

## ON KANT'S VIEW OF ISLAM & WHY IT SHOULD BE *CUM GRANO SALIS*

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### Introduction

A review of Kant's opinion of Islam and Mohammedans in his writings gives one a very clear idea that for him (Kant) the religion and its followers failed in fulfilling his specifications of a rational religion and were, consequently unworthy of great attention in his writings. Where he does mention it we find a great disdain for the teachings of the religion as well as its practitioners. The philosopher perceived the religion to be a figment of Mohammed's (PBUH) imagination in his earlier writings, while in his later writing he depicted it as a sensual, sublime religion with a false sense of superiority.

The aim of this paper is not to address Kant's views on Islam, as a number of highly detailed papers already exist on this particular topic – the present paper aims to question the basis upon which Kant formed these opinions; and contends that Kant's early life and education, social circle and lack of interaction with the outside world deprived him of the exposure and experience to form a just assessment of Islam and Muslims. Consequently, what one finds in his writings is a commentary on the cultures and practices of certain races (especially the Arabs and Turks) rather than the religion itself and should be viewed as such.<sup>1</sup> The following sections will try to construct the aforementioned argument in a logical manner while at the same time deconstructing Kant's life.

### Early life and influences

While there are conflicting views on the financial condition of Kant's family during his childhood and youth,<sup>2</sup> the strong influence of Pietism and

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Jacobs and P. Kain (eds.), *Essays on Kant's Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 5-7.

<sup>2</sup> In *The Life of Immanuel Kant*, Stuckenberg comments on the poverty of Kant's childhood which made him susceptible to melancholy and led him into despondency, see (pg.17); on the other hand Kuehn in *Kant: A Biography* argues that while Kant's family was not rich they were comfortably situated, especially during his formative years and that Kant

morality remain constant (the first being the religious faith of the family and the second his mother's influence). And from all accounts of his formative years Kant's views on morality were, if not exactly formulated, influenced by this atmosphere.

Another major influence that his biographers appear to agree upon is that of Dr. Schulz. He is identified as being a major religious influence on Kant's mother and later on the direction that Kant's education took. His admittance to the *Collegium Fridericianum* was encouraged and supported by Schulz. And it was in *Collegium* that we see Kant's formal theological and spiritual training<sup>3</sup>. His education there was predominantly theological in nature, with the focus on pietism and the New Testament. However, here Kant also learned Latin, Hebrew and Greek, but neither French nor English were taught to the students.

For the current discussion this is a very vital point as it indicates that while Kant was comfortable in the classic languages he had received little to no training in the more modern languages. In turn this would indicate that as a researcher or merely as a reader of foreign texts, Kant's knowledge would be limited to those which were accessible in these languages. It would be interesting to see which translation of the Quran Kant read before forming his opinions<sup>4</sup>. This also indicates that he would have had limited exposure to Arab and Muslim philosophers. It would have been interesting to see

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himself was well disposed towards his parents in that while they didn't leave him money, they didn't leave him any debts either see pg.17. (p.34). And in both accounts one finds Kant positively disposed towards the environment provided by his parents as role models for moral behavior.

<sup>3</sup> On the issue of the *Collegium Fridericianum* too there exists a difference of opinion amongst his biographers; with Stuckenberg claiming that Kant spoke of the place in warm terms and in appreciation of its 'paternal' environment (p.30-31) whereas Kuehn cites Kant as recalling the time spent there as a form of slavery (p.45).

<sup>4</sup> Unfortunately at the writing of this paper I had yet to identify which translation Kant had actually used. During this particular time period the Quran had already been translated into both Latin and German. However there exists a controversy over the translations. The first translation was made by Kettenensis in 1143 titled: The law of Mohammad, the False Prophet. A number of later translations of the Quran in European languages (including German) were made from this translation, until the 17<sup>th</sup> century, rather than directly from Arabic, which was regrettable as the Latin translation was considered inaccurate and biased. For a more complete list of the translations please refer to Translations of the Koran by Samuel M. Zwemer ([http://www.muhammadanism.org/Quran/translations\\_koran.pdf](http://www.muhammadanism.org/Quran/translations_koran.pdf)).

what Kant would have made of the Mutazalites, and the rationalists like Abd al-Jabbar and Ghazali.

