

Roy Jackson. *Nietzsche and Islam*. (New York and London: Routledge, 2007. pp.194)

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This excellent, densely argued and timely study deals with the important influences that Nietzsche's teaching has had and continues to have on the evolution of Islamic spirituality. It addresses the evidently deep lack of understanding for Islam as a world religion in the Christian sphere. It aims to correct the many hostile and willful misrepresentations and superficial reasoning in the public mind of the West that have arisen as a consequence of recent and current acts of hostility. It shows that the tendency to portray Islam and its central paradigms, such as the prophet and the Qur'an, as the "evil enemy" is not just recent, but has deep historical roots in the rivalries and wars between the Christian world and the Muslim world that go back to the time of the origin of this religion in 7th century Arabia. In particular, it shows that the frequently asserted opinion that Islam stopped developing culturally and philosophically in the 13th century is completely wrong. Thus, Alfarabi was not the last serious Muslim thinker who has been followed by nothing other than rage-filled "holy warriors". Jackson discusses in detail the important work of 19th and 20th century Muslim scholars such as Muhammad Iqbal, Muhammad Arkoun, Muhammad Talbi, Fazlur Rahman, Ali Bulac and others, who were deeply involved with the study of Western thinkers such as Hegel and Nietzsche. But these Muslim philosophers remain largely unknown beyond a narrow circle of scholars. It is a great merit of Jackson's book to present succinct discussions of their work and its relevance for, and its influence on, the Islamic Umma.

Jackson presents a convincing analysis of Nietzsche's religiosity. Nietzsche is seen as neither a standard bearer of atheism, nor as someone concerned only with creative individuals to the neglect of political communities. Jackson points to the dialectical relation between Nietzsche's philological deconstruction of the symbols of Christian history and his effort to free the deep religious longings that underlie the current crises of nihilistic transition. Nihilism is likened by Jackson to what in Muslim thinking is called "*jahiliyya*", that is to say, a period of ignorance, barbarism and cultural disintegration, such as existed in the world to which Muhammad brought his teaching and such as designs itself both in the modern West as well as in Muslim cultures. In this respect Jackson introduces the work of the important Muslim philosopher Ibn Khaldoun and his concepts of "*asabiyah*" and "*mulk*", that is to say, internal cohesion of a political order and a stage of disintegration and decline of this same order. Similar to what may be found in Nietzsche's vision, Khaldoun affirms that political orders oscillate between periods of strength and cohesion and periods of decline. The Protestant reformation and the current technological revolutions are periods of decline in Christian political orders. Similarly, the current phase of adjustment to post-colonialism in Muslim societies may be seen as characterized by reformatory impulses and struggles. Accordingly, Islam is now entering a phase of reformation, and Jackson wishes to contribute to its renewal.

All periods of *mulk* are characterized by a threat of a return to the barbarism of *jahiliyya*. Responsible thinkers in such situations will seek to avert and obviate this threat by a reaffirmation of fundamental symbols. In the case of religions of the book, the attempt will be made to return to a "true" interpretation of the holy text. In the case of Islam this involves passionate efforts to re-establish a pure Islam by re-affirming the

paradigms of the prophet, the Qur'an, the society of Medina as the first Islamic state, and the Rashidun, the first four successors of Muhammad as ruler of Medina. These latter are called the "rightly guided Caliphs". The return to fundamentals involves the dubious effort of a literal reading of texts and early commentaries on texts. Such literalism is meant to avoid any distortion of the divine word and to negate the perceived historical decline of religious rules of life and sacred laws. Some members of the Muslim religious community, who feel threatened in their very souls and their spiritual destinies, now make the effort to establish an Islamic state, modeled on the supposedly divine order when God himself governed the society of Medina through the instrumentality of his prophet Muhammad. The prophet then announced the Shariah, the true law of right reason, in his sayings and his actions, and the Rashidun faithfully followed this model; afterwards everything began more or less to decline into *jahiliyya* in which the Umma was governed largely by apostate rulers who were Muslim in name only.

As Jackson argues forcefully, any such attempt at restoring a formerly pristine political order involves confronting an insoluble dilemma that is presented by the very historicity of the human condition. Valid universal principles, valid in the past as well as now, may well once have been enshrined in a given historical period and its institutions. The eternally true law of right reason may thus once have come to exist in time, but the later effort to renew and imitate this law can only occur in a particular time and a different and particular place which requires the adaptation of universal rules to always changing and never quite equal temporal configurations. Formalistic imitation runs the risk of betraying universal principles in their confrontation with historical realities, which never permits an exactly same solution to the problem of reconciling identity and

difference as it once existed. The conflict between eternity and time, in Jackson's terms the "transhistorical" and the "historical", is ineluctable and cannot be fully sublated by any human effort. Thus, a religious teaching that has once for a short period of time brought peace and harmony, when transposed into a militant ideology obliges its adherents to use violence and the instruments of war in any direct imposition of the first principles on very different circumstances. The means used would negate the ends sought. Only a prophetic charisma, such as that given in the person and the time of the prophet would enable a political order to overcome and sublimate this conflict. Additionally, no text and no set of past historical circumstances, which for Jackson, following Nietzsche, is also a "text", can either interpret itself, or admits of only one interpretation. The dangers of projecting wishful utopias based on faulty reasoning into a "golden" past are great: contrary facts and interpretations would then need to be lied away. Such lying may be unconscious and hence innocent, as even without conscious or unconscious lying, all thinking is to a certain extent a distortion, as it is caught in language and language is historically conditioned.

