Goethe's Relationship to Islam
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The relationship of Goethe to Islam and to its founder is one of the most astonishing phenomena, not only within Goethe's own life, but within the historical epoch in which he lived.

Goethe was only 23 years old when he wrote a wonderful hymn in praise of the prophet Muhammad. But even when he was 70 years old, the poet declared quite publicly that he was considering "devoutly celebrating that holy night in which the Koran in its entirety was revealed to the prophet from on high". Between these two dates lies a long life, during which Goethe testified in many forms to his veneration for Islam. This was expressed primarily in that work which, alongside "Faust", we today consider one of his most essential poetic bequests: the "West-Eastern Divan", a collection of 250 poems in an oriental style. In a pre-publication announcement of this work—in which he came closer to the orient than any German writer before or after him—we can even find the remarkable statement that the author of the book would not deny the allegation that he himself was a Muslim.

It is hard for us to conceive of the incredible boldness that lay behind such convictions and particularly of making them public, and what a provocation they must have been to his readers, unless we call to mind what Goethe's contemporaries thought about Islam and its founder. To understand this, however, we must first turn back even further into the past.

The verdict of the Christian world on Muhammad and his followers, was from the start anything but impartial or positive. This is not surprising when one considers how many areas, which Christendom had won during a six hundred years' struggle, had since been lost to Islam, once it began to spread outside of Arabia by the power of the sword. It was particularly painful for Christian Europe to see the cross thrown down where it had first been raised—at the Holy Sepulchre and at the places hallowed by the Saviour himself. The victory of the crescent over the cross in the countries of the Orient, and each triumph of the new religion in the provinces of the Byzantine Empire were defeats felt bitterly by the believers of the older religion. Furthermore, the Christian countries of Europe had felt seriously menaced, ever since the Arab invasion of the Spanish peninsula in 711, when their victorious advance from the South-West seemed irresistible. Then, South-Eastern Europe was threatened by the Islamic Turks who laid siege to Vienna (for the last time) in the year 1683. In all the hostilities between Islam and Christianity lasted with interruptions of course for more than a thousand years. From the middle of the 7th to the end of the 17th century.

No wonder then that European Christendom for hundreds of years looked upon Islam merely as a rival and dangerous enemy, and that—true to human nature—all verdicts of the enemy were coloured by hostility and prejudice. This was necessarily true of both sides: for both reaped the harvest of slander and utter ignorance. Both parties accused each other of paganism, idolatry, cruelty, crime, immorality, treachery and every conceivable kind of vice. The cruder the ignorance of the writer, the cruder was the slander. Let us leave behind, as quickly as possible, this rather discouraging period of history!

Until the end of the 17th century there were not even attempts made to consider this relationship in an impartial and unprejudiced way. Up to that time hardly anyone in Europe had concerned himself with the Koran, the essential key to Islamic doctrine. Only after the threat of war had vanished, did a shift of judgments slowly become apparent. Whereas up to that time the writings on Islam and its founder were purely tendentious and clearly betrayed the confessional and polemic intentions of their authors, efforts to establish more impartial reporting and the securing of exact information, became discernible.

In the year 1698 the text of the Koran, together with a translation into Latin, was published by the former Father Confessor of Pope Innocent XI, the Italian priest, Father Ludovico Maracci. Here, too, however, this theological scholar was principally concerned with refuting and combating Islam and its founder. He did this by means of a long introduction and many notes comment-
ing on the individual Surahs. Nevertheless, we must consider it a step towards better understanding that, for the first time, the whole text of the Koran was available to Europeans in a Latin translation. (The first German translation of this Latin Koran text was published as early as 1703, and opened up the world of Islam to any interested German layman.)

