
RELIGION AND LITERATURE, IDENTITY AND INDIVIDUAL: RESETTING THE MUSLIM- CHRISTIAN ENCOUNTER

C a r o o l K e r s t e n

I've participated in so many of them, and I can tell you that they're absolutely nothing. It's gossip. There's no intellectual input in it. There is no respect for scholarship in it. A huge scholarship has already been produced devoted to the question of faith and reason. All this is put aside and we ignore it. We just congratulate one another, saying, "I respect your faith, and you respect mine." This is nonsense.

(Mohammed Arkoun)¹

It is often far easier for congenial temperaments to understand each other across the lines of religious or cultural traditions than it is for contrasting temperaments to make sense of each other's faith, even when they follow the same cult or utter the same creed.

(Marshall Hodgson)²

The problem with interfaith encounters is that too often those choosing to participate in such events do not need convincing of the necessity for frank exchanges and respect for difference. Consequently, the real challenges are seldom confronted and the most difficult and pressing

¹ Interview of John L. Allen with Mohammed Arkoun for the *National Catholic Reporter*, 17 May 2008, cited in Sandro Magister, "Dialogue among the Religions. The Vatican Prepares the Guidelines," *Chiesa Espressonline*, 11 June 2008, <http://chiesa.espresso.repubblica.it/articolo/205101bdc4.html?eng=y>.

² Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization. I The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1974), 28.

issues remain unaddressed. With a nod to historian of Islam Marshall Hodgson's observation cited above, what is often more urgently needed, and at the same time much harder to achieve, is conducting *intra-faith* dialogues *within* faith communities between opposing doctrinal positions shaped by the different temperaments of adherents to one and the same religious tradition. What can be further extrapolated from the above quoted observation by Hodgson (who, incidentally, was a committed Quaker) is that with such dispositions also come different views of the current world order and the global politics associated with these. In this last regard, one cannot escape the uneasy feeling that in the past twenty odd years or so, inter- and certainly intra-faith encounters have taken a few steps back rather than moving forward.

Resetting the encounter

This shift, or rather reversal, in the encounters between religious traditions can be traced to the 1990s. To my mind, there are three publications that are emblematic of these changes in worldview. First of all, Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man*.³ This book represents the triumphant starting point of a new narrative, hailing the victory of democracy in combination with free market politics, which was enthusiastically embraced by proponents of neo-liberal political and economic agendas. Then, a few years later, the story took a more menacing turn with the release of Samuel Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations*.⁴ It replaced the ideological standoff between a "Free West" and "Communist East," with the prospect of a multipolar world marred by culture wars along civilisational fault lines shaped by religiously-informed identity politics. This book by a specialist in international relations and security studies remains as confrontational in tone as the belligerent discourses of the preceding Cold War era. The

³ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992).

⁴ Originally an article in *Foreign Affairs* (Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?," *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (1993), 22–49, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20045621>, it was reworked into a monograph: Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

clear and neat bipolar East-West divide may have been replaced by a messier division into multiple civilisational blocs, but the underlying disposition remains Manichean, pitching the forces of light against the forces of darkness. However, soon after Huntington launched his Clash of Civilizations thesis, another book identified a single, new main adversary: Islam and the Muslims. With Benjamin Barber's *Jihad versus McWorld*, we are actually back at a new binary; the dichotomous divide of violent Islamism versus the West – and the rest.⁵

The events of 9/11 and other atrocities in London, Madrid, Paris, Brussels, and not to forget Istanbul, Bali, and Jakarta, and subsequent interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq; all these tragedies make one wonder whether Huntington was right from the outset, or whether the book has turned into a self-fulfilling prophecy. A painful illustration of this is what happened to a counter narrative, launched from unlikely quarters just before the start of the new millennium: A proposition for a Dialogue of Civilizations, proposed by President Muhammad Khatami of the Islamic Republic of Iran, during the 1999 meeting of the United Nations' General Assembly. Within a few years the proposal was transformed into an Alliance of Civilizations, co-sponsored by the current president of Turkey (but then still serving as prime minister), Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, and his Spanish colleague José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero; also first presented at the UN General Assembly, during the session of 2005. While both initiatives were adopted into United Nations contexts, the move toward the evidently more martial sounding "alliance" shows that also the world's largest international body has gone along with this securitization of relations between civilisations, and their underlying religious traditions.

So what about other alternative approaches, on an abstract level represented by postmodern philosophy and postcolonial theory? Admittedly, unlike state and non-state political actors, intellectual endeavours generally unfold without bloodshed and human beings getting physically hurt. However, postmodern and postcolonial thinking tend to present dichotomous narratives. With their emphasis on difference

⁵ Benjamin Barber, *Jihad vs McWorld. How Globalism and Tribalism Are Reshaping the World* (New York: Time Books, 1995).

