

RELIGION AND POSTMODERNISM

A series edited by Thomas A. Carlson

EDITORIAL BOARD

Gil Anidjar, Arnold Davidson, Hent de Vries, Amy Hollywood,  
Eric L. Santner

FOUNDING EDITOR

Mark C. Taylor

RECENT BOOKS IN THE SERIES

Thomas A. Carlson, *The Indiscrete Image: Infinitude and Creation of the Human* (2008)

Jacques Derrida, *The Gift of Death, Second Edition, and Literature in Secret* (2008)

Ward Blanton, *Displacing Christian Origins: Philosophy, Secularity, and the New Testament* (2007)

Mark C. Taylor, *After God* (2007)

Slavoj Žižek, Eric L. Santner, and Kenneth Reinhard, *The Neighbor: Three Inquiries in Political Theology* (2006)

Vincent P. Pecora, *Secularization and Cultural Criticism: Religion, Nation, and Modernity* (2006)

Paolo Apolito, *The Internet and the Madonna: Religious Visionary Experience on the Web* (2005)

Kevin Hart, *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred* (2004)

# Islam and the West

*A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*

MUSTAPHA CHÉRIF

*Translated by  
Teresa Lavender Fagan*

*With a foreword by  
Giovanna Borradori*

---

*The University of Chicago Press • Chicago and London*

MUSTAPHA CHÉRIF is professor of philosophy and Islamic studies at the University of Algiers and a visiting professor at the Collège de France.

Among TERESA LAVENDER FAGAN'S most recent translations are Rémi Brague's *The Wisdom of the World*, Jean Bottéro's *The Oldest Cuisine in the World*, and Alain Boureau's *Satan the Heretic: The Birth of Demonology in the Medieval West*.

Originally published as *L'Islam et l'Occident. Rencontre avec Jacques Derrida* © Editions Odile Jacob, 2006.

The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 60637  
The University of Chicago Press, Ltd., London  
© 2008 by The University of Chicago  
All rights reserved. Published 2008  
Printed in the United States of America  
17 16 15 14 13 12 11 10 09 08 1 2 3 4 5  
ISBN-13: 978-0-226-10286-3 (cloth)  
ISBN-10: 0-226-10286-6 (cloth)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Derrida, Jacques.

Islam and the West : a conversation with Jacques Derrida / Mustapha Chérif; translated by Teresa Lavender Fagan; with a foreword by Giovanna Borradori.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-0-226-10286-3 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 0-226-10286-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)

I. Derrida, Jacques—Interviews. 2. East and West. 3. Political science—Philosophy. I. Chérif, Mustapha, 1950– II. Fagan, Teresa Lavender. III. Borradori, Giovanna. IV. Title.

CBZ51.D4 2008

909'.09767—dc22

2008003988

Ⓢ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48-1992.

*To all those who unconditionally  
welcome, listen to, and respect  
THE OTHER.*

## Foreword: Pure Faith in Peace

*I want to speak here, today, as an Algerian, as an Algerian who became French at a given moment, lost his French citizenship, and then recovered it.*

JACQUES DERRIDA

It is a late afternoon in the spring of 2003. In the tea-room of the Institut du Monde Arabe, in Paris, a man by the name of Mustapha Chérif is sitting at a table, deeply immersed in his thoughts. He is expecting the arrival of Jacques Derrida, thinker of worldwide fame, controversial philosopher, and prophet of the oppressed, the undocumented, and the unseen.

We can imagine what Chérif could have reasonably anticipated: after greeting Derrida and exchanging a few words of gratitude for agreeing to participate in

the ensuing public debate, they would have walked toward the hall where a large audience would be eagerly awaiting them. But Chérif could not have anticipated that Derrida would be coming straight from the hospital, where he had just learned he was suffering from pancreatic cancer, the illness that would kill him fifteen months later. "For any other meeting I wouldn't have had the strength to participate," Derrida told Chérif, who found his participation "the most beautiful sign of solidarity, the greatest gesture of friendship he could have offered" (p. 97).

This slender book is the earnest transcript of what Chérif and Derrida told each other that late afternoon, with Derrida's ominous diagnosis in the background. Focusing on the crucial but largely underestimated role that Algeria, his country of birth, has played in Derrida's philosophical itinerary, *Islam and the West* presents Derrida's interpretation of the interdependence of politics, religion, and faith in a new light; shows that his ideal of "democracy to come" has a strong universalist component; and, finally, adds to his fascinating understanding not only of Islam but of the Arab as the ultimate figure of exclusion and dissidence in the post-9/11 era.