The next phase is characterized by the fact that, from then on, not only churchmen participated in the writing about the Islamic problem—who were, of course, tempted to put their confessional zeal first—but also men from other professions, Europeans who had travelled in the Orient, who knew the language and were the forerunners of modern scholarship on the Orient, etc. Foremost among these was the Orientalist and protestant scholar Hadrian Reland, from Utrecht, whose book “De Religione Mohammeda”, which appeared in 1705, attempted the first honest appraisal of Islam. Islam could never have attracted millions of followers, Reland declared, had it been as senseless as European portrayals time and again had claimed. It was absurd, he said to form a conception of a different religion on the basis of the representations of its opponents. Therefore it was necessary to have Islam explained by those who believed in it. Mutual goodwill was the pre-requisite for a religious discussion.

Reland specifically avowed his faith in Christianity, in order to protect himself against the suspicion that he was trying to rehabilitate the religion of Islam. This was certainly the least that was required of a scholar of that time, if he wanted to protect himself against the difficulties which might have arisen from such a work and the way of thinking clearly apparent in it.

Another important step was made by an English lawyer, who devoted his leisure hours to the study of Arabic—George Sale. In 1734 he published an English translation of the Koran, which soon thereafter was translated into German, Dutch and French. For a century it remained one of the main sources from which educated Europeans informed themselves on all questions involving the Koran. Sale looked upon his work chiefly as a vindication of a much maligned book. In his introduction he refrained from almost all temptations to polemize. On the contrary, he pointed out the many correspondences with the Christian faith, for instance, when he emphasizes that the fundamental teaching of Muhammad was based on the Oneness of God. Sale stressed particularly what a noble and praiseworthy effort it had been to convert the Arabs from idolatry to the acknowledgment of One God. He also pointed out that the exhortations to good morals and virtue contained in the Koran were in part so excellent that a Christian might well observe them.

George Sale repeatedly refers to the “Bibliotheque Oeintale” published in 1697 in Paris by Batholomée d’Herbelot, a pioneer-work who for the first time printed everything worth knowing about the religious, social and literary institutions of the Arabs, Perisnas and Turks.

All three of the publications we have just mentioned, must be looked upon as products of the Age of Enlightenment, the influence of which was decisive in Goethe’s youth.

A Frenchman, Count de Boulainvillier, wrote a biography of Muhammad in this same spirit of enlightenment, which was published after his death in London in 1730. Unlike all previous disparagements of Muhammad, it can be considered an apology. Boulainvillier saw Muhammad principally as the reformer of his people and the creator of a rational religion. Twenty years later his book was translated into German. In his preface, the German translator confesses his surprise that the author had been able to escape the holy inquisition.

Boulainvillier’s work had a great influence on, among others, one of his most famous contemporaries, Voltaire. In Voltaire’s “Essay sur les moeurs”, written in 1765, much was said about Islam which showed its derivation from Boulainvillier’s portrayal. Here Muhammad’s religion was characterized as one of the greatest facts of world history. The Koran was praised as an excellent book, containing sublime passages and excellent laws. In this account of Voltaire’s, the prophet was portrayed as a great man, as another Cromwell, who as conqueror, law-giver, ruler and preacher all in one—had played the most important role anyone could possibly play on this earth. Voltaire counted Muhammad among the three greatest law-givers of the world, along with Confucius and Zoroaster. He recognized him as one of the truly inspired visionaries.

How then can we understand the malice Voltaire poured into his drama “Le Fanatisme ou Mohamet le Prophete”, in which
the hero appears as a hypocrite, a swindler and a tyrant, driven by sensuality? Voltaire knew that the portrait of his stage-hero did not correspond to reality. The whole intrigue on which the plot of the play is based, was entirely his own invention. In this play, however, he was not at all concerned with historical truth or with the prophet from Mecca. It can be surmised that Voltaire’s intention was directed toward a quite different goal. As a free thinker he had often crossed swords with the French clerics, and now he consciously created a stage-play as a polemic against religion as such, against fanaticism, clerical craftiness, and superstition. He would have taken the subject matter for his play from Christian sources had he had the necessary audacity and temerity. But that was too much of a risk, and so he preferred to make use of Muhammad—the founder of a foreign religion as a figure with which to illustrate and combat the phenomenon of fanaticism. It was a camouflage on Voltaire’s part, to avoid personal difficulties and dangers. He chose a period a thousand years in the past, but was referring to the present. He spoke about Mecca, but was pointing at Rome. The author’s intention, however, became apparent, and the play was officially banned from the Paris stage after its third performance, as a danger to religion. It took much clever maneuvering on the part of the author before the play was again allowed to be performed.