(also called *différance*, alterity) all too often these discourses are just the other side of that same – binary – coin. As a historian of ideas, I have looked at attempts by intellectuals, such as the sociologists of knowledge Hamid Dabashi and Ali Mirsepassi, to transcend or – perhaps to phrase it more appropriately – subvert the false binary of Islam versus the West, and the unhelpful dichotomous worldviews on which they are based.⁶

In my current intellectual-historical research I am moving from academic philosophy and the sociology of knowledge to other forms of cultural criticism and alternative ways of engaging with religion, whereby the emphasis will be on sublimation rather than abstraction. For this, I am looking at writers working in the interstices of literature and scholarship, who respond to the challenge that literature too gets often caught up in the “us *versus* them” binary. Think of the criticism of the Eurocentrism of existing literary canons, generally consisting of books by “dead white men,” and concomitant campaigns to decolonise knowledge. Even such somewhat highbrow intellectual debates percolate through into real-life politics and become part of the polarisation between advocates of multiculturalism and their populist detractors.

Re-resetting the encounter: religion and literature, identity and individual

The rest of this article offers some preliminary findings from orientational readings in the oeuvres of writers who resist the kind of polarisation bred by essentialist collective identity politics, often driven by self-appointed spokespersons of the religious communities involved. Here too, Marshall Hodgson’s earlier cited observation is relevant. Aside from pushing the case for intra-faith dialogue, his attention for individual temperaments is shared by literary writers interested in religious themes, who use it to drive a counter narrative of acknowledging,

⁶ Carool Kersten, “Islam vs the West? Muslim Challenges of a False Binary,” in *The Poetics of Peace: Narratives, Cultures and Philosophies*, eds. Klaus-Gerd Giesen, Carool Kersten, and Lenart Škof (New York: Routledge, 2017), 81–96.

recognising, implementing, actively integrating difference and alterity in the identity formation by paying more attention to the individual.

From the Anglophone world we can point to contributions by writers from South Asian extraction. A key marker here is *The Satanic Verses* (1989); the novel unleashing a storm of indignation that turned its author Salman Rushdie into a *cause célèbre*. Also books causing less controversy address the ambiguity of religious belonging and its role in individual identity formation: for example, *Brick Lane* (2003) by Monica Ali; *The Wasted Vigil* (2008) of Nadeem Aslam; and Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007).⁷ However, against the backdrop of Brexit, with its anachronistic ambition of reviving a commonwealth of former colonies in nostalgic reminiscence of the Empire, and the undermining of the "unity in diversity" on the other side of the Atlantic by the Trump administration, I want to shift the attention to authors who have mediated between the Muslim world and the cultures from mainland Europe. For the purposes of the present volume, the following three intellectuals have been selected, because they can be considered emblematic contributors to conversations featuring individual experiences. Navid Kermani (b. 1967); Abdelwahab Meddeb (1946–2014); and Daryush Shayegan (1935–2018).

Before reading the Iranian philosopher Shayegan, I had already begun engaging with the writings of Navid Kermani, a German author and scholar of Islam who is also of Iranian extraction. He has written comparative studies of German and Persian literature, presented in a book entitled *Between Quran and Kafka*, subtitled *West-Eastern Affinities* – although I think that "West-Eastern Investigations" would have been closer to the original German *west-östliche Erkundungen*.⁸ Also Abdelwahab Meddeb, a Tunisian-born writer who spent his working

⁷ Salman Rushdie, *The Satanic Verses* (New York: Viking Press, 1988); Monica Ali, *Brick Lane* (London: Double Day, 2003); Nadeem Aslam, *The Wasted Vigil* (London: Faber & Faber, 2008); Mohsin Hamid, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (London and New York: Hamish Hamilton and Harcourt, 2007).

⁸ Navid Kermani, *Between Quran and Kafka: West-Eastern Affinities*, trans. Tony Crawford (Cambridge and Malden: Polity Press, 2016); Navid Kermani, *Zwischen Koran und Kafka: West-östliche Erkundungen* (München: C.H. Beck, 2014).

life in France, caught my attention prior to engaging with Shayegan. A red thread running through his literary and academic writings is the notion of double genealogy; a reference to his indebtedness to Islamic civilisation and his own Muslim background, as well as the formative influence of a Francophone education. This points up not only a parallel with Kermani's west-eastern affinities, it also takes me back to something that I have stressed in an earlier project on contemporary Muslim intellectuals: that the liminality resulting from cultural hybridity, or from being situated in the interstices of cultural traditions, has creative potential, artistically as well as academically.⁹ It also ties in with my continued interest in the earlier mentioned American-Iranian sociologist of knowledge and cultural critic Hamid Dabashi and his hermeneutics of alterity, advocating an anti-foundationalist theology of liberation that seeks to break the Islam vs the West binary and transcend dichotomous thinking about self and other.¹⁰

Despite being very different intellectuals, there is a family resemblance binding Kermani, Meddeb, and Shayegan together. Although belonging to different generations, Daryush Shayegan and Navid Kermani are both of Iranian extraction and shared an academic background in the study of religions. Like Abdelwahab Meddeb, who left his native Tunisia for France in the 1960s, Shayegan spent many years as an expatriate in Paris.

