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## HEGEL AND ISLAM

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Hegel (1770-1831) and his Marxist materialist elaboration of the young Hegelian tradition has been central to Twentieth Century history. This has been in spite of the hostility from the Anglo-Saxon analyst tradition, and innate insular conservatism, which has found continental-style speculative philosophy and social radicalism anathema. This bifurcation has continued with the existentialism of Heidegger. Anglo-Saxons find the language of Hegel and Heidegger turgid and overblown.

So when it comes to Islam as seen by Hegel, Anglo-Saxons have a predictable blind spot, so that standard works on Hegel in English, like that of the Canadian Hegelian Charles Taylor (Fellow of All Souls, Oxford), has totally ignored Hegel's interesting observations on Islam in his *Philosophy of History* – late Hegel, based on a series of lectures in 1822 and published posthumously by his son (compare this work with his most famous work on the Phenomenology of the Spirit published in 1807). Hegel has an interesting and illuminating short chapter on Islam, somewhat incongruously located in the final section on the German world and not, as one might expect, in the earlier section on the Oriental world. This in itself begs the question as to Islam's place in world history.

For a recent work which hints at the true locus of Islam one can turn to the academic Bosnian Muslim (and its first president) – an intellectual who can be compared to Vaclav Havel of the Czech Republic – Aliya Ali Izetbegovic, who entitled his work published in the 80's "Islam between East and West" wherein Islam is seen as appearing in the spatial and temporal congruence, between the sacred and the secular, appearing as it does in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE in the full light of history.

Scholars in the past have found Islam to be a product of late Classicism, like Christianity arising out of the Levant and heavily indebted to neo-Platonism, and only gradually Orientalised as its centre of gravity moved from Syria (in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE) to Mesopotamia (Iraq), and as its rulers changed from Arabs (who had heavily invested in the translation project of the Greek philosophic corpus into Arabic) to neophyte newcomers from Turkish Central Asia (see the Tunisian writer Hichem Djait's Hegelian Study of *Europe of Islam*, University of California of Press translation, 1985 ).

Paradoxically, the first great philosopher in Arabic was a Central Asian Turk – Al Farabi (d.950). But, the Turkish newcomers to the Muslim Near East, initially military mercenaries, clung to religious orthodoxy and an orientalised Islamic civilisation. Before this, under the earlier Abbasids, Arab Islam, confident under the height of Arab classicism (Al Mamun and Harun-al-Rashid) experimented with religious rationalism (Mutazila) as its official ideology, but the somewhat heavy-handed approach in seeking to impose it on religious scholars and jurists brought on a conservative reaction which sought to free Gods saving power from the shackles of causality (Asharites and the Hanbalite School of Law). Thus from metaphysics the stress moved to a sort of conservative and Pharisaic legalism.

For Hegel, the trajectory of history as an expression of World Spirit moved from the Oriental where only the ruler was free, via classicism where some were free, to the Germanic world of western Europe where the movement was towards universal freedom through participation in the State. The old feudal structures of the Holy Roman Empire had been, in Hegel's time, broken up by the onset of the French revolution and which carried over into all Europe by Napoleon.

For the young Hegel, Napoleon was the personification of "History on Horseback". Hegel, a Swabian (Wurtenberger) from South West Germany across the Rhine from France, was born the same year as Beethoven (who had originally composed his epochal *Eroica* symphony dedicated to Napoleon) and Holderlin, Germany's greatest lyric poet. Just as for Francis Fukuyama, Japanese-American mandarin, a neo-Hegelian, the Anglo-Saxon liberal consumerist society was the end of history, so for Hegel it was the anticipation of the Germanic state which ideally was the culmination of history. This may have been a paean to the past, since Hegel recalls the classical adage that the owl of Minerva takes wing at dusk. Philosophical reflexive wisdom arrives at the end of a process, a life, a culture, or a civilisation, though it may also anticipate a new dawn.

