



Nietzsche and Islam by Roy Jackson

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Confucian term, such as *dao*, is glossed over in order to draw the important connection of a certain usage with Dewey's understanding of experience. In some places *dao* is presented as roughly equivalent to Dewey's consummatory experience, and in others *dao* is conceived of as a path consisting of experiences. An elaboration of how these terms differ would help to deepen the reader's understanding of both philosophical terms.

A second obstacle is that sometimes a term is used in multiple working connections spread throughout the book, without any concluding account of what the term means for Confucianism; *li*, for example, is compared to felt intelligence, inquiry, symbolic expression, and cultural values. These comparisons are in no way mutually exclusive, but each different comparison entails subtle differences in connotation. While it is certainly valuable to see how dynamic this term is and to avoid flattening it into one specific English equivalent, the presentation of it as a working connection for Deweyan notions rather than its explication as a Confucian term in its own right may leave the reader without a clear understanding of the Confucian term. However, given the quality of explanations with regard to Confucian terms and the care given to their subtleties, this issue seems to be primarily a factor of the book's brevity rather than the author's misunderstanding of the terms.

All in all, Grange's presentation of Dewey's philosophy of experience and culture as well as the parallels he develops with Confucianism are truly valuable contributions to the field of comparative philosophy. He successfully constructs the stage on which a cross-cultural dialogue can take place while simultaneously offering an insightful critique of the Western social and political landscape.

Nietzsche and Islam. By Roy Jackson. London and New York: Routledge, 2007. Pp. 194. Hardcover.

Reviewed by **Peter S. Groff** Bucknell University

Given its title, one might expect Roy Jackson's *Nietzsche and Islam* to offer an examination of Nietzsche's views on Islam. Such a volume would be welcome indeed, since with the exception of a short but excellent article by Ian Almond there is a striking lacuna in Nietzsche studies on this particular topic.¹ However, while Jackson frequently notes Nietzsche's surprisingly positive assessment of Islam, his concerns here are not so much historical and philological as contemporary and political. The stated aim of the book is twofold: first, to demonstrate (contrary to popular belief) that "Nietzsche is not the standard bearer for atheism" and second, to make the case that his philosophy "has particular relevance for how Islamic identity is perceived in the modern world" (p. 1).

Jackson argues that Nietzsche's insights can in fact help Islam confront the force of secularization on the one hand and revitalize itself on the other through a critical-historical return to its "key paradigms": the Qur'an, the Prophet Muhammad, the city-state of Medina, and the four Rightly-Guided Caliphs. These paradigms of the

formative period (610–661 C.E.) represent for Jackson the very “soul” or “essence” of Islam (pp. 8–9). Not surprisingly, they also lie at the heart of the utopian “Golden Age” narratives that contemporary political revivalists (Islamists) employ to justify the establishment of a pure Islamic state—a state in which all aspects of life are encompassed by religious law. Jackson’s attempt to take back the key Islamic paradigms from such reactive, authoritarian, and stultifying forces—as well as his resistance to the ideology of modern Western secularism—places him firmly in the progressive lineage of the *Nahda* (the “Awakening” or “Renaissance” of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries).

Chapter 1 sets the stage for Jackson’s project by examining some post-9/11 debates surrounding the “clash of civilizations” thesis, the question of Islamic identity, and so forth. Chapters 2 and 3 are dedicated primarily to the explication of Nietzsche’s thought, indicating its relevance to the question of Islamic identity. Put briefly, Jackson finds in Nietzsche’s writings a robust and salutary articulation of the critical “Historical” perspective, which he uses to counterbalance the ostensibly “Transhistorical” approach to Islam (i.e., the vision of Islam as pure, pristine, and all-encompassing) proffered by revivalist thinkers like Mawlana Mawdudi. Of particular interest to Jackson is the Nietzschean idea of the soul as something mortal, relational, and irreducibly multiple (pp. 35–36), a model he will ultimately apply to the key paradigms of Islam.

If it seems strange to call upon Nietzsche for help in reclaiming the vital energies of Islam, chapter 3 makes a case for his “religiosity.” Jackson’s central claim is that Nietzsche does not reject the religious as such, but rather just particular life-denying or otherworldly manifestations of the religious impulse. Indeed, according to Jackson, Nietzsche shares with religious thinkers an obsession with matters of “ultimate concern” (to use Paul Tillich’s phrase), the need for redemption, and, perhaps most importantly, a “lack of ‘faith’ in the secular order to provide humanity with any meaningful existence” (p. 13). Far from announcing the inevitable triumph of atheism, then, Nietzsche’s proclamation of the death of God merely signals the contingent inability of a decadent form of Christianity to negotiate the process of secularization. Indeed, according to Jackson, Islam can learn a good deal from Nietzsche’s critique of the “dead God” of Christianity and consequently “embrace a ‘living God’ that does not perceive secularization as an enemy” (p. 13).

The next three chapters focus on Islam, with Jackson endeavoring to apply a putatively Nietzschean perspective to its key paradigms. Building upon the work of Fazlur Rahman, Muhammad Arkoun, and Mohamed Talbi, chapter 4 lays out a hermeneutics of the Qur’an that attempts to strike a balance between the text’s ostensibly divine, timeless, universal message and the cultural, linguistic, political, and historical context of its particular audiences.