Kermani, Meddeb and Shayegan also shared an interest in medieval Sufism, engaging intensively with twelfth- and thirteenth-century poets and mystics, like Attar (1145–1220), Ibn Arabi (1165–1240) and Shahab al-Din al-Suhrawardi (Sohrawardi) (1154–1191). In the case of Shayegan, this was done first under the direction of, and later in collaboration with, the French Orientalist and philosopher Henri Corbin, while Meddeb explored Sufism in *L'exil occidental* (occidental exile) and several translation projects.¹¹ All three also seriously studied religions other than their own. Aside from being a philosopher, Shayegan was

⁹ Carol Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics: New Muslim Intellectuals and the Study of Islam* (London and New York: Hurst Publishers and Oxford University Press, 2011).

¹⁰ Cf. Kersten, "Islam vs the West?."

¹¹ Daryush Shayegan, *Henry Corbin, La topographie spirituelle de l'Islam iranien* (Paris: Éditions de la Différence, 1990); Abdelwahab Meddeb, *L'exil occidental* (Paris: Albin Michel,

a trained Indologist with knowledge of the languages and religions of South Asia.¹² His interests extended further into Chinese religions and Christian mysticism. Kermani has studied theodicy by comparing the Biblical figure of Job with the Persian poet Attar; he has translated a book on Jesus by Mehdi Bazargan, the first prime minister to take office in Iran after the Islamic revolution of 1979; delved into Christian sacred art; and explored Jewish mysticism.¹³ Meddeb did work on Judaism, taking part in an extensive historical survey project.¹⁴

Such catholicity also applied to the trio's literary interests, evincing comparable broad spectrums and extending beyond their joint Islamic heritage. Shayegan wrote about the Taoist Chuang Tzu and the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart; Meddeb translated Japanese poetry, while Kermani is an avid reader of Latin American writers like Pablo Neruda and Jorge Luis Borges, while also sharing Shayegan's interest in Octavio Paz. Consequently, all three have produced a varied oeuvre, composed of scholarly studies, engaged essays, and literary writings. Meddeb was a novelist and essayist, a poet and translator of Sufi poetry. So was Shayegan, who also translated novels by the Iranian writer Sohrab Sepehri into French alongside his work as an academic philosopher. Kermani has written novels, plays, travel reportage, and other prose texts that fit into the genre of life-writing.¹⁵ In fact, all three writers wove autobiography into their academic and engaged writings. In his exchanges with Ramin Jahanbegloo, Shayegan talked extensively of his

2005); Abdelwahab Meddeb, *Les dits de Bistami (Shatahāt)* (Paris: Fayard, 1989); Abdelwahab Meddeb, *Tombeau of Ibn Arabi and White Traverses* (New York: Fordham University, 2009).

¹² Daryush Shayegan, *Hindouisme et Soufisme, une lecture du «Confluent des Deux Océans»* (Paris: Éditions de la Différence, 1979).

¹³ Navid Kermani, *Der Schrecken Gottes: Attar, Hiob und die metaphysische Revolte* (München: C.H. Beck, 2005); English translation: *The Terror of God: Attar, Job and the Metaphysical Revolt* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011); Mehdi Bazargan, *Und Jesus ist sein Prophet: Der Koran und die Kristen. Mit einer Einleitung von Navid Kermani* (München: C.H. Beck, 2006); Navid Kermani, *Ungläubiges Staunen: Über den Christentum* (München: C.H. Beck, 2016); English translation: *Wonder beyond Belief: On Christianity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017).

¹⁴ Abdelwahab Meddeb, Michael B. Smith, Benjamin Stora, and Jane Marie Todd, eds., *A History of Jewish-Muslim Relations: From Its Origins to the Present Day* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

¹⁵ Torsten Hoffmann, "Trennungsprobleme: Navid Kermani's Autofiktionen," *Text + Kritik: Zeitschrift für Literatur* 217 Navid Kermani (2018): 6–22.

mixed Persian-Georgian origins.¹⁶ Meddeb explicitly identified autobiography as elementary in religious intellectualism, arguing that this has been the case since Augustine wrote his *Confessions*, and to whom he referred as a “compatriot.”¹⁷ It is also a characteristic of modern humanism and the Enlightenment: think of Montaigne, Pascal, or Rousseau.¹⁸ At various instances, Kermani has stressed the importance of his affinities with spoken Persian in terms of familial belonging and intimacy, and with written German where it concerns his intellectual belonging and literary taste.¹⁹