But what did Hegel have to say about Islam? In the section on the German World in chapter II (quaintly entitled *Mahometanism*) Hegel compares the historic trajectory of the west and Islam:

*"While the West began to shelter itself in the political edifice of chance entanglement and particularity [Hegel had been thinking of his own middle-European feudal legacy of the Holy Roman Empire before it was blown away by the Napoleonic whirlwind] the very opposite direction necessarily made its appearance in the world, to produce the balance of the totality of spiritual manifestation.*

*This took place in the Revolution of the East, which destroyed all particularity and dependence, and perfectly cleared up and purified the soul and disposition; making the abstract One (God) the absolute object of attention and devotion, and to the same extent pure subjective consciousness- the Knowledge of this One alone – the only aim of reality: - making the Unconditioned (das Verhältnisslose) the condition (Verhältniss) of existence".*

In stating this Hegel was recognising Islamic monotheism as the purest and most universalist type which the Christian Trinity compromised and the Judaic Yahweh had particularised as a tribal God.

Hegel compares this revolution in the Islamic East to the oriental principal even further east where in Buddhism the Highest Being is only negative (Nirvana) that with it the positive imparts an abandonment to nature (a nature more profuse in South East Asia than in the empty deserts of the Middle East where the monotheistic Absolute was conceived), an enslavement of Spirit to the world of realities.

*" Only among the Jews have we observed the principal of Pure Unity elevated to thought...in the adoration paid to the One, as an object of thought" but "Jehovah was only the God of one people – the God of Abraham, of Isaac and Jacob" in an exclusive covenant (a covenant that is incidentally at the root of the present Arab-Jewish conflict over Palestine).*

*"But this speciality of relation was done away with in 'Mahometanism'. In this spiritual universality, in this unlimited and indefinite purity and simplicity of conception, human personality has no other aim than the realisation of this universality and simplicity. Allah has not the affirmative, limited aim of the Judaic God. The worship of the One is the final aim of Mahometanism, and*

*objectivity has this worship for the sole occupation of its activity – with the design to subjugate secular existence to the One. This One has the quality of Spirit but is deprived of its concrete predicate.*

*“Islam is not monastic immersion to the Absolute. Subjectivity here is living and unlimited...to promote the pure adoration of the One. The object of Moslem worship is pure intellectual; no image, no representation of Allah is tolerated. Mahomet is a prophet but still man. The leading features of Islam involve this - that in actual existence nothing can become fixed, but everything is destined to expand itself in activity and life in the boundless amplitude of the world, so that the worship of the One remains the only bond by which the whole is capable of uniting. In this expansion, this active energy, all limits, all national and caste distinctions vanish; no particular race, political claim of birth or possession is regarded – only man as a believer.”*

*“To adore the One, to believe in Him, to fast – to remove the sense of speciality and consequent separation from the Infinite arising from corporeal limitation – to give alms – that is to get rid of particular possessions, this is the essence of Islam; but the highest merit is to die for the Faith.*

*“Their object is to establish an abstract worship...their enthusiasm was Fanaticism, enthusiasm for something abstract – a desolating destructive relation to the concrete, but most of Islam was at the same time capable of the greatest elevation – an elevation free from petty interest, united with all the instance that appertain to magnanimity and valour.*

*“While Europeans are involved in a multitude of relations – in Islam the individual is one passion and that alone, he is superlatively cruel, cunning, bold or generous. Where sentiment of love exists there is an equal abandon – the most fervid. This reckless fervour shows itself in the glowing warmth of Arab and Saracen poetry.*

*“Never has enthusiasm performed greater deeds. Abstract, all comprehending enthusiasm finding its limits nowhere is that of the Muslim East.”*

The learned men of the Empire assembled at the Caliph’s court, which not merely shone with the outward pomp but was resplendent with the glory of poetry and all the sciences.

*“In the struggle with the Saracens, European valour had idealised itself to a fair and noble chivalry. Science and Knowledge, especially that of philosophy, came from the Arabs to the West. A noble poetry and free imagination was kindled among the Germans by the East...directed Goethe’s attention to the Orient and occasioned ‘Divan’ which in warmth and felicity of fancy cannot be surpassed.”*

But what of the Islamic world contemporary to Hegel?

*“But the East itself, when by degrees enthusiasm had vanished, sank into the grossest vice – at present driven back into its Asiatic and African quarters tolerated only in one corner of Europe through the jealousy of Christian Powers, Islam has long vanished from the stage of history at large and has retreated into oriental ease and repose.”*

What of the present – the 21<sup>st</sup> Century? What lessons can be drawn from the past?

