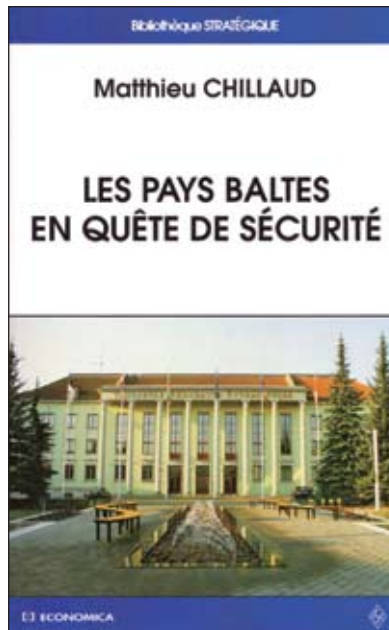


BOOK REVIEWS

countries (especially Estonia and Latvia) have ‘bent over backwards’ to accommodate accusations of discrimination. The analysis of how the Baltic States managed to progress on the tightrope of human and political rights without falling into the abyss of ethnic conflict, or becoming victim to the actions of a fifth column, would have added value. Indeed, a deeper discussion of how Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Andrei Kozyrev received the Baltic concessions on minority rights through the 1990s would alert the reader unfamiliar with the topic of certain trends in Russian policy-making and strategy. Similarly, these trends should have been connected more precisely with the provision to the Baltic States of the Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the 1999 NATO Summit in Washington, DC. There is merit in recognizing the courage with which the Baltic States have tackled these issues relative to, say, the Balkans, which did not do so.

Finally, the military aspect of the analysis of Baltic security is essential when one considers the issue of security *contributions* versus *consumptions* by the new members is sparsely treated. This is also due to the fact that the



Baltic States, during the period of time under review by Dr. Chillaud, had to generate costly material solutions to their security, relative to the areas needing to be defended and the availability of financial resources. A greater display of the travails of force generation and of the efforts deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan could have been done. The Baltic States have developed, in some cases, original solutions and niche capabilities during the last 15 years. These successes are important to highlight relative to an ‘out-of-area’ policy of NATO.

This important contribution to the literature of the Baltic States is a synthesis that deepens in many respects the analyses available in the specialized media about this region of the world. It enhances our understanding of how intangible concepts, such as identity and culture, can be ‘operationalized’ for the sake of security policy planning and implementation.

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ISLAM AND THE WEST: A CONVERSATION WITH JACQUES DERRIDA

by Mustapha Chérif. Translated by
Teresa Lavender Fagan,
with a foreword by Giovanna Borradori.

Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008

Xxii + 114 pages, US\$19.00

ISBN: 978-0-226-10286-3 (hardcover)

Pages: xxii + 114

Reviewed by Brian Bertosa

Just over three weeks after then-US President George W. Bush announced the end of “major combat operations” in Iraq,¹ a colloquium entitled “Algeria-France: Tribute to the Great Figures of the Dialogue between Civilizations” was held in Paris. Its closing session consisted of a conversation before a packed auditorium between Mustapha Chérif, a prominent Algerian intellectual described as “...one of the only moderate Islamic voices speaking up today,” (p. x), and Jacques Derrida, a towering figure of modern continental philosophy. Their discussion centred upon the relationship, as it appeared to them, between the Islamic world and the West in the context of the events that had recently unfolded, and in the post-9/11 world more generally. Chérif transcribed this interview and published it as *L’Islam et l’Occident* in 2006.² The present volume, compris-

ing the English translation of that work, appeared in October 2008 – over a half-decade since the original colloquium. Nevertheless, virtually nothing in the book has been overtaken by events in the intervening years. At the time of the writing of this review, President Barack Obama is being praised for conciliatory remarks toward Islam³ – although, of course, actions must follow words⁴ – and this takes some of the sting from Derrida’s complaints of US unilateralism. Nevertheless, Western involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan continues.