If we now turn to Germany, we find first of all three men among Goethe’s predecessors and contemporaries who acted as pioneers for a more humane and rational attitude toward religions—Leibniz, Lessing, and Herder.

Already in his “Theodizee” (1710) Leibniz praised Muhammad for not having deviated in any way from the natural religion whose great precepts had been set up by Abraham and Moses, and to which Jesus then imparted the significance of a generally accepted dogma. But Muhammad’s followers were to be given credit for having spread the religion of the sages which, through Jesus, had become a religion for all peoples, among the nations of Asia and Africa, in this way destroying in many countries heathen superstitions and opposition to the faith in the one good God, creator of all things, and which also contradicted the true doctrine of the immortality of the soul and retribution in the life to come.

Now with regard to Lessing, we have a passage that he wrote as a twelve-year-old in a school essay, advocating tolerance toward the Mohammedans, among whom there were men just as righteous as among the Christians. I quote: “Deus ipse dixit: Ne judicate, ne damnate! Nolumus damnare Mohametanos: etiam inter Mahometanos probi hominus sunt”. In this spirit—that is in the spirit of tolerance Lessing worked all his life. Relying on George Sale’s translation of the Koran and on Harian Reland’s book on the Islamic religion, he called for impartial judgment of other religions. The religion of Islam should be viewed with as much justice as unbiased and trusted scholars in modern times deemed necessary to concede to it. This was Lessing’s demand in his “Gardanus”. The violence of the prejudices he had to combat is best illustrated by his repeated assertions that Muhammad was not a fraud, and that his religion was not of the devil, but rather in accord with reason. Like Leibniz, Lessing found in the Koran all the essential articles of natural religion, stressed the agreement with Christian dogma in the doctrine of the One God, and—like Sale before him—evaluated the ethical precepts of the Koran in such a way that they might well recommend themselves to a Christian. It is hard to imagine in our day how much courage it took at that time to publish such ideas. Thus Lessing—the protestant pioneer of reason and tolerance—was at odds with the powers of the Counter-Enlightenment and intolerance all his life. But through Lessing’s attitude many people were led to a more humane and liberal way of thinking. Without his preparatory work it might perhaps have been impossible for a protestant theologian to write as impartially about Islam, as Herder did only a few years later (1791) in his “Ideas on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind”. In this book Herder tried from the point of view of cultural history—to assess Muhammad as the last founder of a religion. Although grounded in theology, Herder did not divide world history into sacred and profane areas, but placed the Islamic world right in the midst of universal history. In Muhammad he saw combined all that nation, tribe, time and place could contribute: in him were conjoined the qualities of merchant, prophet, orator, poet, hero and legislator, all in an Arab style. Herder praised “Muhammad’s noble enthusiasm for the doctrine of the One God” and for “the way of serving Him through purity, devotion and good deeds”. “Corrupt tradi-
tions of Jewry and Christianity”, the poetical caste of mind of the Arabic nation, the idiom of his tribe and his personal talents “were—according to Herder—the pinions, as it were, which bore Muhammad out of and beyond himself”

Thus we see that in Goethe's era efforts were initiated to look upon Islam in a more liberal and unprejudiced way than had been the habit for hundreds of years. But we must not forget: it was only a few individuals who were capable of rising to such an unbiassed viewpoint. Only the few exceptionally fine minds of that time truly endeavoured to overcome narrow-minded concepts, enlighten the perceptions of their countrymen and ennoble their ideas and ways of thinking. On the other hand, the rest of the scholarly world, in so far as it took notice of Islam at all remained mostly intolerant and unsympathetic.