### **Social circle**

One of the arguments put forward when debating Kant's views on Islam is the geographical location of Königsberg, which made it an ideal place for budding philosophers to study different cultures and peoples as they journeyed to and through the port city. This it is said this was a source of education for Kant on the different characteristics of various nationalities, which he lays out in great detail in *Observations on the Beautiful and the Sublime*. However, these arguments need to be evaluated with a closer look at the social circle within which Kant moved during his lifetime<sup>5</sup> and the socio-political conditions prevailing in Königsberg at that time. Here one can cite the example quoted by Kuehn in his book:

*The journeymen cannot go into the public because of the soldiers. They must always sit in the hostels, playing cards for money – something very common in Königsberg.*<sup>6</sup>

Although Kant believed that one could acquire the knowledge of the world in Königsberg because of its metropolitan nature, Kuehn writes that the city was a rather gloomy place, and with a restrictive atmosphere. From these impressions one can assume that being a port city there were people from different cultures and backgrounds, but there was little interaction between the locals and the foreigners.

The foreigners settled in Königsberg, were mostly of European origin. Both biographical texts contain no reference of any significant presence of Arabs or Turks in the city. Hence it can be assumed that, even if, Kant came in contact with any people from these cultures they belonged to a particular occupation and were not a representative sample of the entire culture (and/or religion).

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<sup>5</sup> Here also the issue of languages comes into play. Would Kant have been able to communicate with traders from the 'Orient' and with his rather obvious disdain, would he have even tried? Or would his opinion be formed by those who were to be found frequently in his circle and would (probably) have similar views? See I. Kant, *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime*. Translated by J. T. Goldthwait (London: University of California Press, 1991), 109.

<sup>6</sup> Kuehn, *Kant: A Biography*, 30.

In Kant's own circle of friends we again find no reference to any individual from this geographical or cultural background. The earliest records of his friends are fellow students in school and the Collegium. Later, after the death of his father we see Kant accepting private teaching positions respectively with Pastor Andersch, and a Prussian Knight, von Hulsen and it appears that as a private tutor Kant was well respected and socially accepted by his employers. Upon his return to the Collegium, we see him renewing his connections in the academia with the likes of Hamann, Funk, Jacobi, Hippel etc. We also see Kant as a regular guest at the Keyserlingktable, which continued even after the invasion of the city by the Russians in 1758. Even during this time period (1758-1762) Kant continued to move in high society, especially since the Russian officers were taking his courses at the university. However, according to both Kuehn and Stuckenbergone one of Kant's closest friends was Joseph Green, a British merchant who was settled in Konigsberg. And even here we see that his friendship was limited to Green and his assistant and did not result in any extensive exposure to the maritime tradition<sup>7</sup>.

This brief overview of Kant's friends, acquaintances and extended social circle again points towards a lack of personal experience of the cultures/religion he was addressing in his texts. Most of his personal and professional interaction is with other Anglo-Saxons (if one can use the term) like himself.

### **Geographical inertia**

On reviewing Kant's perceptions and opinions on Islam the issue of geographical inertia is of particular concern from two perspectives: one he was extremely unwilling to move out of Konigsberg<sup>8</sup> and second that Kant did not travel outside of Germany. A couple of reasons can be cited for this attitude:

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<sup>7</sup> This particular lack of exposure can also be laid somewhat at Green's door, as reading between the lines in Kuehn one sees that after his initial success and settlement in Konigsberg, Green was not very active in running his business and left most of the day-to-day running to Robert Motherbery, who was Green's own prodigy.

<sup>8</sup> This assumption can be easily made on the basis that he turned down maybe three but at least two job opportunities offered to him while he was with the Konigsberg University (Universities of Erlangen, Jena and Halle) – all posts apparently better in terms of both professional growth and remuneration.