The warrior, patrimonial ethic which so shocked Hegel’s German compatriots and their Victorian Protestant sensibilities, like the sociologist Max Weber (1864-1920) and the theologian Rudolph Otto (in *Das Heilige*) is now over as Muslim societies are transformed by the growth of population and influx of the new petit bourgeoisie into the cities. Their outlook is definitely and generically more puritanical than their warrior and dynastic predecessors. That is why, as I indicated in my introduction, Islam is going through a Pharisaic, legalistic, scripture centred age. The radicalism comes from a sense of humiliation, frustration and impotence; what Nietzsche describes in a similar situation of the Jews amongst the Gentiles as ‘ressentiment’.

Everywhere the Muslims look (Palestine, Kashmir, Central Asia) they find their territorial integrity, their true identity, their resources (oil, petrodollars) subordinate and infinitely alienable to Western and neo-imperialists interests.

What with that, and the perception at the closing stages of the Gulf War, and the massacre of 200,000 Iraqi conscripts and civilians, the downing of an airline full of Iranian pilgrims by an American warship in the Gulf during the Iran-Iraq war (when the West's sentiments were pro-Iraqi) with no hint of apology let alone compensation, and the blood-letting of Muslims in the Lebanon and Palestine in what is perceived as Zionist imperialism working hand in glove with the US, Muslim lives are seen as being sold cheap compared to that of Westerners. In these new circumstances, and after the collapse of Marxism, we Muslims can justifiably regard ourselves as the new helot class globally subjected to everyone else's imperialism. Israeli, American, British, Chinese, Russian, Indian – all more organised and stronger than Muslims. Is this perhaps a fulfilment of Simon Huntington's prognostication of civilisational confrontation?

The only solution from the Muslim point of view, to meet the requirements of the age, is not the petit bourgeois demand – a Muslim legalistic (sharia) state with the old-fashioned draconian punishments which contemporary sensibilities will not countenance, but an Islamic bloc from Morocco in the Atlantic to Indonesia in the East; including a permanent seat in the Security Council to prevent the U.N. from being manipulated by the only great power interest, and be a truly global body. This would be an Islamic world capable of holding its ground in global geopolitik. A resentful and impotent Islamic world is rightly regarded by the West as dangerous, but an Islamic bloc, truly independent, would be an equal partner in the world's destiny.

The Jews have at last been accepted by the West after 2,000 years of persecution; the 'Judeo-Christian tradition' needed the impetus, the blood price of the shock to the West's collective conscience of the Holocaust, to become reality.

The present tribulations of the Muslim world at the hands of the Earthly powers characterised by alienation, exploitation and repression, may one day make a reality of the 'Judeo-Christian-Muslim' tradition.

The three monotheistic traditions are in dialectic relationship with each other; Christianity and Islam alternative models of the universalisation of Judaic monotheism – the twin offspring of Jewish messianism. The new geographical and cultural juxtaposition of the three should insure against any solipsism, in Hegelian terms, attempts to smuggle in or assert particularisms disguised as the universal.

Christianity was the pacifist stream which was keen from the first to secure the secular power of Rome ('render unto Caesar what is Caesar's'); the Islamic revolution in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE Middle East an extension of militant messianism of part of 1<sup>st</sup> century Judaism which was bloodily suppressed by Rome and displaced from Palestine, partly into a global diaspora, partly into the interior of the Arabian desert. Islam beat the Christian Roman Empire in the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE, succeeding where the Jews failed.

One further rejoinder:

In Hegelian terms, if there is an Absolute it is beyond the temporal sphere of life in the world, therefore our religious particularism should not be allowed to be insinuated into history as universals – that is the illegitimate way of cultism.

Thus, for Christianity the logos – is Jesus and in a flirtation with ideology the Logos has been elevated into the Trinitarian Godhead. So in Islam, the Logos is the scripture, the Holy Qu’ran, and this, in orthodox Muslim dogma, is the uncreated word of God.

A truly universalist deconstructed Jesus would have his full humanity restored - the man who cried out in despair on the cross “Oh God, why have you forsaken me?”. Following structuralist perceptions the Qu’ran should be restored as a text like many others whose language transcends its authorship. With Jesus a man like any other Hegel’s unhappy consciousness is near to an universalist resolution. With a text which, as according to the attempted Mutazila solution in the 10<sup>th</sup> century CE Islam, was created, Muslims in their turn can guard against solipsism and idolatry.

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