CHAPTER 7

Religion

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A famous line from Goethe's *Faust* declares theology a notorious field of human knowledge: 'and – what is worst – Theology' (FA 7.1:33 / CW 2:13), Faust attests as he lists his scholarly pursuits. This comment ironizes the plot of *Faust*. At the centre of this seminal work stands a pact with supernatural forces whose image builds on multifaceted theological concepts of evil. Diverse links to religious motifs invoke, additionally, an association of authorship with omnipotent providence, paralleling human creativity with God's power. The familiarity with religious faith is a catalyst of the plot on multiple levels. What fuels Faust's ironic opposition to the centrality of theology among the fields of human knowledge?

A conflicted attraction to religion characterises Goethe's oeuvre as much as it informed his intellectual dilemmas and public polemics. His works demonstrate a long-standing fascination with religion as a social power and, correspondingly, with the vocabulary that it offers for literary creation.

Goethe experimented with spiritual doctrines that diverged from institutional Christianity. Due to his cultural prominence, Goethe's relationship to religion provoked anxiety among his contemporaries. He was taken to be advocating atheism, deism and even paganism. Goethe's critique of fundamental Christian convictions and attention to Pantheism were the backdrop for those descriptions. His evident interest in Eastern spirituality late in his life added to concerns that this popular writer would encourage his readers to reject institutional Christianity. In fact, Goethe's approach to Christianity was multifaceted and changed considerably throughout his life. Interest in central Christian beliefs is sustained throughout his oeuvre. His transgressive relationship to Christianity demonstrates an active engagement with tradition – an attempt to revise religious tenets, rather than renounce them altogether.

For his time, Goethe's engagement with religion was remarkable, because it made the rebellion against institutionalised Christianity into a poetic catalyst. In such polemical writings as Kant's *Die Religion innerhalb*

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der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft (*Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, 1793), the late German Enlightenment sought to advance the transition from a confining system of faith that centred on religious authorities, primarily priests, to a participatory model that highlighted the independent exploration of religious tenets. The underlying premise of this transition was that all human beings hold intellectual capacities that enable them to engage with Scriptures autonomously. Goethe approached religion not as an authoritative system of beliefs that confined the individual. On the contrary, he treated traditional religious symbols as sparking creative experimentation. While Goethe's renderings of biblical motifs can be said to advance this transformation, Goethe also expressed concerns about what he saw as a religious crisis in his era, namely the questioning of singular status of Scripture as a cultural, legal and historical authority.

Autonomous Contemplation and the Value of Scripture

The view that scriptural reading is an asset to the religious community reflects Goethe's overall pleading for a contemplative exploration of spirituality. The Scripture contains tropes that are both remarkably captivating and have universal pertinence. Eckermann's *Gespräche mit Goethe* (*Conversations with Goethe*), which present multiple reflections on spirituality, illustrate the principles that guided Goethe in his approach to religion as a creative force. Eckermann cites Goethe as saying that:

> Belief and unbelief are not at all the right organs for apprehending a work of art; that requires very different human powers and abilities. Art should address itself to those organs with which we apprehend it; if it fails to do so, it defeats its purpose and has no real effect on us. A religious subject can also make good material for art, but only if it is of general human interest. That's why a Virgin and Child is an excellent subject, which has been done a hundred times, and yet we never tire of it. (Sunday 2 May, 1824; FA 39:115 / E 93–4)

Eckermann claims to document, thereby, a bold approach to religious imagery that reflects the Enlightenment endeavour to free the individual from religious authority while advancing this imperative.

Goethe's short text 'Brief des Pastors zu ***. an den neuen Pastor zu ***' ('Letter from the Pastor of*** to the New Pastor of***', 1773) reflects Goethe's approach to faith. Taking the voice of a clergyman, the letter grants Protestantism the potential to liberate believers from their constant preoccupation with the blame that they carry for original sin. The speaker advises the pastor, 'Let your parish read the Bible as much as

they please.'[1] The Letter promotes a corresponding conviction: the rejection of original sin as a confining concept. Goethe revealed throughout his life a certain aversion to Christian doctrines, particularly to Catholicism, opposing what he saw as damaging religious indoctrination that instils guilt in human life. Goethe held the Bible in high regard but rejected religious indoctrination – the main hazard he found in institutionalised biblical exegesis. At the same time, Goethe's reflections on politics scrutinise the long-standing function of religious institutions as pillars of social order. In this context, Goethe recognised the Bible's stature as a cultural asset that sparked the imagination of contemporary German authors, particularly those who cultivated national sentiments.