Admittedly, Chérif and Derrida are an odd couple, for their profound love of Algeria is almost all they share. A vocal public intellectual and one of the only moderate Islamic voices speaking up today, Chérif has consistently worked from within the institutions

he hopes to affect. Once a prominent politician, serving in the Algerian government as secretary of higher education and ambassador to Egypt, this professor of epistemology and Islamic studies at the University of Algiers was the first Muslim thinker to be received by a pope in the Vatican's history. In November 2006, after giving a controversial speech on the violent nature of Islam in Ratisbon, Germany, and just before his politically delicate visit to Turkey, Benedict XVI invited Chérif into his private library for a tête à tête, without witnesses, on the dialogue of civilizations.

By contrast, Derrida never fit any institutional cadre. Throughout his life and in many different forms, Derrida aimed at unearthing and dismantling, or deconstructing, the oppressive force that he saw inhabiting all institutions, simply because of their regulating and normalizing role. Understanding institutions in this fashion allowed Derrida to broaden the traditional notion of what counts as an institution. Traditionally, institutions are understood to shape the concrete domains of education, law, politics, and religion. For Derrida, abstract conceptual constructs such as gender, ethnicity, and language govern human existence in a similar way and thus may be counted as institutions. Deconstruction, as the process of identification and displacement of the oppressive structure proper to all institutions, can be indiscriminately applied to either the concrete or the conceptual domain. In Derrida's reading, even

nonreligious institutions tend to impose their norms and standards from the top down, according to a model of absolute authority shared by the three religions of the Book: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. If this is true, which Derrida believes it is, the liberating duty of deconstruction entails a commitment to secularization (*laïcité*), assumed as the interminable effort to dismantle the theocratic model of institutional authority, which coincides with the demand for unconditional submission.

In light of Derrida's suspicion of all institutional formats, it is not surprising that he requested an informal conversation with Chérif. And it is to Chérif's credit to have produced a book in line with Derrida's original desire: a narrative that progresses without a predetermined path and that is presented to the reader as a "stream of consciousness." And yet, for all his preference for fluidity over rigidity, Derrida was a highly guarded man, whose constant effort to protect his private life was obvious even to those of us who knew him personally over a span of many years.

This book pierces that reticence at a moment of great vulnerability, revealing the depth and complexity of Derrida's feelings for Algeria. Chérif knows it and, in the appendix entitled "Biography: Derrida and the Southern Shores," gives the reader the bare facts that lie behind those feelings. Some of these are well known and some less. Among those rarely discussed is that, after leaving Algeria for the first time

in 1949 at the age of nineteen, Derrida returned as a soldier in the French Army and a teacher in 1957–59, during Algeria's war of independence. Chérif notes Derrida's first and only return to lecture at the University of Algiers in 1971. Interestingly, over the course of the next two decades Derrida would travel all over Africa and the Middle East, expressing his political support for the oppressed in South Africa and in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, for example. But he would never again land in his country of birth. When, in 1991, a second trip to Algeria was planned, the visit was abruptly canceled because of the Gulf War. The very last opportunity would have been in November 2004, when he had been invited to a conference entirely dedicated to his work. But, as Chérif sadly acknowledges, destiny decided otherwise, for Derrida died on October 8 of that year.

The book leaves us to ponder the eerie coincidence of Derrida expressing his deepest feelings about Algeria just prior to his death. Chérif would like the reader to believe that even the master of deconstruction had a dream: an Algeria in which French and Algerians could live together in harmony. But here is where, I believe, the difference in their sensibilities emerges most clearly. Long before his conversation with Chérif, Derrida chose to name his affection for Algeria "nostalgeria" (*nostalgerie*), a designation expressing his characteristic blend of theoretical sophistication and emotional control. Nostalgeria captures

the fact that Derrida's love of, and hope for, Algeria was never that of a citizen, involving the patriotic attachment one has for a nation-state. In a speech in support of Algerian intellectuals, delivered in 1994 while the country was experiencing unspeakable violence, Derrida claimed that the attachment of the noncitizen is all the more powerful because it can afford to tie, in a single knot, the heart, the mind, and the act of taking a political stance. Heart, mind, and the act of taking a political stance form the cardinal points of nostalgia, which is a constellation more than an entity: it is an irreducible plurality of different emotional and rational strains, protected from all oppression, including the oppression of the modern institution par excellence, the nation-state.

The way in which Algeria colored both the birth and the death of this great thinker is swiftly but delicately painted by Chérif's farewell to Derrida. Entitled "From the Southern Shores, Adieu to Derrida," this afterword was the eulogy Chérif read at the Collège International de Philosophie, in Paris, on October 21, 2004. In 1983, Derrida and a small group of friends conceived and founded this "anti-institution," where a new practice of thinking and exchanging philosophy was intended to take place. In 2003, at the commemoration of its twentieth anniversary, Derrida underlined the noninstitutional character of this institution by declaring that the birth of the Collège

had not been the result of a comprehensive plan but rather the culmination of a series of setbacks.

