

## “The Lore of Heaven, The Speech of Earth”: Carlyle, Mahomet, and Islam

RUTH APROBERTS

IN 1953, THE DISTINGUISHED ARABIST W. MONTGOMERY WATT gave an address to the Carlyle Society in Edinburgh, “Carlyle on Muhammad.” He felt it was timely to explore Carlyle’s sympathetic view of Islam then, when it and Christianity were “no longer two separate worlds, hostile to one another so far as they are in contact, but seldom in close contact . . . they are two completely interrelated parts of a single whole” (247). It may seem that fifty years later the interrelationship has mutated, with mutual incomprehension undermining the possibility of a “single whole.” Watt’s essay is still invaluable for its learned critique, but today’s troubling circumstances oblige us to revisit Carlyle. The occasion of his essay on Mahomet was a series of public lectures, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*, delivered in 1840 and published in 1841. The book sprung from Carlyle’s deeply meditated views on religion. Like David Hume, Carlyle rejected all supernaturalism in religion, yet unlike Hume, he venerated religion. In the first lecture on the Norse god Odin, Carlyle asserts, “[A] man’s religion is the chief fact with regard to him” (4). The essay itself is primarily centered on the question of what constitutes religious experience: “That men should have worshipped their poor fellowman as a God. . . . All this looks like an incredible fable” (5). In such remarks Carlyle inevitably signals his awareness of the example of Jesus. And in a way, the entire lecture on Odin is a disguised lecture on Christianity itself.<sup>1</sup>

In Odin the Norse people recognized virtues and strengths

that are actually the astonishing capabilities of those special human beings known as “heroes.” The bold scheme of *Heroes* is that the sacred and the secular are all one: “The true Shekinah is Man!” (10). From the Odin lecture onwards, Carlyle’s subjects—Mahomet, Dante, Shakespeare, Johnson, Luther, Calvin, Napoleon, and Cromwell—reflect his own movement from the supernatural to the natural. But in the beginning he concentrates on the hero viewed as supernatural, drawing on the Norse mythology that he has become interested in through reading Herder. In *Heroes* Carlyle pursues a steadfastly naturalist or non-supernaturalist course. His doctrine of “Natural Supernaturalism” (*Sartor* 187–95) insists that what is indisputably *here* is intrinsically wondrous. Science can only account for a small proportion of things, and the area of “Nescience” (*Heroes* 9) is vast. We do not need to believe in magic or gods, and the miraculous elements in Christianity are altogether superfluous and wrong. It was Goethe who provided Carlyle with a rationale for religion, and who also reminded him that it was in the East that all three great religions took shape: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Carlyle’s favorite Goethean poetry was found in the collection, the *West-östlicher Diwan* (1819). It begins with a “Hegire,” echoing Mahomet’s flight to Medina. Goethe takes flight to the “East,” where the great religions originated, where there took place *Himmelslehr in Erdesprachen*, “the lore of heaven in the speech of earth” (*Diwan*, *Werke* 2: 7).

Another beloved Goethean text to which Carlyle often refers is *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre* (1821, 1829), which he translated in 1827. In his rectorial address at the University of Edinburgh in 1866, he admitted that the *Wanderjahre* “has dwelt in my mind as perhaps the most remarkable bit of writing which I have known to be executed in these late centuries” (*Works* 29: 473). In the novel Wilhelm has come to visit the educational establishment where he placed his son Felix. He observes how the students are taught in due course about the “three religions.” He asks the leader, “And to which of these religions do you especially adhere?” “To all the three” (*Works* 30: 41) is the reply. “To all the three” is Carlyle’s recurrent text. In Gotthold Ephraim Lessing’s play *Nathan der Weise* (1779), he found a similar resolution. Lessing’s fable of the three rings

tells of a man who possesses a wonderful ring that makes its owner beloved of God and man. As he grows old, he is troubled to decide which of his three equally beloved sons should inherit the ring. He calls in a jeweler and orders two exact replicas of it. The Jeweler succeeds so well that even the owner cannot tell the rings apart. When in due course the man dies, each son receives a ring and each thinks he has the original. The point of the fable is that whether you are Moslem, Jew, or Christian, you had better respect your two brothers, for one of them may possess the real original.

In the lecture on Odin in *Heroes*, Carlyle explains “Paganism” in the context of his ultimate hero, Jesus. For Carlyle, Jesus is a man who possesses no supernatural attributes. But he cannot publicly advance this idea, well aware of the pieties of both his audience and his elderly mother. Instead, he uses the Mahomet lecture to make oblique references to Jesus: “The Hero is not now regarded as a God among his fellow-men, but as one God-inspired, as a Prophet. . . . What a change and progress is indicated here, in the universal condition and thoughts of men” (37). In Carlyle’s view this transition explains the advent of Mahomet as it demonstrates that the “change” from Christianity to Islam can be defined as “progress.” He speculates about the reception that news of the life and death of Jesus might have had in Mecca:

Obscure tidings of the most important Event ever transacted in this world, the Life and Death of the Divine Man in Judea, at once the symptom and cause of immeasurable change to all people in the world, had in the course of centuries reached into Arabia too; and could not but, of itself, have produced fermentation there. (44–45)

These are emphatically de-supernaturalized terms to describe Christ. It is as if the word “Divine” could be used with mocking quotation marks, in sharp contrast to “Life,” “Death,” and “Man.”