Goethe's first attempts to write poetry took the form of religious odes. In his autobiography *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit* (*From My Life: Poetry and Truth*), Goethe describes that his early poems were meant to convey Christ's ascension – a topic prevalent in spiritual poetry at the time, such as that of Elias Schlegel and Friedrich Gottlieb Klopstock. Witnessing his mother's turn to Scripture as a source for guidance in times of distress or confusion, the young Goethe recognised the authority of the Bible as an orientating tool. While his early poems emulate traditional Christian descriptions of Christ's supernatural powers, later reflections on spirituality show Goethe's opposition to parts of Scriptures grounded in supernatural descriptions, including miracles.

Goethe highlighted the human characteristics of Christ in various manifestations of his approach to the Scripture as a source of creative inspiration. His early idyllic poems on Christ's divine powers were exchanged with reflections on Christ as a non-conformist. This shift marks Goethe's involvement with the Pietist community; his relation to Pietism through his friendship with Susanne Katharina von Klettenberg exposed Goethe to religious conviction remarkably different from his father's religious orthodoxy.[2]

Natural Religion

Several of Goethe's statements on religiosity invoke what the eighteenth century called 'natural religion'. As he told the Swiss theologian and philosopher Johann Kaspar Lavater:

> You consider the Gospel the most divine truth; even a loud voice from heaven wouldn't convince *me* that water burns and fire puts it out, that a woman bears a child without a man, or that a man can rise from the dead; instead, I consider these beliefs to be blasphemies against the great God and his revelation in nature.[3]

Goethe thought it self-evident that the order of nature reveals a divine presence. Natural religion did not require efforts to foster faith with the believer; it was particular religions that necessitated such mental labour. God's manifestation in natural order is a guiding principle in Goethe's literary and scientific enterprises.

Goethe's adherence to nature as a principle of religion reflects his long-standing preoccupation with Spinoza's thought. In late eighteenth-century German philosophy, Spinoza sparked a seminal theological image: the view of God as embodied in the world. Goethe was an active party in the famous Pantheism debate, which sought to scrutinise Spinoza's impact on German intellectuals and assess whether Spinozism was in accordance with institutional Christianity. Goethe was exposed to Spinozism in the 1770s and engaged with spiritual trends that built on Spinoza's ideas. Pantheism, the view of God as embodied in the world, can be said to echo in Goethe's occupation with nature in his poems of 1773–4.[4] These poems demonstrate the engagement of spirituality through an exploratory engagement with nature. Deism, the view of faith as grounded in rationalism and, as such, as detached from authoritative traditional religious institutions, was a diverging, yet related, adaptation of Spinoza's ideas in Goethe's intellectual reflections.

Goethe is concerned with nature, in both his lyric and scientific writings, as a system that upholds a strong internal logic that informs the teleological development of organisms as well as their harmonious cohabitation. The poem 'Das Göttliche' ('The Godlike'), which was most likely composed in 1783, juxtaposes nature's regularity with moral distinctions that pervade the human understanding of the world. Whereas humans distinguish good from evil, cosmological entities do not register such a distinction:

> For unfeeling,
> Numb, is nature;
> The sun shines
> Upon bad and good,
> And to the criminal
> As to the best
> The moon and the stars lend light.
>
> (FA 1:333 / CW 1:79–81; trans. Vernon Watkins)

The concept of natural religion dispels, therefore, the view of moral values as God-given. Denial of the inherent harmony between morality and religious belief characterises Goethe's critical distance from institutionalised religion.

The Legacy of the Hebrew Bible

Notwithstanding this distance, Goethe shows throughout his intellectual life great interest in the social eminence of religious values. This led him to explore, throughout his oeuvre, the roots of monotheism. Goethe's investigations of ancient Judaism displayed his explorative approach to religion. At the same time, this interest was representative of his period. Late eighteenth-century German cultural industry exhibited vibrant attempts to investigate – and even emulate – the ancient Hebrews, a nation that was celebrated for producing the Hebrew Bible, and with it, monotheism's ideological roots.

A typical example of this venture was Goethe's interest in ancient Jewish history as it is documented in the Old Testament. Seminal biblical narratives, including the wandering of the Israelites in the desert, echo in Goethe's literary writings.[5] Furthermore, he reflects in various writings on the pertinence of biblical motifs to German cultural production during his time. These reflections add to the impression that Goethe's relationship to Jewish culture was ambivalent, rather than merely critical. Though he ultimately called his compatriots to renounce the emulation of the ancient Hebrews, which proliferated during his lifetime, his entire oeuvre engages biblical motifs that relate to the Jewish tradition.

In his youth, Goethe planned to author a novel composed of dialogues in seven different languages; one of them was set to be Yiddish. The plan never materialised. Though the young Goethe did not achieve a command of Yiddish, he was exposed to it cursorily wandering Frankfurt's Jewish quarter. His interest in Judaism led him to engage with the study of another language: Biblical Hebrew. The ancient language was taken at that time to expose its learners to the clandestine origins of Christianity. Goethe documents in his autobiography his difficulties learning the language, which counteracted his striving to connect with primordial religion. Readers of Biblical Hebrew are faced with such hurdles as punctuation. A late addition to the biblical text, punctuation alerts us to the interventions occurring throughout its long-lasting transmission. Paradoxically, the biblical text does not intimate authentic spiritual tenets, but, by contrast, the existence of political forces that mediate the Bible to its readers.