As is evident, Jackson finds Nietzsche's deconstructive and critical reading of ancient texts particularly useful. Thus, even assuming that there is such a thing, taken literally and not seen as a mythical metaphor, as God speaking directly to certain individuals, that is to say, revelation has once occurred and has given valid insights into what is the case and what needs to be done, such acts of communication need to be framed in some human language, and such language needs to be understood by ordinary people who are not on the same level of understanding as the prophet. All readings and all understandings are shaped and hence distorted by the level of insight of the reader or

the listener, as the case may be. Moreover, languages change over time, and even an originally oral communication is altered significantly when transposed into writing as happened with the revelation of Muhammad.

Jackson draws on the responses by Christian theologians such as Karl Barth, Bonhoeffer, Fraser and Altizer, both to Nietzsche's challenge to Christianity and to the evident disintegration of Christian spirituality into conditions resembling the tower of Babel. As mentioned above, he discusses Muslim thinkers of the late 19th and the 20th centuries who knew and accepted Nietzsche's insights and who understood that the turn to nihilism/*jahiliyya* would necessarily also affect Muslim cultures. They hence sought ways of renewing Muslim religiosity by a return to the sources. Just like Christian theologians with similar concerns and similar intentions, they gave re-interpretations of the key paradigms of their religion. They used Nietzsche's vision of the soul as a conflicted multiplicity, his insight into the importance of strength of willing for human well-being and for the ordering of the soul into a line of willing as a foundation for political order, and how such ordering had once occurred under the impact of prophetic visions. Willing now needed to be reshaped into new lines on the basis of their inherited spiritualities. Yet upon these bases, major differences arose on the way of integrating Nietzsche's pluralistic vision of the soul into the political and spiritual renewal of Islam.

Some Islamic thinkers, such as Iqbal and Arkoun, developed visions of a pluralistic Islam that would be compatible with a democratic and secular political order, a project with which Jackson identifies. In this view, Islam had always been pluralistic and tolerant and the society of Medina had not been a dictatorial theocracy that involved rigid interpretations of divine law. Rather, it had been a pluralistic community, organized

around a voluntary adherence to the person of the prophet and to his sayings as coming from the divinity, who enjoyed peace and economic justice and the abatement of class conflicts. It was organized around the charisma of Muhammad, a Weberian concept not used by Jackson but seemingly quite appropriate and Nietzschean.

Yet other Islamic thinkers, such as Qutb and Mawdudi, believed that nihilistic disintegration had indeed happened in Christian countries, and that Nietzsche had diagnosed the disease correctly. But they thought that these nefarious developments had only occurred in Muslim countries under the impact of Western imperialism, but that these countries still had preserved genuine Muslim spiritualities at the popular mass levels. The religious masses were ruled and oppressed, however, by unjust and apostate rulers who only pretended to be Muslim and who were in the service of Western imperialisms. These thinkers hence sought to avoid a further destruction of the Islamic Umma by a return to a strict and literal interpretation of the sayings and actions of the prophet and the Rashidun, in particular. They attempted to interpret these key paradigms, however, in terms of transhistorical "truths" which really are fictions that ignore their bases in time-bound occurrences. Frequently engaging in rigid literalism, they particularly distorted the Rashidun, that is to say, the sayings and actions of the first four "rightly guided caliphs". These Caliphs were the immediate "successors" of the prophet who knew him personally or who were even members of his family. Hence they did everything right, because of their proximity to the divine source, and their age is interpreted as golden in a completely utopian manner, that ignores the shabby power struggles, their egregious acts of violence, and the murders and betrayals of the rulers of this original Umma.