Carlyle defines Islam as submission to the will of God and identifies this submission with Christianity: “This is the soul of Islam; it is properly the soul of Christianity; had Christianity not been, neither had it been.” A remark from Goethe confirms the universal appeal of the Prophet’s faith: “If this be Islam

do we not all live in Islam?” (49). Mahomet preaches a kind of Christianity that is freed of the adhesions of medieval supernaturalism at the same time it transcends the pedantry of the Christological disputes:

[Islam is] a better kind than that of those miserable Syrian Sects, with their vain janglings about Homoiousion, Homooision, the head full of worthless noise, the hearty empty and dead! The truth of it is embedded in portentous error and falsehood; but the truth of it makes it to be believed, not the falsehood: it succeeded by truth. A bastard kind of Christianity, but a living kind; with a heart-life in it; not dead, chopping barren logic merely. (54)

What sources did Carlyle consult and use? The Strouse edition of *Heroes* is rather vague on the subject. Carlyle certainly inherited the commonplace view of Islam as the great enemy of Christianity. But there were new attitudes emerging. In his youth in Edinburgh he took in all of Gibbon’s *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776–88), which offered a surprisingly extensive and fairly accurate history of Mahomet. Gibbon had no qualms about slighting remarks on Christianity in comparison with Islam. Carlyle also relied on George Sale’s excellent translation of the Koran (1734) and his extensive “Preliminary Discourse,” which included a reliable life of Mahomet together with a subsequent history of Islam.

Sale certainly helped to reassure Carlyle that Mahomet’s religion had not flourished because it was propagated by the sword: “We do not find, of the Christian Religion either, that it always disdained the sword, when once it had got one. Charlemagne’s conversion of the Saxons was not by preaching” (*Heroes* 53). An experience of my own was enlightening in this regard. I was at a university in Ankara, Turkey, teaching the Bible as literature to English students. They were quite well read in English Literature, but the Bible was mostly unknown territory to them. The students were largely urban atheists; Islam was for servants and country people. They knew a little about the Bible—Adam and Eve, Noah, and Moses, for example—but they were a little embarrassed by it, having learnt these stories from servants. I was interested in their responses. When we got to Isaiah, “And his name shall be called wonderful, Counsellor,

The Mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace” (9: 6), I told the students that these lines were written three or four hundred years before Christ, and that they were understood to predict the coming of Jesus. The students were baffled, and by questions, I was able to discover why. “The Prince of Peace” they said, could not possibly be Jesus Christ. This gave *me* pause. They simply know the history of the Crusades from the other side.

Throughout *Heroes*, Carlyle’s portrait of Mahomet is a consistent and lively picture full of loving sympathy. He recounts the history: from the Kaaba in Mecca, through the *hegire* to Medina, the Prophet’s private life with his wife Kadijah, his handsome looks, his illiteracy, his amiability and cordiality, his sense of humor (“a good laugh in him withal” [*Heroes* 46]), his modest way of life with humble food and clothes repaired by his own hand, his alleged sensuality, his influence on his young cousin Ali who was one of his first converts, and the spread of Islam. Carlyle’s comments on the Koran give us helpful personal advice in reading the holy text—start with the later sections. The passages he cites, perhaps inevitably, reflect his own religious instincts: “Look over the world, says he; is it not wonderful, the work of Allah. . . . This Earth, God made it for you. . . . Miracles? cries he: What miracle would you have? Are you not yourselves there? God made you, ‘shaped out of a little clay.’ Ye were small once; a few years ago ye were not at all. Ye have beauty, strength, thoughts, ‘ye have compassion on one another’: this struck me much” (*Heroes* 59). The marvels of creation and the religion of wonder: these are familiar leitmotifs for readers of Carlyle.

Montgomery Watt concluded his essay by assuring us of the integrity of Carlyle’s scholarship in his biography of Mahomet: “In its essence Carlyle’s conception of Muhammad is a true one, and one that is still of value in its broad outlines to the historian of today. The greatest merit of Carlyle’s lecture, however, is that it is an important step forward in the process of reversing the medieval world-picture of Islam as the great enemy, and rehabilitating its founder, Muhammad” (254). At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we are in still more pressing need of such a reversal. It is time to forego all the negatives defined by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978) and to look at Islam afresh. And Carlyle’s great essay will help with that.

## Notes

1. See my full discussion of this issue in *The Ancient Dialect*.

## Works Cited

- Carlyle, Thomas. *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and the Heroic in History*. Ed. Michael K. Goldberg. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 1993.
- . *Sartor Resartus*. Ed. Rodger L. Tarr. Berkeley, CA: U of California P, 2000.
- . *Works*. Ed. H. D. Traill. Centenary Edition. 30 vols. London: Chapman and Hall, 1896–99.
- Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *West-östlicher Diwan*. Vol. 7 of *Werke*. Ed. E. Trunz. 14 vols. Hamburg, Germ.: Christian Wegner Verlag, 1949–60.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978.
- Sale, George, trans. *The Koran, Commonly Called the Alcoran of Mohammed . . . to which is Prefixed A Preliminary Discourse*. London: Ackers, Wilcox, 1734.
- Watt, Montgomery W. "Carlyle on Muhammad." *Hibbert Journal* 53 (1954–55): 247–54.