Islam and the West takes the form of a slim hardback, with an attractive yellow cover and dust jacket, and consists of an elucidating foreword by Giovanna Borradori, who specializes in the philosophy of terrorism; two introductory essays by Chérif, reflecting the structure of the French original, which lacks the foreword; a main body, divided into six chapters of varying length, comprising Chérif’s account of his discussion that day with Derrida; a conclusion; an afterword in the form of a farewell speech given by Chérif after Derrida’s death in 2004; and a chronology of major events in Derrida’s life. Regrettably, the book lacks an index.

Each chapter of the main body consists of one or more questions or discussion points posed at some length by Chérif, followed by Derrida’s views on the subject(s) presented. While fans of Derrida may be more interested in what the great philosopher has to say, I believe that those engaged with the Muslim world – whether as military personnel, diplomatic

BOOK REVIEWS

staff, aid workers, or others – should take note rather of what Chérif has to say. Among his many other accomplishments – notably, visiting professor at the prestigious Collège de France – Chérif was the first Muslim scholar in history to receive an audience with a pope.⁵ With intellectual attainments such as these, and his extensive contacts with Europe, it is unlikely that Chérif would harbour any but the most well-founded grudges against the West current in the Muslim world today. Not all of his opinions will be shared by everyone. Nevertheless, if his views were in complete agreement with those of his Western readers, they would thereby be valueless for the project of allowing those readers to form an understanding of the Muslim “other.” It is precisely views that we do *not* agree with – or even actively dislike – that need to be heard if we in the West are to have any inkling of why Muslims may see things differently from us.⁶

It should be pointed out at this juncture that Chérif is scrupulously fair, balancing his judgments against the West by acknowledging that some of its aspects have been positive, such as “...the primacy of reason, secularity, and free energies” (p.48).⁷ He also points out what he sees as the failures of the Muslim world, including, among other things, “...the multiform madness of fundamentalism, intolerance, and terrorism” (p. 12). While such views do much to establish Chérif’s bona fides as a moderate – inasmuch as they are expressed by a Muslim, rather than a Westerner – they are not, in my view, of primary importance in the context of this book. There are two reasons for this: first, because they are not part of what Derrida, the other voice in this volume, is asked to comment upon, and second, because the failings of Islam – the subject of an already-large bibliography, taking the form particularly of “Islam as threat” literature since September 2001 – are dealt with at greater length elsewhere.⁸

What, then, are some of the grievances Chérif articulates? Among these are a number that have been heard before, and that, in fact, have many adherents in the West – for example, the extreme economic inequality between North and South. Others concern hypocritical patterns of thought and behaviour in the West that hinder it from engaging seriously with the Muslim world. For example, Chérif inveighs against:

...the attitude of a West with entrenched ideas, which refuses to admit plurality, to really listen to the other, to recognize that there exist[s] other, completely different ways to see the world. (p. 10)

Of greater concern, he asserts:

If we [Muslims] hazard to criticize, however peacefully, however naturally, the deviations, the lies, the duplicity, the confusion, the law of the strongest, the perversions of some practices of freedom, all doors close, and we are accused of every evil. (p. 41)

Some, at least, of what Chérif complains of here could, if the will were present, be addressed by opinion leaders or policymakers in the West. Quite different, however, are his criticisms of a purely *religious* nature, which contrast Islam with the West’s project of modernity. For example, while the primacy of reason is, overall, something to be admired, there are further aspects to be considered:

Modern reason has serious difficulty explaining and resolving the question of life’s struggles: Who are we? What are we destined for, why are we put to the test on earth? How can we learn to live, notably within the framework of a life without religion? (*Ibid.*)