As far as Goethe was concerned, his attitude toward Islam—and this is decisive—was from the very beginning not exclusively from the very beginning not exclusively determined by an attitude of progressive enlightenment and its aspirations toward tolerance. Goethe's relationship to Muhammad and his religion was of a much more personal nature. That is also the reason why his comments on Islam far surpassed in provocative daring anything that had been said in Germany before his time. Goethe achieved a truly positive relation to Islam by finding certain major precepts in accord with his own thinking and beliefs. This aroused in him a deep-seated sympathy, and from this sympathy resulted the tenor of such sincere conviction as we have already cited.

I would now like to elaborate on those chief points of the Muslim religion that had such an attraction for Goethe. Up to now there had been no clear conception of this. And yet, the true nature of Goethe's relationship to Islam cannot be fully understood, unless we answer this question: What was it that so attracted him to the Muslim religion, what was it that seemed to be so close to his own way of thinking?

A decided affection for the oriental world manifested itself in Goethe's life at an early stage. He tried to get as much information as possible about it. The first piece of evidence for his interest in Islam dates from June, 1772. We find it in the famous letter to Herder, containing the avowal of his passionate search for ways to achieve what he called “mastery” and genuine “virtuosity”.

It was the Greek poet Pindar who was to become his guide here, and this is chiefly what his letter deals with. But at the end of this acknowledgement of Pindar we read: “I would like to pray like Moses in the Koran: Lord, make room in my narrow breast”.

Here Goethe quotes the 20th Surah of the Koran. The essential meaning of this becomes clearer, when one reads the continuation of this Surah. (Goethe noted it down at the time in his excerpts from the Koran, of which we shall speak later.) It says here: “O Lord, make room in my narrow breast. Make also my task easy. Loosen the ties of my tongue”. This proves to us that the verse from the Koran in the letter to Herder was also expressing the idea of longing for “mastery”, for lightening of his “task”, for the loosening of his tongue, that is, for the final release of his creative powers in the right way. Goethe's simultaneous reference to the Koran and Pindar in this connection throws a sudden light upon the poet's evaluation of the former even at that time.

We know how Goethe came in contact with the Koran when he was 23 years old. In the year 1772, a German translation of the Koran was printed in his native city, prepared by the Frankfurter professor Megerlin. Even before this book appeared in the autumn book-fair, Goethe got possession of the proof-sheets, possibly because the publisher sent them to him for a review. Goethe, as you know, was a contributor to the “Frankfurter Gelehrten Anzeigen”, a publication devoted solely to reviews.

Megerlin was the first German scholar who translated the Koran from the original text into German, and thus answered an urgent need of the time. In his intellectual attitude, however, he in no way showed himself modern, or even impartial and unbiassed. To him the Holy Book of Islam appeared to be a “book of lies” and Muhammad as a false prophet and Anti-Christ.

Goethe was obviously deeply disappointed in Megerlin's work. A review in the “Frankfurter Gelehrten Anzeigen” was devastatingly critical, at any rate. The reviewer clearly showed that his concept of the Koran was a completely different and higher one than Megerlin's translation was able to convey. The reviewer expressed the wish that a different translation might be prepared “under oriental skies, by a German reading the Koran in his tent with due poetic and prophetic feelings, and sufficient sensitivity to
grasp the whole”. The review mentioned George Sale’s English translation of the Koran, the tenor of which was naturally more congenial to Goethe than Megerlin’s polemic-ridden work. But to Goethe, Sale’s translation seemed antiquated too. None of the existing translations could measure up to his demands. Goethe was very sensitive to the linguistic beauty of the Koran. Even in his late years he praised this beauty in the “West-Eastern Divan” where he says: “The style of the Koran is severe, elevated, formidable, in parts truly sublime”. If one is acquainted with Goethe’s way of expression, one knows that the words “truly sublime” belong to the highest attributes which he could assign to a literary landmark.