Adding Daryush Shayegan as a third interlocutor and interrogating his idea of “cultural schizophrenia” is done primarily for heuristic purposes: first of all, to frame the writings of Kermani and Meddeb for a larger project on religion and literature; secondly, to demonstrate that their respective notions of west-eastern affinities and double genealogy can be considered to constitute a panacea against afflictions associated with oscillating between different cultures, which Shayegan chose to phrase in psycho-pathological terms. Yet another reason for adding Shayegan is that in the course of his own philosophical investigations, he shifted from an interest in socio-political analyses toward a focus on individual intellectuals. Therefore, in this article I will amplify the ideas of Daryush Shayegan, and defer detailed elaborations on Navid Kermani and Abdelwahab Meddeb to other occasions.

Cultural schizophrenia (Daryush Shayegan)

Intellectual histories of contemporary Iran and other studies of present-day Iranian thinking written in English do not pay much attention to Daryush Shayegan; at least not to the same extent as to figures like

¹⁶ Daryush Shayegan, *Sous les yeux du monde: Entretien avec Ramin Jahanbegloo* (Paris: Le Félin, 2011): 21–22.

¹⁷ Abdelwahab Meddeb, “L’interruption généalogique,” *L’Esprit*, 208:1 (1995), 78, <https://esprit.presse.fr/article/abdelwahab-meddeb/l-interruption-genealogique-10706>; Abdelwahab Meddeb, *Islam and Its Discontents*, trans. Pierre Joris and Ann Reid (London: William Heinemann, 2003), 167.

¹⁸ Meddeb, *Islam and Its Discontents*, 167.

¹⁹ Navid Kermani, *Wer ist Wir? Deutschland und seine Muslime* (München: C.H. Beck, 2017), 136.

Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923–1969), Ali Shariati (1933–1977), or Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1946). Apart from the 1992 publication (in French!) of Ramin Jahanbegloo’s conversations with Shayegan, more than a passing mention we find only in recent publications by Afshin Matin-Asgari and Siavash Saffari.²⁰ Here I want to stress again that for the purposes of the present investigation, Shayegan is a relevant and important thinker.

For a proposed resetting of interreligious dialogues, it pays to examine more closely two of Shayegan’s books written in French and appearing almost a quarter of a century apart: *Le regard mutilé: Schizophrénie culturelle* (1989) and *La lumière vient de l’occident* (2013).²¹ According to Shayegan, we are not just dealing with – to maintain his psychopathological vocabulary – a personality split between Islam and the West; this in spite of the Western focus reflected in the title of Shayegan’s most recent publication (in his case, we also need to account for influences coming from the South Asian subcontinent, and the polyglot Russo-Georgian world of the Caucasus).

Cultural Schizophrenia was originally written in French in 1989 and appeared in English translation three years later.²² In this book, Shayegan moves from the political and social concerns addressed in *Qu’est-ce qu’une révolution religieuse?*, a title resonating with Ernest Renan’s *Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?*, to the individualized approach that I wish to investigate as part of my new project on cultural criticism and literary studies in relation to religion.²³ In Shayegan’s own words, *Cultural Schizophrenia* examines “a narration of a hypothetical ‘I’, who can be anyone,” but who lives in “a state of *In-between*,” thus revealing the

²⁰ Afshin Matin-Asgari, *Both Eastern and Western: An Intellectual History of Iranian Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Siavash Saffari, *Beyond Shariati: Modernity, Cosmopolitanism, and Islam in Iranian Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019); Ramin Jahanbegloo, *Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity* (London etc: Lexington Books, 2004).

²¹ Daryush Shayegan, *Le regard mutilé: Schizophrénie culturelle: pays traditionnels face à la modernité* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1989); Daryush Shayegan, *La lumière vient de l’Occident: Le réenchantement du monde et la pensée nomade* (Paris: L’Aube, 2013).

²² Daryush Shayegan, *Le regard mutilé*; Daryush Shayegan, *Cultural Schizophrenia: Islamic Societies Confronting the West*, trans. John Howe (London: Saqi Books, 1992; Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1997).

²³ Daryush, Shayegan, *Qu’est-ce qu’une révolution religieuse* (Paris: Presses d’Aujourd’hui, 1982).

inner contradictions of such a narrative ego, which translates on an individual level into cultural schizophrenia and, in terms of politics, into false consciousness.²⁴ It is also opportune to note a difference between the French and English titles of this book, in particular the crucial difference in subtitle: where *Le regard mutilé: Schizophrénie culturelle* speaks of *pays traditionnels face à la modernité*, “traditional countries in the face of modernity,” in the English version this is narrowed down to “Islamic societies confronting the West.”

