopted this approach as a standard way of dealing with Palestinians – the Good Palestinians who 'simply want peace', and the Bad Palestinians who insist on resistance rather than co-operation. To drop this method of representation would be simply unthinkable, as a consequence of such a disavowal would be to radically re-think the entire terms of the situation being addressed. In the case of Israel, this would mean understanding that what the 'Bad' Palestinians are unhappy with today is what they have been left with - 22 percent of the original British Mandate of Palestine.

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The paradigm of the Good/Bad Muslim allows the Western mainstream media to avoid this unpleasant truth.

Secondly: if to study the representation of Muslims in a culture is to study, indirectly, that culture itself, then this also means to see how that culture – or author, or readership – is fragmented within itself. Nothing reveals the fissuring of a subject more than the different ways with which it addresses the same region or faith. The two words we have for the country of Hafiz and Ahmadinejad – ‘Persia’ and ‘Iran’ – belong to vastly different landscapes, so that some people will doubtless be unaware that they refer to the same nation. ‘Persia’ is a word which symbolises carpets, Oriental architecture, ghazals; ‘Iran’, today, a name which in the West invokes a whole panoply of associations – oppression, despotism, dictatorship, nuclear threat. What the study of Islam’s representation in the West inevitably reveals is how multiply centered and multiply voiced our own cultures, societies and even individual subjects are.

Another version of what the ‘representation of Islam’ might mean or at least be able to show us, concerns the future. It is curious the extent to which Islam, in both the past and the present, has been involved in Western discourse about the future. This has either been apocalyptic – the Franciscans using exegesis in the Middle Ages to calculate, from the Prophet’s birthday, the date of the Last Judgement, or Spengler and the Turks and Tartars who will ultimately overrun civilized Europe – or collaborative (the Protestants who thought the Turks would join with them to overcome the Papal Antichrist, the various business models today which sees the Muslim world as a ‘global player’). Islam has always helped to situate Europe not merely in terms of its boundaries – an obvious use – but also more subtly in terms of its time. Europe is the ‘now’ – Muslim countries, we are told, have to come up-to-date. They have to reach our ‘now’. Oddly enough, this still means they

concern our future. Nothing has provoked more self-reflection in the European Union on its own future than the possible membership of Turkey. Agonizing, self-tormenting debates over what kind of future EU we want to live in has been the consequence of allowing a Muslim country to join our Christian club. Islam belongs to the future of Europe not merely in the guise of an Ankara MEP, but also in the form of the millions of Pakistani/Algerian/Turkish immigrants who, by 2040, will have been living in Europe for well over a hundred years.

The study of Muslim representations in Western literature also means, implicitly, the study of non-representation. For it is in the silences of Western discourse concerning Islam and the Middle East that its complex relationship to such entities as 'Islam' and 'Arab' becomes most evident. In many ways, the scholar embarked upon the study of such representations has to work almost mystically – trying to intuit, from what is not, what is; trying to gauge, from what is not being said, the deep, invisible discursive forces at work which silently sift and filter the phenomena which finally arrives – for us, the Western reader – on the page, on the screen, in the news bulletin. The Muslim poets, Turkish communists, Islamic feminists, Arab Christians, Palestinian secularists, Syrian Catholics.. the entire range of problematic phenomena which necessarily must disappear from a mainstream version of the Muslim world, so that the West can continue to 'understand' it. Goethe was doing this almost two hundred years ago, reading books about Ottoman poetry and thought, whilst simultaneously producing Turks in his poetry which were little more than bloodthirsty animals. When it comes to representing the Muslim Other – or, for that matter, the Greek/Armenian/Orthodox Other – the cliché is as true as ever: what we leave out is as important as what we put in.