The young Goethe was at that time seriously studying the Koran. He seemed to have made his first attempts at learning to speak and write Arabic. We know this from a number of papers which contain excerpts in his own handwriting from Megerlin’s translation and from Maracci’s Latin Koran. There he wrote down a considerable number of verses from ten different Surahs. His choice of verses is very revealing. For the first time we can recognize some of those aspects of the Islamic religious doctrine which Goethe considered relevant to his own ideas. To begin with, we must mention here the basic concept, so typically Goethean, that God reveals Himself in all of nature. Without a doubt he was thinking of this conviction of his when he noted down the following verses from the Koran: “The rising and setting of the sun are the Lord’s and wherever you turn, there is God’s countenance”. “He has given us abundant signs in the creation of the heavens and the earth, in the change of night and day . . . in all these are signs abundant of his oneness and goodness for those peoples that are observant of them”. The last words also reflect the doctrine of the unity of God, a concept which certainly did not find its way into Goethe’s notes accidentally, for it was precisely the emphatic pronouncement of this doctrine which the poet considered one of the main achievements of the prophet Muhammad. We shall come back to this later.

Other verses from the Koran written down by Goethe at this period, refer to a subject that the youthful Goethe was much concerned with: that God had spoken and was still speaking to makind, not only through one mediator but through many. I quote: “Thus Mohammed is also nothing but a messenger among you, and many messengers have died before him. If he should now die, would you therefore turn back on your heels”? “God is not given to making known what is secret, but he elects a few of his messengers as he sees fit: that they (the nations) may believe in God and in his messenger”.

As is well known, the young Goethe debated at great length, especially with the Swiss theologian Lavater, the question whether it was Jesus Christ whom we had to consider the sole Messiah of God, or whether we should acknowledge others to have this same mission. This was one of the points of dispute that finally led to his break with Lavater, for Goethe could not accept the strictly Christian view of his friend. It surely was no coincidence that the personal diary of Lavater shows the Koran also to have been the subject of discussion between Goethe and himself. By referring to Muhammad, Goethe probably tried to explain to Lavater that history also knows other great founders of religion, outside the realm of Christianity. Furthermore, Goethe’s Koranic excerpts betray his special interest in Muhammad’s effect upon a whole people and their attitude towards him. Thus we find Goethe taking down the following lines from the Koran (from Surah 29): “The signs are with God, I am but a manifest preacher”, and from Surah 13: “Furthermore some unbelievers say of you: has there not been a wondrous sign sent down upon him by his Lord? But you are only a preacher, and every people has been given a teacher for its instruction”.

It has been proven that Goethe, all his life, had a special liking for this last verse from the Koran. Even in 1819, he quotes it in a letter to a young scholar: “What God says in the Koran is true: We have never sent a prophet to any people, except in its own language”. And in a letter to his Scottish friend, the writer Carlyle, in 1827, he again mentions this quotation from the Koran, where he writes: “The Koran says: God has given a prophet to every people in its own language”. And Goethe repeats this same sentence in an essay of the year 1828.

The Koranic verses from Goethe’s notes, which I just mentioned, speaking of the unbelievers’ expectation of miraculous signs from Muhammad, also had a prolonged effect on Goethe. Alluding to these verses, a literary appendix of a much later date—that is, from the period of the “West-Eastern
Divan"—reads as follows: "I cannot perform miracles, said the prophet. The greatest miracle is that I am".