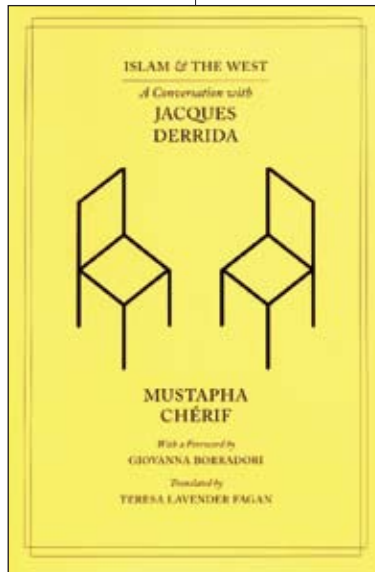
Given that the modernity project does not – indeed, cannot – advance a program in which the question of *meaning* is central, Chérif asks:

What, then are the interest, strength, and specificity of this European model that ignores or marginalizes,

indeed criticizes and battles everything that is religious and every link between the spiritual and the temporal? (p. 65)

One of the dominant themes of the past half-millennium of Western intellectual history – indeed, possibly *the* dominant theme – has been precisely to sunder any link between the spiritual and the temporal, to relegate religion to an insignificant role in almost every field. We arrive, then, at the crux of the problem between Islam and the West, possibly the only truly insurmountable hurdle faced. The West, for its part, will likely never go back to a world in which religion holds a dominant place – and which religion, or denomination, would that be? – while Muslims, at least to judge by Chérif’s remarks, appear to have no intention whatever of moving to a world in which it does not. While progress may be possible on other issues that stand between them, in this particular matter, each of these “two solitudes” will, at least for the foreseeable future, simply have to learn to live with the puzzling – and for some, infuriating – attitude of the other.

What of the other voice in *Islam and the West*, the ‘great man,’ Derrida, himself? A nonreligious thinker working outside any system of belief,⁹ he focuses instead upon faith in the secular sense, that faith that is “...the condition of the social bond itself,” that guarantees “...the exchange of words and financial credit, social credit, and all forms of credit and legitimacy in society” (p. 58). He discusses secularism, by which he means “...the detachment of the political from the theocratic and the theological” – a typically French view – while encompassing “...absolute religious freedom guaranteed by the state.” (p. 50). And he speaks of “...the democracy to come” (p. 42): as long as “every citizen has the right to criticize, in the name of democracy, the state of things that are called democratic,” (p. 43), democracy remains endlessly perfectible; it is therefore never



BOOK REVIEWS

static, it is always “to come.” Derrida’s is very much ‘blue sky’ thinking, and not every reader will necessarily have patience with this, but it is beautiful and inspiring nevertheless.

To conclude, I would like to draw attention to an idea of Derrida’s concerning the cessation of hostilities in cases of ongoing conflict such as those in the Middle East and elsewhere. It is possibly the most depressingly true statement in the book, at least in the sense of the inescapability of the consequence of which it warns:

The difference between an opening up and a closure depends on the risk taken, on the responsibility taken in the midst of risk, by someone who knows that, if he is not the first to address the other, if he is not the first to offer his hand, the war will not end. If one waits, if one always places a precondition on the ceasing of hostilities, then there will be perpetual war. (p. 60).¹⁰

In *theory*, there is no compelling reason why this statement should not be just as applicable to Muslim combatants as to Western combatants. In *practice*, however, the zones of conflict currently in play between Islam and the West involve the occupation of Muslim soil by Western forces, far from home, with sometimes tenuous public support. In the case of Afghanistan, inasmuch as foreign forces will inevitably be obliged to depart at some point – they cannot stay forever – chances are that the first to ‘address the other’ in that theatre will, in fact, be the West. Whatever exit strategy results from the process set in train by that act of ‘opening up,’ war in that land – at least involving Western forces – will not be perpetual, any more than it proved to be in Vietnam.

Brian Bertosa is an independent scholar whose articles have appeared in the Canadian Military Journal, the Journal of Military History, and War and Society.