Although Shayegan’s own cultural grounding is that of the “world of Iranian Islam,” his analysis functions as a stand-in for all other societies on the side-lines. While their experience of “unhappy consciousness” is not shared by Westerners, it is affecting all those “trapped in a fault-line between incompatible worlds.”²⁵ A few years after the appearance of *Cultural Schizophrenia*, this notion of the fault-line was also employed by Huntington in the *Clash of Civilizations*. And whereas most illustrations provided by Shayegan pertain to Islam, and Iran in particular, the wider relevance of confrontations between civilisations is pointed up by the frequent occurrence of the earlier-mentioned Octavio Paz as Shayegan’s most prominent non-Muslim interlocutor in *Cultural Schizophrenia*.²⁶

Another useful text for thinking about intercultural communication, and about possible avenues for resetting the Muslim-Christian encounter, is *La Lumière vient de l’Occident*. The title presents a reversal of the Latin expression *Ex Oriente Lux* – “From the East Comes the Light.” Moreover, the French *lumière* can be translated as either “The Light” or “Enlightenment.” Aside from offering such multi-layered interplays of words, appearing almost twenty-five years after the original French version of *Cultural Schizophrenia*, Shayegan’s later book also offers an opportunity for detecting both constant or sustained concerns, as well as further developments in Shayegan’s thinking. As the title suggests, Shayegan retains his confidence in the intellectual achievements of European modernity, but without being dogmatic or ideological about

²⁴ Shayegan, *Cultural Schizophrenia*, ix.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, vii.

²⁶ The writings and ideas of the Mexican intellectual are also an important point of reference for Navid Kerm.

it, as has been the case with Fukuyama and Huntington. In relation to the question of modernity, but also in reflecting on critical discourses, such as postmodernism and postcolonial theory, in *La Lumière vient de l'Occident*, Shayegan gives pride of place to the French Enlightenment thinker and Encyclopaedist Denis Diderot (1713–1784). Presenting him as the precursor of postmodern and postcolonial “polyphonic worldviews,” Shayegan characterises him as a man who had already devised “a strategy of difference” in the eighteenth century.²⁷ This genealogical continuity is evinced by Shayegan’s observation that contemporary philosophies of difference, developed by figures such as Gilles Deleuze and Gianni Vattimo, are products of a philosophical tradition that remains emphatically continental European.

In regards to a more immediate relation between Deleuze and Shayegan’s thinking it is important to point to the latter’s borrowing of Sohrawardi’s idea of the *na koja abad*, or an imaginal “nowhere land.”²⁸ The founder of what is known as the philosophical school of Illuminatism (*al-ishraq*) serves not just as a source of inspiration for Shayegan’s own idea of the *non-lieu* or non-place, its affiliation with nomadic thinking – considered central enough to feature in the book’s subtitle – is also an evident cognate of the nomad thought and nomadology in Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*. In *La lumière*, Books III and IV, entitled “Harlequin Identity” and “Zones of Hybridization” respectively, form the point of convergence where Sohrawardi and Deleuze come together in Shayegan’s thinking, as he meditates and reflects on “double displacement,” “rhizome and nomad thinking,” “double decentring,” “the in-between,” and *na koja abad*, as the *temporalité de l’entre-deux*.²⁹

Also Deleuze’s eclectic borrowing from thinkers as different as Lucretius, Spinoza, Hume, and Nietzsche is not dissimilar to the cut-and-paste writing style of *Encyclopédie* editor Diderot. Just as Diderot preceded Heidegger’s attempt to subvert European philosophy by going perhaps not so much beyond as returning to before its intellectual

²⁷ Shayegan, *La lumière vient de l'Occident*, 460.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 217, 326, 339.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 145ff.

trajectory was reduced to footnotes to Plato, so can Gilles Deleuze's appeal to the pre-Socratics, as well as his suggestion of the figure of the rhizome, be regarded as earnest attempts to not just dig for the foundations of European philosophy as we know it, but rather as offering an alternative for the prevailing arboreal model of thinking, by uprooting the metaphysical justifications for its tree of knowledge.

Deleuze's preference for immanence over metaphysics and transcendence is shared by his Italian fellow philosopher of difference Gianni Vattimo. This is a reason why Shayegan is drawn to Gianni Vattimo's use of the notion of *penseiro debole*, or "weak thought," which is used to advocate a "weakening of ontologies."³⁰ At the same time, these weak ontologies are employed in rethinking Christian theology and philosophy of religion as evinced by several of Vattimo's later books.³¹ This brings me to the way religion features in the writings of Daryush Shayegan, which opposes the ugly side of present-day religion. By this, Shayegan means the ideological use of religion by cultural critics, such as Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Ali Shariati, for essentialist identity politics. Their "us-versus-them" binary is just the other side of the coin of clash of civilisation theorists like Samuel Huntington, and the Islamophobic discourses that have emerged in its wake. For this reason, Siavash Saffari counts Daryush Shayegan among the critics of Ali Shariati and his followers. Together with Javad Tabataba'i and Abdolkarim Soroush, Shayegan charged that the reappropriation of the Islamic tradition by ideologues of the Iranian revolution resulted in "delaying the negotiation of modernity in Iranian society."³² In Shayegan's estimation the politicisation of Islam is demeaning, constituting a veritable desacralisation of religion – the exact phrase that was used in the 1960s and 1970s by

³⁰ Ibid., 295ff. Cf. also Gianni Vattimo and Pier Aldo Rovatti. *Weak Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012).