One of the most interesting and original chapters of Jackson's book concerns his analysis of the destiny of the Islamic soul in the time of the Rashidun. He details the tendency by modern exponents of an Islamic state that would be governed by the Shariah to idealize this period into an eternal paradigm and a timeless model to follow. He then confronts this idealized vision with a discussion of the rather brutal forms of power politics, the assassinations, betrayals and acts of oppression that occurred in the period of the Rashidun. The question then becomes how such flagrant violations and contradictions of the original prophetic message could be ignored and lied away. Jackson, rightly I believe, ascribes this blindness to "Islam's Platonism behind the mask of liberalism" (p.146). I suppose that this would be a kind of Platonism that believes that Plato's Republic set forth a timeless model of a good society in its "city in logos". This is certainly a standard Platonism in which the Republic is seen as a blueprint for a totalitarian political order, wholly incompatible with any form of pluralism or any kind of democracy. My criticism of this interpretation would revolve around such a rather superficial reading of Plato, even though it admittedly is a wide-spread and deeply ingrained reading, not only in Muslim culture, but even more in the Christian sphere. In this regard, Jackson shows how Muslim scholars, such as Arkoun, have used Nietzsche's critique of any kind of linguistic literalism to show that the whole enterprise of founding an Islamic state is fundamentally misguided. Nietzsche (and arguably also Plato) held the seemingly cogent view that all human language, including any divine logos, is always metaphorical in as much as such a logos must enter a human idiom. As such the hermeneutic circle that stretches between the Arabia of the seventh century and the struggling communities in our era of planetary unification could never be fully closed by

any human effort. Such closure might require a new prophetic pneuma (again a hint to Weber) which by the very terms of at least Sunni Islam is impossible. For Sunni Islam, (and Jackson does not deal with Shiism), Muhammad is the last of the prophets and the seal of the age of prophecy.

This book says much about Islam and how Nietzsche and other Western thinkers have been used for the advocacy within radical Islamism of founding a “true” Islamic state based on the Shariah and the “monumental” historical fiction of the Rashidun. But it also shows how these thinkers, and in particular Nietzsche, have been and can be used to achieve a loosening of rigid monotheisms as well as for a pluralistic subversion of autocratic and violent political programs hiding under the mask of spiritual purification. In this respect, it is surprising that Jackson does not invoke Nietzsche’s profound insight into the uses and abuses of history. For is not the struggle within Islam, to which he points, a case of an ill-advised use of “monumental” history in conflict with an appropriate use of “critical” history?

On the whole, Jackson’s book is not very informative on Nietzsche’s explicit statements on Islam, especially the negative ones in his published works, such as the *Anti-Christ* (-ian). Thus, one would have wished more coverage of Islam’s concepts of sin and damnation to an eternal hell. While Nietzsche on the whole is an Islamophile, he nevertheless would also have seemed to oppose Muhammad’s liberal use of the threat of hell-fire as a tool of political control. Like the similar, and perhaps more vicious hostility to life found in Christian scriptures’ use of hell, Islam’s holy book does invoke the threat of eternal fire with astonishing frequency. From a cynical perspective, one compatible with Nietzsche’s positive estimation of cynicism, one could of course argue that such

metaphysical threats may unfortunately have been necessary in the past so as to establish sustainable lines of willing in the many weak souls. Such weak souls, seemingly a majority of human beings, need “to be willed” in this manner before they are able to will on their own authority. Vice-regency is the goal that Jackson, following Iqbal, alleges to be the aim of Muslim practices of spiritual self-cultivation. The three stage are: obedience to the law, self-control followed by vice-regency. But the attainment of this “heaven” on earth might well have to pass via such fear of the “gates of hell”.

However, the above indicated political uses of the “beyond” in Islam, just as in Christianity, would seem to be profoundly ambiguous from Nietzsche’s perspective. Jackson does not deal with this and its far-reaching political implications. It would seem that tyrannical political regimes of any religious dispensation, especially also Muslim ones, have frequently used torture as a foretaste of hell, as a kind of making visible and palpable of such very negative invisibles. Nietzsche seems to consign all such profoundly “immoral” practices of “morality” to the slavish past of humanity that is to be left behind.

But the political implications of religion arise on an even deeper level, namely the level at which Nietzsche discusses the problem of the rank order between philosophy and religion. *Beyond Good and Evil* is the text on which Jackson relies most frequently in his discussion of the Nietzschean soul and the soul in *jahiliyya*. Yet little is said about how Nietzsche there conceives of the proper rank order between philosophical rule and the employment of historically given and hence available forms of religiosity. Aphorisms 61, 62, 188, and 260, in particular come to mind here. It would seem that Muslim theologians, similar to Christian theologians, have been extremely suspicious of philosophy. In both religions they have succeeded in turning philosophy into a

“handmaiden of theology”. In Islam, secular rulers seem to have succeeded in subordinating philosophy as well as popular piety to often short term political gain. An interesting point that might have been pursued more than is done is the extent to which contemporary *ulama* are either Nietzschean free spirits or already philosophical legislators. Where in the Muslim world would one have to look to find men (and women) in whom to trust for a renewal and secularization of Islam?

Summarily speaking, this book is well-worth the effort of reading. Much can be learned from it about Islam, even though it does not provide similar enlightenment about Nietzsche’s teaching on its own.

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