NOTES

- 1 The text of Bush’s speech on that occasion can be found at: <http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2003/05/01/iraq/main551946.shtml> (accessed 5 April 2009).
- 2 Mustapha Chérif, *L’Islam et l’Occident: Rencontre avec Jacques Derrida* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2006). A review of that book can be found in the French language version of this issue. Interested Francophone readers will want to acquire the original, but those able to read either language are advised that it is a paperback (the translation is hardcover), and much more expensive.
- 3 Patrick Martin, “Obama’s calming words put aside ‘axis of evil,’” in the *Globe and Mail*, 8 April 2009, Ontario edition. See also, in the same edition, Shira Herzog, “Drop the doom, Bibi, and listen to Obama.”
- 4 Haroon Siddiqui, “Obama must back words with action,” in the *Toronto Star*, 9 April 2009.
- 5 Benedict XVI, in November 2006.
- 6 I use the terms “we” and “us” with great reluctance here, knowing that many of us in the West are, in fact, Muslim, but as a convenient shorthand I cannot improve upon this usage, regret it though I may.
- 7 Chérif even has good things to say about ‘Orientalism’ – a now-outmoded term for the academic study, in the West, of the cultures of the East – which was the *bête noire* of the Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said in his influential book *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978; reprint, New York: Vintage, 1979). Chérif’s charitable remarks are particularly surprising inasmuch as an uncritical acceptance of Said’s judgment of the Orientalist project has become *de rigueur* in certain academic circles in the West.
- 8 In this connection, I would direct the reader to two works by one of the most important – and controversial – scholars of the Middle East, Bernard Lewis: *What Went Wrong: Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) and *The Crisis of Islam: Holy War and Unholy Terror* (New York: Modern Library, 2003). (Lewis, incidentally, is castigated by Said in *Orientalism*, especially at pp. 314–320.)
- 9 Derrida: “I have always had the tendency to resist religious communitarianism, that is, any form of gregarious community that oppresses the individual, that prevents the individual from acting as a nonreligious citizen. One can be religious, of course, and yet act as a lay citizen, without feeling herded by a religious community.” (p. 51). Borradori, in her foreword, describes Chérif and Derrida as “...an odd couple, for their profound love of Algeria is almost all they share.” (p. x).
- 10 See also Derrida’s view that “...nothing essential will be done if one doesn’t allow oneself to be called forth by the other.” (p. 99).

FOR LOVE AND COURAGE: THE LETTERS OF LIEUTENANT- COLONEL E.W. HERMON FROM THE WESTERN FRONT 1914-1917

Edited by Anne Nason

London

Preface Publishing, 2008

367 pages, \$25.00 (softcover)

ISBN 978-1-84809-067-5

Reviewed by Colonel P.J. Williams

With each passing year, the number of surviving First World War veterans dwindles to the very low single digits. Arguably however, this has been accompanied by a greatly increased public interest in this conflict, fuelled in part perhaps by the release of the film *Passchendaele* to great acclaim last year, as well as 90th anniversary commemorations of the “War to end all Wars.” This public interest

has been met to a large extent by the publication of personal accounts by those involved. The recently discovered and published letters of British Lieutenant-Colonel Edward William Hermon are a case in point, and they represent a particularly poignant and personal narrative of life on the Western Front in what was then known as The Great War.

The letters in this account, from Hermon to his wife Ethel and their five children, (collectively known as “The Chugs”) number some 200 written during the war. Hermon was killed on 9 April 1917, while leading his battalion during the Arras Offensive. He was eventually awarded the Distinguished Service Order (DSO) for his services. As he fell in battle, his final words to his adjutant were: “Go on.” The letters were kept by Ethel after the war, were eventually passed on to daughter Mary, then ultimately to granddaughter Anne Nason in 1991 upon Mary’s death. Anne subsequently decided the time was right for publication of the letters, which she hopes will serve as a testament to the love between Edward and Ethel, as well as to the courage of the ordinary British soldier.