³¹ Gianni Vattimo, *Belief* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Gianni Vattimo and Richard Rorty. *The Future of Religion*, ed. Santiago Zabala (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Gianni Vattimo and John D. Caputo. *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007); Gianni Vattimo and René Girard, *Christianity, Truth and Weakening Faith: A Dialogue*, ed. Pierpaolo Antonello (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

³² Saffari, *Beyond Shariati*, 33.

the Indonesian Muslim intellectual Nurcholish Madjid (1939–2005).³³ The “neo-Shariatis” who continue this post-revolutionary revival of left-leaning progressive thinking “acknowledge the ‘ideological’ character of Shariati’s discourse,” but “reject the logic of Shayegan, Tabatabaei [sic!], and Soroush in equating ideology with dogma.”³⁴

Afshin Matin-Asgari situates Shayegan in an intellectual circle gravitating around Henri Corbin, which also included sociologist Ehsan Narqhi (Naraghi) (1926–2012) and fellow philosopher Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933). It operated in Tehran from the 1950s until mid-1970s, alongside another circle led by the philosopher Ahmad Fardid (1909–1994). Fardid’s significance lies in having played a key role in introducing the philosophy of Heidegger in Iran and in coining the term *gharb-zadegi*.³⁵ Various translations as “Westoxification,” “Occidentosis,” and “West-struckness,” this notion was given wider currency by Jalal Al-e Ahmad and adopted by other intellectuals endeavouring to synthesise elements from socialism and the Islamic tradition into a kind of leftist-progressive interpretation of Islam, whereas Fardid actually shared Heidegger’s “attraction to right-wing regimes.”³⁶ Shayegan was closer to Corbin than to Fardid, but both circles were “defining Iranian authenticity by drawing on European discourses of Eastern spirituality” and “merg[ing] esoteric Shi’ism and European counter-modernist philosophy.”³⁷ Matin-Asgar may be correct in regards to Corbin, who was involved in the Eranos meetings, which also included Carl-Gustav Jung and Mircea Eliade, and to some degree also with respect to Nasr, who is regarded as an influential exponent of Traditionalism and *de facto* successor of René Guénon (1886–1951) and Frithjof Schuon (1907–1998), the founders of a concomitant strand of modern-day, but distinctly anti-modern, Sufism.³⁸ But, as Matin-Asgar acknowledges elsewhere in his book, Shayegan’s stance is more subtle, offering:

³³ Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics*, 36, 230.

³⁴ Saffari, *Beyond Shariati*, 42.

³⁵ Matin-Asgari, *Both Eastern and Western*, 198–199.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 201. Cf. also: Daniel Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 65.

³⁷ Matin-Asgari, *Both Eastern and Western*, 202.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 203–204.

...their circle's most intellectually sophisticated take on Iran's encounter with modernity. Shayegan's superior linguistic prowess, as well as his specialization in Indian religions, made him more competent than his teachers at comparing European and Asian cultures and religions. His first major work, *Asia Facing the West* (1977), identified Asian civilizations with "great religions that make up their fundamental essence," offering the promise of "deliverance and redemption," in contrast to a modern Western civilization defined by moral "nihilism."³⁹

Like Vattimo, Shayegan resists falling into all-out cynical nihilism, which is so often considered a hallmark of postmodern philosophy. Instead, Shayegan is very much concerned with salvaging the soul, even advocating a re-enchantment to the world – as the other part of the subtitle of *La Lumière* reads. He envisages a reintegration of the spirit into a mode of thinking that remains indebted to Enlightenment. Accommodating such a "simultaneity of levels of human consciousness" is one of the valuable achievements of post-Enlightenment modernity.⁴⁰ A further affirmation of this ability to accommodate varying systems of knowledge from different epochs in human history, and of the need to privilege the spiritual dimensions of religions, Shayegan found in the reception of the Persian translation of *La Lumière* by young Iranians. In his own interpretation, to them, the book was:

A justifying testimony capable of apprehending their states of mind, a suitable frame in which to fit their newly found convictions. They had become nomadic migrants, incorporating into their worldviews the varying identities corresponding to different historical periods.⁴¹

In the conclusion of *La Lumière*, Shayegan returns to Diderot, ending with the observation that throughout his writings Diderot made an effort to retain what Shayegan calls the unity of different types of

³⁹ Ibid., 207.