Goethe's concern with the Koran in the year 1772, led to extraordinarily important consequences. They inspired him to outline a whole tragedy that was to be entitled "Mohomet". Although this plan was not carried out, Goethe did write down a number of crucial passages, which we still possess. Even with regard to these passages it must be said that they represent probably the most significant homage a German poet ever paid to the prophet of Islam. The fragments of this tragedy are important for our considerations here, because in them the essence of Goethe's strong personal interest in Islam becomes truly apparent. First of all, it was the figure of the prophet Muhammad himself, and secondly one of the doctrines he taught, which aroused Goethe's susceptibilities even in his youth.

To speak first of the figure of Muhammad—Goethe was interested in the type and fate of a founder of religion who spread his message not only by the word, as did Jesus Christ, but also by aggressive secular means—by the sword. For Voltaire it was exactly this latter aspect that led him to such an unjustly negative portrayal in his Mahomet-tragedy. Goethe intended to give a much more positive portrayal, even if a certain amount of criticism was unavoidable.

Among the preserved fragments, it was mainly the famous song of praise—Mahomet's Gesang—The Song of Mahomet, originally meant as a dialogue sung by Ali and Fatima that expressed Goethe's interest in Muhammad as a person. Here Goethe portrays the nature of the prophet of a spiritual leader of mankind, in the symbol of a stream. He chose this symbol to illustrate how the spiritual power, from the smallest beginnings, grows into a gigantic force, through unfolding and expanding, and comes to its glorious fulfilment by flowing into the ocean, which here is made the symbol of divinity.

This simile is mainly based on the concept that the religious genius carries the other people as his brothers, bears them along with him, like the large river the smaller brooks and streams, on its way to the sea. It is this very motif that is emphatically illustrated. Let me remind you of the famous verses where it is said of the river:

And now, silver-resplendent,
It enters the plain . . .

And the rivers of the plain
And the streams from the mountains
Shout to him in exultation—Brother!
Brother, take your brothers with you,
With you to your ancient father,
To that everlasting ocean,
Who with outstretched arms
Awaits us . . .

Later it reads, slightly transformed:
Take your brothers from the plain.
Take your brothers from the mountains
With you, to your father!

And Goethe's Mahomet hymn ends:
And he carries thus his brothers
All tumultuous with rapture
To their waiting Maker's heart.

These verses reveal most clearly how Goethe, throughout the whole song, also points to himself. This was the way he felt about his task, his mission as a poet: to work for mankind, as for his brothers, to carry them along, to bear them upward to a higher farm of life. In this sense all his poetic work took on for him an ultimately religious aspect. And Goethe did in fact become the spiritual guide and prophet for many people.

In the same way, however, all the fragments of the tragedy that are concerned with Muhammad himself, bear the marks of the young Goethe. At that time the poet had in mind a number of dramatic plans, whose centre was to be occupied by some great figure from history or mythology; in this way he wanted to symbolize what he, as a young man, felt to be his own uniqueness; the magnitude and force of his creative powers, which he regarded as something divine, but which at the same time seemed to him his special task and mission, his divine call.

I already mentioned that the fragments of the Mahomet-tragedy reveal Goethe's special interest in one main doctrine of Islam. It is again the doctrine of the unity, the oneness of God. He expressly points to this doctrine in the hymn at the beginning of the drama. Alone, under the starry skies, Mahomet sings this hymn which begins with the words: "The fervency of this soul I cannot divide among you".

Praying, Mahomet first turns to all the stars, then to single, more important heavenly bodies: to Jupiter, to the moon and the sun. Here again, Goethe's reverence in the face of nature accords with Islamic concepts. It is characteristic, however, that Goethe's hero endeavours to raise his eyes beyond the multiplicity of the divinely-given natural phenomena to the vision of the One, Highest
God. In his autobiographic "Dichtung und Wahrheit" where, in a consideration of his Mahomet fragment, Goethe discusses this hymn, we read: "Mahomet ... raises himself to God, the One, the Everlasting, Unlimited, to whom ... all limited glorious beings owe their existence".