In his autobiography, Goethe documents the proliferating interest in the Old Testament that was unique to the move from the late Enlightenment to early Romanticism. The revaluation of the Old Testament, he writes in chapter seven of his autobiography, led to making the ancient Hebrews into a national model that his German-speaking contemporaries sought to

emulate. Goethe stresses that this admiration pervaded the literary scene. The qualities demanded from a poet thus included familiarity with the Bible as an integral part of the cultural canon.

In his comments on the cultural significance of the Bible during his time, Goethe names not only aesthetic merits, but also its history of reception. Resistance to the Bible – various oppositions to its long-accepted authority – had spread globally. Therefore, both the admiration for the Bible and the attacks on it make for its compelling cultural influence:

> [I]t had previously been accepted on good faith that this book of books had been composed in one single spirit, indeed that it had been inspired and, as it were, dictated by the divine spirit. Yet the dissimilarities of the various parts had long since been alternately criticized and defended by unbelievers and believers … For my part, I loved and revered it, because I owed almost my whole development in moral culture to it, and all of it, stories, teachings, symbols, parables, had impressed itself on me deeply and influenced me in one way or another. (FA 14:300–1 / CW 4:208)

Like many contemporary intellectuals who sought to rediscover the Old Testament, Goethe held some biblical texts in high regard, like Genesis or Psalms, while ignoring large parts of the Bible. His preferences are representative of his time. The biblical references in his work mostly relate to stories that concern momentous scenes of Israel's constitution as a nation.

Goethe documents not only the admiration of the Bible as a canonical cultural text but also the decline of this appreciation in nineteenth-century German culture. Goethe observes that his contemporaries eventually matured out of the attempt to imitate the national poetry of a different nation and instead sought to establish an independent aesthetic model for the nation. This description hints at his own attempt to approach Scriptures as a source of inspiration that ultimately leads to autonomous creation and to a celebration of creative freedom.

An eminent example of this approach is Goethe's engagement with the Song of Songs, a biblical text that drew the attention of a number of prominent intellectuals during his time. Goethe declared that the Song was 'the tenderest and most inimitable expression of love that has come down to us from oriental antiquity' (FA 3.1:141).[6] When he was twenty-six, he endeavoured to translate the text – an attempt also made by a number of other German intellectuals, including Johann Gottfried Herder, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, Johann Georg Hamann, and Moses Mendelssohn. Goethe's translation does not mask his inadequate command of Biblical Hebrew. However passionate, his translation does not opt to emulate the original text by attending to Biblical Hebrew's linguistic particularities.

Goethe held in high regard Luther's translation of the Bible in general and of the Song in particular. Rather than offering a more precise translation of the Hebrew original, Goethe sought to express his own creative genius through a novel adaptation. Goethe's translation of the Song manifests, therefore, his view of translation as an enriching, non-instrumental engagement with a text. The Song's unique vividness sets in motion a series of poetic renderings that stimulate the translator's creativity.

Goethe's intellectual exchange with Herder sparked his interest in the period's emerging notion of nationalism as much as it informed his exploration of non-Western cultures. In Herder's oeuvre, the praise of the Old Testament is connected to its view as capturing a unique people's national spirit. Herder examined Biblical Hebrew as a language whose pure form disappeared with the collapse of the ancient Jewish nation. Goethe's reflections on the Old Testament register Herder's celebration of biblical literature as a national artefact, though Goethe ultimately criticised the sweeping admiration of the ancient Hebrews.

Islam and Other Traditions

Herder's influence on Goethe went beyond the exploration of the roots of monotheism. Herder presented pioneering attempts to compose a world history: accounts that straddle antiquity, the rise of the Roman empire, and the emergence of European nations. Herder propelled, thereby, the acknowledgement of diverse cultures and religions that had previously been disregarded as marginal or even barbaric. Herder's *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit* (*This Too a Philosophy of History for the Formation of Humanity*, 1774) advocates the non-hierarchical examination of religious notions. The essay pays attention to ancient Egyptian religion, and to the instrumentality of polytheism in general for the development of civilization. Herder argues that religious credos are contingent on context and shaped by cultural and historical norms. Exploration of cultures that had previously been considered inferior thus served, for both Herder and Goethe, as a platform for investigating non-Western systems of faith.