⁴⁰ Shayegan, *La lumière vient de l'Occident*, 6.

⁴¹ Ibid., 8. A recent study of the interest among young Iranians in religious ideas and practices that fall outside the orthodox interpretations propagated or condoned by the regime of the Islamic republic is Alireza Doostari, *The Iranian Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam, and the Uncanny* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2018).

knowledge, because “without the unity of the physical, moral, and poetic, the only alternative that remains for mankind would be barbarity.”⁴²

Double Genealogy (Abdelwahab Meddeb)

This term barbarity also features in the subtitle of one of Abdelwahab Meddeb's books: *Sortir de la Malédiction: L'islam entre civilisation et barbarie* (2008), which can be translated as *Escaping the Curse: Islam between Civilisation and Barbarity*.⁴³ In this wide-ranging essay collection, Meddeb engages with both Muslim and non-Muslim authors and thinkers: ranging from the pre-Socratic philosopher Empedocles, and the accursed field featuring in his manifesto for universal peace entitled Purifications; to the analysis of the Quran chapter “The Table” (*Sura al-Ma'ida*) by the theologian of religions Michel Cuyppers; to the dissident Sudanese mystic and activist Mahmud Muhammad Taha and his contrarian exegesis of the Quran, which resulted in his execution in 1985 on charges of heresy and sedition.⁴⁴

Ever since the appearance of the novel *Talismano* in 1987, the notions of nomadism and hybridity, which we have already seen featuring in the writings of Shayegan, have remained recurring motifs or vignettes in the literary oeuvre of Meddeb, in particular where it concerns the interest he shares with Shayegan in the Persian Illuminationist Sohrawardi.⁴⁵ Meddeb's essays in *L'exil occidental* on the desert and Sohrawardi's “Western exile” turn these (imaginal) localities into the topographical meeting points of cultural hybridity, where nomadism and Sufism are explicitly connected with migration and crossing the lines between cultures as well as states of consciousness, noting that “it is in the in-between (*entre-deux*), which they instated, that

⁴² Shayegan, *La Lumière vient de l'Occident*, 463.

⁴³ Abdelwahab Meddeb, *Sortir de la Malédiction: L'islam entre civilisation et barbarie* (Paris: Seuil, 2008).

⁴⁴ Meddeb, *Sortir de la Malédiction*, 12, 120–124; 151, 239–246.

⁴⁵ Abdelwahab Meddeb, *Talismano* (Paris: Éditions Sindbad, 1987); Abdelwahab Meddeb, *Talismano*, trans. and introd. Jane Kuntz (Champaign and London: The Dalkey Archive Press, 2011).

one finds the energies actualized, which have accorded to nomadism and Sufism a spiritual conjuncture.”⁴⁶

Meddeb expanded his reflections on cultural hybridity into a double genealogy, reflective of his own mixed Mediterranean origins as a Tunisian working in Paris and writing in French. Aside from turning it into a recurring theme in his literary writings, he had made this also the subject of his doctoral studies and further investigations of the bilingualism that characterises the hybrid identities of many intellectuals from his native Maghreb (encompassing Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia).⁴⁷ Although a Tunisian Arab by birth, Meddeb was also a self-confessed loyal citizen of the Fifth French Republic. His republicanism bears a similarity to Navid Kermani’s advocacy of patriotism without nationalism; citizenship; and the importance of the project of European Unity.⁴⁸

West-Eastern Affinities (Navid Kermani)

When it comes to identity, Kermani’s views are quite similar to those of Shayegan. Both challenge the primordial understandings of ideologically-informed identity politics positing essentialist binaries of us versus them, instead of conceiving of identity as a construct. What Shayegan calls the “illusions of identity” can also be found in Kermani’s objection to essentialist identity politics. Humans are no drawing boards. Passports are not icons, but travel documents.⁴⁹ For Navid Kermani, individual identities are composites and he also stresses that he is not preoccupied with being a Muslim. In this regard he does not shy away from making controversial statements that remind one of the rapturous exclamations of the early Sufis, such his observation that with regards to religious questions he had learned more

⁴⁶ Meddeb, *L'exil occidental*, 11.

⁴⁷ Abdelwahab Meddeb, *Écriture et double généalogie*, superv. Anne Roche (PhD thesis, Université de Provence, Aix-en-Provence, 1991).

⁴⁸ Karolin Machtans, “Navid Kermani, Advocate for an Antipatriotic Patriotism and a Multi-religious, Multicultural Europe,” in *Envisioning Social Justice in Contemporary German Culture*, ed. Jill E. Twark and Axel Hildebrandt (Camden House: Boydell & Brewer, 2015): 290–311.