It was this doctrine of the Oneness of God, of His uniqueness, that Goethe always valued most highly, and when we speak of this poet's relationship to Islam we will have to recognize this doctrine of the unity of God as the main source of Goethe's indebtedness. It is significant here that Goethe's hymn to the heavenly bodies was written in direct reference to one of the Surah of the Koran—something that isn't mentioned in "Dichtung und Wahrheit". It is the 6th Surah, translated from the Latin version by Goethe, and also contained in his excerpts from the Koran previously mentioned.

Let me just mention the short dialogue scene among the fragments of the Mahomet tragedy, in which once more the topic of the unity of God is made the central theme, again, characteristically tied up with the subject of the veneration of nature. Mahomet says here, that God appears to him "at every quiet spring, under each blossoming tree with the warmth of his love". At the same time the prophet combats the false belief, so prevalent among his people, according to which many gods are venerated "like minor lords". "God has no partners". "If he had any", Mahomet says, "if he had any, would he be God"?

Let us recapitulate: It was, in the first place, the whole personality of the prophet that mainly interested Goethe in Islam ever since he had planned a Mahomet tragedy in his youth; in the second place, it was the doctrine of the unity of God. Concerning Muhammad's personality, Goethe was fascinated even by such traits as seemed questionable. On this point we find a detailed account in a passage of "Dichtung und Wahrheit", where he comments on the Mahomet work of his early years. To judge by this passage, the projected drama was supposed to show Muhammad as a general, who often had to employ terrible means to advance his good ends—like any general or conqueror. Thus, in the course of the action, it happens—and I quote—that "the secular world grows and expands, the divine retreats and is tarnished". The end of the tragedy, however, was to let the prophet appear in full glory. As Goethe writes: he was "to depart from this world highsouled, worthy of admiration, purifying his doctrine and establishing his empire".

It is from "Dichtung und Wahrheit" that we also learn why Goethe was equally fascinated by the negative aspects of Mohammad's personality. Repeatedly he had observed at that time, that well known contemporaries, appearing in the role of religious prophets, could not keep aloof from certain errors. In pursuing their spiritual aims, they often did not seem able to avoid making use of very worldly means. It was mainly in the personality of Lavater that Goethe observed such traits. He thus developed the suspicion that the religious prophet in general had something questionable about him. He always observed the same phenomenon: that all too easily the higher is sacrificed to the lower. In pursuing his goal, the religious prophet can hardly maintain his purity intact: too often his paths lead him to destruction instead of to salvation—as Goethe says in "Dichtung und Wahrheit". So Goethe decided to portray dramatically by the example of Muhammad, what he as a poet had recognized as a characteristic, or inner principle, of any religious prophet. On the other hand, he reports that he in opposition to many of his contemporaries "could never look upon Muhammad as a fraud". He had at that time just been reading and studying with great interest the life of the oriental prophet. That inspired him to outline this tragedy in which, furthermore—and I quote again—"all that was to be portrayed which genius, through strength of character and mind, can effect in men". "All that genius can effect in men"—these words prove once again how the phenomenon of the spiritual educator, of the religious leader influencing mankind, both so important to Goethe, were so closely connected in his mind with Muhammad's personality. It is obvious that the Mahomet drama projected by the young Goethe, would have been fundamentally different in a positive way from Voltaire's Mahomet. Many years later Goethe translated Voltaire's "Mahomet" and produced it on the Weimar stage. But let it be clear—this did not show a change of conviction, for it was only with considerable inner resistance that he decided to translate it, precisely because he did not agree with Voltaire's polemically distorted portrayal of the prophet. That he did it at all, was only because the Duke of Weimar, Carl August, desired it and Goethe could not refuse.

*(To be continued.)*

*Goethe (1749—1832), was a German writer universally acknowledged to be one of the giants of world literature. He was also an outstanding critic, journalist, statesman and natural philosopher.*