Among the many quirky aspects of this book, the most evident is perhaps its title. The project of reconciling Islam and the West presupposes that there is only one Islam and one West. By contrast, and this is perhaps the key argument of the book, there is plurality *in* Islam as well as multiple Islams, as there is plurality *in* the West as well as multiple Wests. This consideration supports Chérif and Derrida's invitation to rethink the Islam-West opposition in terms of the internal division of the Mediterranean Sea into Southern and Northern shores. "Derrida came from the Southern shores," Chérif writes, thus "he viewed Islam and Muslim culture without external prejudice" (p. 7). Concurrently, Derrida admits to being very sensitive to the opportunity of feeling welcome "among Algerians," to which he adds, "I cherish that which is still Algerian in me, what is in me and keeps me Algerian" (p. 86).

The use of either set of categories, Islam and the West and the Northern and Southern shores of the Mediterranean, identifies two separate ways of addressing a politically sensitive issue. In the United States, in most social sciences including Islamic studies, political theory, and philosophy, to see legitimacy in the opposition Islam-West means to align oneself with the "culturalists," represented by conservative

scholars like Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington. For both of them, Islam is about the blending of the distinction between politics and religion. This is the keystone of their culturalist explanation of current tensions in terms of the clash of civilizations. By contrast, progressive Islamic scholars in Europe and the United States, including Olivier Roy and Mahmoud Mamdani, oppose that categorization, preferring instead the Northern versus Southern distinction. Conceiving of Islam and the West as the Southern and Northern shores of the Mediterranean basin means to interpret them as the two halves of a geographical, ethnic, religious, and cultural unit. It also gestures at a concept of religious and cultural identity that is intrinsically and irreducibly divided. There are at least two internal divisions that unite the Mediterranean basin, giving it its unique identity. One is the division and overlapping of the three major monotheistic traditions that originated from it: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam. The other, more painful one, is the unforgivable attack that European colonialism launched against the Muslim world. The Mediterranean is a unity only with reference to both of these constitutive divisions.

Chérif and Derrida align themselves with the progressive antiorientalist lineage in hopes, as Chérif wrote, to “to reopen the horizon, to go beyond the divisions, to seek a new form of alliance between individuals and peoples in love with justice” (p. 11). But who is passionate about justice? Is it the Northern self

or the Southern other? Or is it, rather, the reverse: the Southern self and the Northern other? Is the Muslim a figure of what is near (*du proche*) or of what is far away (*du lointain*)? And who is Derrida’s neighbor: this proximity or this distance?

With his first question, Chérif opens a window onto Derrida’s “lived experience as an Algerian” (*vécu d’Algérien*) or, more precisely, as a French-Maghrebin-Jew, or maybe simply as an Arab-Jew, a condition of marginalization similar to the one that a large portion of Arab youth is living in France today. The essence of Derrida’s answer is that to be such a hybrid meant for him to form a conception of the other as the closest of all possible neighbors (*l’autre comme le prochain le plus proche*). To be at home is, thus, to feel the absolute otherness of one’s neighbor. In this way, *Islam and the West* reinforces one of Derrida’s key persuasions: that civilization and community are not about sameness but difference. The Greek, the Arab, and the Jew, the three figures at the center of the second half of this book, define Mediterranean civilization precisely because of their irreducible difference.

To dissolve the opposition between Islam and the West within the divided unity of Mediterranean civilization is one of the leading themes of the discussion between Chérif and Derrida. Both of them register the force of this new categorization, which expands upon a major shift in vocabulary that occurred after World War II.

As intellectuals, historians, and philosophers tried to make sense of the tragedy of the Holocaust in the context of the Western ideals of equality and freedom, democracy, and fraternity, they faced the moral obligation to call into question the unity of the West as a fundamentally Christian concept. The redefinition of the Western trunk in Judeo-Christian terms emerged in this context.