In particular, a broad interest in Eastern cultural creation and in Islam permeates Goethe's late works, and especially in his *West–östlicher Divan* (*West-Eastern Divan*) of 1819, a work that explores intercultural encounters as poetic inspiration. Goethe addresses Hafez, the Persian poet of the fourteenth century, indicating that engagement with his poetry and the system of values that it represents may facilitate new forms of happiness, ostensibly

for Western readers. Presenting a poetic speaker who is a Muslim believer is central to this effort. The religious interest in Islam that is manifested in the *Divan* centres on mysticism, particularly that associated with Sufism. Several of the poems in the collection carry names that acknowledge traditional Muslim narratives such as 'Hegire' ('Hegira'), a title that references the journey of Muhammad's early followers to a safe haven for the practice of Islam. Goethe's poem opens with the statement 'North and west and south are breaking' (FA 3.1:12 / SPL 145), which is followed by an address to 'holy Hafez' who, it is intimated, holds clandestine spiritual knowledge that saturates his poetry – secrets that may open the gate to paradise. It is telling that a title fundamental to Muslim cultural memory explicates Goethe's own poetic attempt to transfigure the world's cultural geography. This choice is characteristic of the collection's performative poetic venture, in which the poetic speaker takes on the role of a poetic interlocutor with the East, prompting the Eastern tradition to reveal itself on its own terms.

Whether or not this engagement with Eastern culture is a genuine renunciation of Western cultural privileges is inconclusive. As in the case of Goethe's admiration of the Song of Songs, the exploration of 'Oriental' poetics reveals fantasies characteristic of the era, such as the linking of the East and of its inhabitants with enhanced eroticism. It is thus important to note that while Islam could be conceived as an Abrahamic religion – as a pillar of Western civilization similarly to Judaism and Christianity – its presentation in the *Divan* positions it as esoteric. The imagery of the *Divan* is a pastiche that blends allusions to Islam, Hinduism and Persian religions.

Notwithstanding these typical associations, the *Divan*'s manifold references to Muslim theology represent a cultural transformation. Some of the period's leading intellectuals showed growing interest in Eastern cultures. Friedrich Schlegel, Alexander von Humboldt and others sought to offer German readers insights into foreign cultures that maintain vital elements of human nature that have been corrupted or disappeared. As a part of those efforts, the languages of the East were taken as holding the key to paradise, diminishing the theological importance of Biblical Hebrew as the language of creation.[7] The interest in the mythical East – the land where the sun rises – then shifted to entertain new cultural and geographical terrains such Persia and India.

In the *Divan*, the engagement with Eastern cultures promises to expose the poet-speaker to a novel form of aesthetics. He attests to the formation of a poetic friendship with the Persian poet. The penetration of his interlocutor's worldview is accompanied by praises of Eastern culture. The underlying reasoning is that the East demonstrates long-standing

adherence to tradition. Paeans to Islam do consider, at the same time, similarities between Eastern and Western religious customs, such as charity, that are taken as meritorious regardless of their geographical location.

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Goethe was a leading voice in revolutionising the role of religion in modern cultural consumption, not through the rejection of religious narratives, but through their active rewriting. Our own period has sparked examinations of how Christian polemics and trends have modulated cultural practices, including the consumption of literature. The rise of Romanticism, particularly in Germany and England, has been understood as having prompted an engagement with Scriptures through the senses – a trend of universalising and pluralising exegesis most readily associated with Protestantism. Interpersonal exchange, such as that occurring between a poetic speaker and a reader, could thus be said to model divine inspiration, while also challenging traditional views of God's revelation as a singular authority. Against this background, Goethe's works exemplify a novel approach to religious authority. His writings reference various religious traditions while transfiguring the role of their audience: from believers who adhere faithfully to traditional rites, readers turn into agents who engage with the reframing of religious symbols.

Notes

1 'Letter from the Pastor of*** to the New Pastor of***' (1773), *Literature and Belief* 20.2 (2000), 1–11 (at 10).
2 Arnold Bergsträsser, 'Goethe's View of Christ', *Modern Philology* 46.3 (1949), 176.
3 Translated in Elisabeth Krimmer, '"Then Say What Your Religion Is": Goethe, Religion, and *Faust*', in Elisabeth Krimmer and Patricia Anne Simpson (eds.), *Religion, Reason, and Culture in the Age of Goethe* (Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 2013), 99–118 (at 106).
4 Nicholas Boyle, *Goethe: The Poet and the Age*, vol. 1: *The Poetry of Desire (1749–1790)* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 160–1.
5 Karin Schutjer, *Goethe and Judaism: The Troubled Inheritance of Modern Literature* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2015), 67–124.
6 Translated in George Holley Gilbert, 'How Men Have Read "The Song of Songs"', *Biblical World* 33.3 (1909), 171–81 (at 171).
7 Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise: Race, Religion, and Philology in the Nineteenth Century*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992 [1989]).