⁴⁹ Kermani, *Wer ist Wir?*, 135.

from Adorno's *Minima Moralia* than from the Prophet Muhammad.⁵⁰ There are also parallels between what Kermani has said in his book on German Muslims about interfaith and intercultural dialogues, and the quotes by Arkoun and Hodgson at the beginning of this article:

The very term "Dialogue of Culture" is pure ideology. No, even worse, well-intended as it may be, it nevertheless confirms unintentionally its opposite: "Culture War". [...] The Dialogue of Cultures is as much a caricature as those analyses, which reduce today's world to a Clash of Civilizations.⁵¹

The fault line does not run between cultures, rather, it runs right through them.⁵²

Germany's Islam Conference is a process in which the participants learned on behalf of their society how complicated identities really are.⁵³

Kermani also agrees with Shayegan about the desecralisation of religion; a view not only shared by Nurcholish Madjid, but by yet another Iranian intellectual: Abdolkarim Soroush. It leads Kermani to conclude that "where religion and politics are mixed, religion is desecrated; turning it away from its actual objective, namely to perfect the individual and give direction to its relationship with God."⁵⁴ It is at this point that the concerns of Kermani converge not only with those of Shayegan, but also with Meddeb's, in the sense that they are predominantly interested in the spiritual dimensions of Islam, and religions in general: As internalised Islam, mysticism could prove to be the domain where piety and enlightenment, individuation and devotion merge.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Kermani, *Zwischen Koran und Kafka*, 11.

⁵¹ Kermani, *Wer ist Wir?*, 127.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 55.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 129.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 130.

By way of conclusion: a comparative evaluation

Within the oeuvres of Daryush Shayegan and Abdelwahab Meddeb, the cultural and religious critiques can be structured into tetralogies:

<i>Daryush Shayegan</i>	<i>Abdelwahab Meddeb</i>
<i>Qu'est-ce qu'une révolution religieuse?</i>	<i>Face à l'islam</i>
<i>Le Régard Mutilé: Schizophrénie culturelle</i>	<i>La Maladie de l'Islam</i> ⁵⁶
<i>Les illusions de l'identité</i> ⁵⁷	<i>Contre-Prêches</i>
<i>La lumière vient de l'Occident:</i>	<i>Sortir de la Malédiction:</i>
<i>Le réenchantement du monde</i>	<i>L'Islam Entre Civilisation</i>
<i>et la pensée nomade</i>	<i>et Barbarie</i>

Aside from joint reference to pathologies (*Cultural Schizophrenia*, *The Malady of Islam*), after three volumes of diagnostics, both authors also propose a cure: in the case of Shayegan, the pharmacopoeia consists in the kind of enlightenment writings produced by the *Encyclopédiste* Denis Diderot, whereas Meddeb returns to the ancient Greek statesman and writer Empedocles, but as read through the lens of the German Romantic poet Friedrich Hölderlin (Hölderlin is also one of Kermani's abiding interests).

Shayegan and Meddeb are very French in their unabashed admiration and advocacy of eighteenth-century French Enlightenment thinkers, in particular the *Encyclopédistes*. This also applies to the way they talk about the encounter between Islam and the West, and in particular the effects of Westernization. Both Meddeb and Shayegan explicitly distinguish European and American variants of this process; showing themselves very disparaging of the latter, while being rather celebratory – not to say triumphant – about the former. This has something to do with Shayegan and Meddeb's long-standing associa-

⁵⁶ Abdelwahab Meddeb, *La Maladie de L'Islam* (Paris: Sieul, 2002).

⁵⁷ Daryush Shayegan, *Les Illusion de l'identités* (Paris: Éditions du Félin, 1992).

tions with France – their French connection, so to speak.⁵⁸ Illustrative of this distinction between Europeanisation and Americanisation is the following quote from *The Malady of Islam*, where Meddeb contrasts what he calls “European nuance” with the hyper-reality of Americanisation and its disastrous political consequences for individuality and human freedom:

[T]he European individual, provided with his nuance, can speak to the Muslim in these terms: “I make Islam a civilization of my own, I internalize it: doesn’t it sustain part of my soul? As a religion, it deserves respect: by the symbolic and the imaginal formation it grants to those who believe in it, doesn’t it produce subjects who can be loyal subjects? But on the political and legal level, we believe in the universality of our own system [...] for human experience teaches us that as soon as the religious absolute is confused with the law and with politics, freedoms are stripped away.”⁵⁹

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⁵⁸ Cf. also the decision of De Gaulle to leave the military pact of NATO because of American dominance, and earlier publications like Jean-Jacques Servan-Schreiber’s *Le Defi Americain* (Paris: Éditions Denoël, 1967).

⁵⁹ Meddeb, Abdelwahab. *The Malady of Islam*, trans. Pierre Joris and Ann Reid (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 222.

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