Notwithstanding the massive difference in scale, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the international mayhem of their aftermath, have increased the need to pluralize the Western trunk even further. "Universal civilization belongs to everyone and is owned by no one," Chérif said, indicating that "the *Greek, Arab, and Jewish* peoples represented three major historical moments in the civilization of the Mediterranean basin" (p. 37). Derrida's parallel call "to deconstruct the European intellectual construct of Islam" (p. 38) adds a personal dimension to the historical and ethical scopes of Chérif's position:

The community to which I belonged was cut off in three ways: it was cut off first both from the Arab and the Berber, actually the Maghrebin language and culture; it was also cut off from the French, indeed European, language and culture, which were viewed as distant poles, unrelated to its history; and finally, or to begin with, it was cut off from the Jewish memory, from that history and that language that one must assume to be one's own, but which at a given moment no

longer were—at least in a special way, for most of its members in a sufficiently living and internal way. The arrogant specificity, the traumatizing brutality of what is called the colonial war, colonial cruelty—some, including myself, experienced it from both sides, if I may say so. (pp. 34–35)

The vaccine against the colonial brutality that all Algerians know firsthand is for Chérif the universalism of democracy. But Derrida cautions him that the universalism of democracy presupposes that democracy not be conceived as a fixed model of a political regime. "What distinguishes the idea of democracy from all other ideas of political regimes—monarchy, aristocracy, oligarchy, and so on—is that democracy is the only political system, a model without a model, that accepts its own historicity, that is, its own future, which accepts its self-criticism, which accepts its perfectibility" (p. 42). This concept of democracy, which is undeniably Greek in origin, inherits from its beginnings an association with the land, a conception of the "right to belong" based on being born in a territory, which coincides with the boundaries of the state. "I have nothing against the State, I have nothing against citizenship, but I dare to dream of a democracy that is not simply tied to a nation-state and to citizenship. And it is under these conditions that one can speak of a universal democracy, a democracy that is not only cosmopolitical but universal"

(pp. 43–44). The universalism of democracy consists precisely in its being the model for the absence of a model, that is, of a universally applicable system of governance. This is why it cannot be packaged and exported as one pleases.

Chérif's view of Islam may be the last bastion of resistance against the complete commodification of existence pushed South by the Northern winds of extreme secularism and antireligious sentiment. "Can Islam," he asks, "that object of misunderstanding, a figure of the resistant, the dissident, the other, contribute to loosening the deadlock?" (p. 14). If it can, it is because Islam's core is the question of the meaning of human existence, or what Chérif calls a relation to mystery (*le rapport au mystère*). Is faith the translation of that mystery, which is the mystery of the elusiveness of the meaning of existence in the face of the divine?

For Derrida, faith is indeed the Judeo-Christian correlative of mystery except that there is nothing mysterious about faith. "I cannot address the other, whoever he or she might be, regardless of his or her religion, language, culture, without asking that other to believe me and to trust me [*me faire crédit*]. One's relationship to the other, addressing the other, presupposes faith" (pp. 57–58). Faith is thus the condition of my relation with the other in a social context. It is the social bond itself, which would not exist without the ability to have faith in another human being. And

yet, for Derrida religion and faith are two separate domains. Intolerance and the conflict with secularized politics and culture pertains to religion, because religion is by definition exclusionary: there are many religions, and most of them are mutually exclusive. But since the relation to the other presupposes faith, there is no contradiction at all between the secularization of politics and what Chérif calls "the mystery of life."

For Chérif, Derrida is the model for how one should think of one's roots: from the perspective of the question concerning the meaning of existence. The question concerning the meaning of existence is the Universal. Islam, and the figure of the Arab that impersonates it, is the last dissident opposing the downturns of global modernity. Therefore, both Islam and the Arab have taken up the role of universal target. Islam is a religion and not a culture—this is Chérif's firm belief, which he offers here on behalf of the silent majority of moderate Muslims who condemn the manipulation of religion for political violence.

The lack of teaching of true religion and an indoctrination based on a retrograde vision of the spiritual have produced misguided or fanatic individuals. Whereas the Classical West was Judeo-Islamo-Christian and Greco-Arab, we have been led to believe that it was only Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian. The sons

of Abraham fall into the trap of confrontation at the moment when they must live together. On the European side, Islamic studies are envisioned from the perspective of security: this reductive view favors integration and denigration and reduces the third branch of monotheism to a myriad of small groups. As for the Muslims, one must deplore the weakness of their objective thinking and critical theology. (p. 3)

Derrida's way to cut the Gordian knot of fanaticism and the ideological manipulation of religion for political purposes is, unsurprisingly, by focusing on pure faith. The issue of faith is, for him, essential to the peace process. To Chérif's question regarding how intellectuals can oppose the forces of closure and separatism, Derrida answered, "One cannot force someone to speak or to listen; this is where the question of faith returns. An opening up must occur where there is war, and there is war everywhere in the world today. Peace is only possible when one of the warring sides takes the first step, the hazardous initiative, the risk of opening up dialogue, and decides to make the gesture that will lead not only to an armistice but to peace" (p. 59). To take the initiative, full of promise as well as risk, is to embrace faith. Peace is thus in the hands of an act of faith in the other, both on the Northern and on the Southern shores of the Mediterranean.

GIOVANNA BORRADORI