- His physical condition
- Support and standing in Königsberg

While one feels that there might be merit in the first argument, the second is somewhat weak.

At a number of places both Kant himself and his biographers raise the topic of his health – Kant was not the most robust of men. His health was indifferent and according to Kuehn and Stuckenberg he had difficulty in breathing with ease at times.

While his physical weakness might explain his avoidance of international travel, it does not quite explain the reluctance to move to other academic institutions in Germany for professional growth. This is particularly surprising for most of the offers came at a time when Kant already had recognition in his area and his work was being studied by philosophers already.

The second argument that he stayed on in Königsberg because he had support and standing in the city is a little weak, as by the time these opportunities came Kant was no longer an obscure philosopher; but had a following of his own. This indicates that Kant was quite happy and contented with a sort of geographical inertia, where he was comfortable living in a particular place, was well connected with the high society and felt that moving away at such a time would undermine his current standing within the local society and the academia.

However, while these reasons might be enough to explain his rejection of job offers, it raises a lot of questions about how, then did Kant feel that he was equipped to pass judgment and/or (universal) observations on different cultures and religions? Apart from Islam in his *Observations on the Beautiful and the Sublime* he talks about the ideal nature of men and women and draws conclusions about the characteristics which define, rather blithely, traits which are general to certain nationalities and cultures. These generalizations too, can be challenged on the basis of the very arguments raised earlier. With substantial populations of French, Dutch and English in Königsberg, and the ten years of occupation by the Russians, locals like Kant were in a very good position to identify the traits of these nations – however, beyond these migrant populations attributing traits to non-local

populace based on hearsay seems irresponsible. In the case of Islam, one classic example of this type of mistake is where in his earlier work "Physical Geography" Kant asserts that makes the use of drugs, especially opium is an acceptable part of the religion<sup>9</sup> (p. 396), whereas the Quran actually states

*They ask you about intoxicants and games of chance. Say: In both of them there is a great sin and means of profit for men, and their sin is greater than their profit (Verse 2:219).*

Similar examples can be found both in the Quran and in the teachings of the Prophet (PBUH). Another example is his belief that no non-Muslims can enter Saudi Arabia, again the only restriction in place is that non-Muslims cannot enter Makkah; they are perfectly welcome in all other places in Saudi Arabia, including Medina (which is also a major center of religious importance for Muslims).

### **Conclusions**

Based on the above (brief) deconstruction of Kant's life, one does find a dearth of exposure or experience, for him to have formed an accurate assessment of Islam and Muslims. Just to put it in perspective: in comparison to Kant, who did not at any time travel to the Orient or interact (to our knowledge) with the Arabs or the Turks; Nietzsche, another German scholar, spent considerable time in reading Oriental texts as well as traveling to these countries. This should not in any way be taken as an endorsement of Islam by Nietzsche; what it does give, is an impression that this person actually had experience, exposure and knowledge on which he based his arguments. In the case of Kant, when reading his opinion on Islam, one does not get this feeling that he has made any effort to actually acquaint himself with the teachings of the faith before rejecting them.

Also there appears to exist, for Kant, a blurring of the boundary between the theological teachings of Islam and the cultural practices of Muslims – one is a constant while the latter is determined and influenced by pre-existing practices and geographical location. This blurring has not helped his case either, causing readers familiar with the teachings of the faith to feel a little lost as the constant (the faith) is still the same but cultural

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<sup>9</sup> I. Kan, Lectures on Physical Geography in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Prussian Academy, 1900), 396.

practices and geographical boundaries have changed over time – leaving them with no reference point with which to identify Kant's Islam.

Consequently, one feels that, when reading Kant, his opinions and interpretation of Islam should be taken with a pinch of salt or should be ignored to a great extent, especially because, while reading these passages the followers of Islam will get unduly angered and ignore the actual body of knowledge. The non-Muslims too, would find it confusing.