Chapter 5 interprets the cultural template of pre-Islamic Arabia as the Nietzschean “soul” of Islam. While Muslims and non-Muslims alike often assume a radical break between *al-Jahiliyya* (the pagan period of “ignorance”) and the “Golden Age” of Islam, Jackson sees an important continuity. Drawing upon Ibn Khaldun’s seminal science of culture, he argues that the phenomenon of *‘asabiyya* (internal cohesion

or social solidarity) functioned in the Arab world as an engine of reform and renewal. Similarly, he argues that Islam's commitment to social justice and its defense of the weak and oppressed are importantly linked to the Bedouin ethos of egalitarianism, individualism, and independence. The formative period of Islam is thus deeply rooted in and conditioned by *Jahiliyya*.

Chapter 6 examines the constitution of Medina and Muhammad's role in it. Drawing on the work of Ali Bulaç and 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq, Jackson makes the case that the first Islamic city-state was a profoundly pluralistic society that acknowledged a separation between the secular and the religious. Further, the Prophet Muhammad's role was not so much that of a religio-political ruler (as assumed by contemporary revivalists), but rather a "charismatic arbiter of disputes" concerned with fortifying a dangerously frayed Arab *'asabiyya*. Focusing, then, on the subsequent period of the *Rashidun* (the four "Rightly-Guided" Caliphs), he argues that despite some innovations, they, too, had relatively limited secular and religious authority, and that their role was primarily one of advising and persuading. Ironically, it was only later, with the advent of the dynastic Caliphates, that the Prophet Muhammad was retroactively re-imagined as an all-encompassing religio-political authority. The conclusion that Jackson draws from this is that "the prophetic and *Rashidun* paradigms have become unworkable idealised archetypes, neither of which existed in reality" (p. 145). Accordingly, the revivalist fantasy of "returning" to such a utopian "Golden Age" is destined to fail.

The final chapter elaborates in more general terms on this conclusion. Surveying Mawdudi again, along with a range of more moderate voices, Jackson suggests that the biggest threat to Islam comes neither from the West nor from secularization, but internally, that is to say, from its own self-perception. Transhistorical Islam, in its dreams of founding a pure Islamic state, is "damaging, impractical and ultimately 'un-Islamic'" (p. 147). Jackson's condemnation of Transhistorical Islam is Nietzschean in spirit—while he criticizes its historical naïveté and transparent mythologizing, he seems more concerned ultimately with its effect on life: "the important question is whether that outlook promotes and enhances the species or not" (p. 161, cf. pp. 32–33). The denial of history, change, growth, plurality, interpretation, perspective, and even secularization leads not to human flourishing but to stagnation and death. To the extent that Jackson's Historical Islam embraces such realities, it can be said to have a kind of Nietzschean character. Indeed, not only is Jackson's Islam this-worldly and pluralistic, but "*in its essence, [it] is rebellious, revolutionary, and concerned with reform and renewal*" (p. 108). The book concludes by making a case for the amenability of Nietzsche and Islam to democratic institutions, seeing in both a rejection of the Platonic philosopher king and the sovereignty of the monolithic belief system.

As might be expected from a book of its scope and ambition, *Nietzsche and Islam* has its shortcomings. It suffers from scattershot organization, particularly in the early chapters, where the discussion drifts back and forth over so many topics that it is sometimes unclear what Jackson's main points are or how they are supposed to connect with one another. The use of quotations can be inconsistent, confusing, and

frustrating as well. Too often, a single source is cited to back up controversial claims or broad, otherwise unsubstantiated generalizations, glossing over the inconvenient reality of scholarly consensus and disagreements. In the sections on Nietzsche, Jackson at least prefaces quotations with the author's name, so the reader can see who is being presented as a representative authority. In the sections on Islam, quotations are frequently left authorless in the body of the text, leaving the reader to refer again and again to endnotes just to find out what presumed authority is being cited.

The rendering of Arabic terms is inconsistent as well. Jackson opts for minimal rather than full Roman transliteration, which in itself is not objectionable, but he doesn't stick with any one system. For instance, sometimes he transliterates the 'ayn (as in 'adl or 'Ali 'Abd al-Raziq) and sometimes he ignores it (as in *asabiyah*, *aql*, or Ali b. Ali Talib); sometimes he renders the *ta' marbuta* as "ah" (as in *asabiyah* or *falsafah*) and sometimes it is as just an "a" (as in *Jahiliyya* or *shahada*). Sometimes he uses non-Arabic variants (such as *Khalifat-e-Rashidun* instead of *al-Khulafa' al-Rashidun*), an awkward choice given his claim that Islam is "essentially Arab" (p. 11). And so forth. Such inconsistencies rarely obstruct comprehension of Jackson's accounts and arguments, but one expects more from a volume in the "Routledge Advances in Middle East and Islamic Studies" series.

The scholarly treatment of Nietzsche falls somewhat short of what might be expected from a specialist monograph as well. As mentioned earlier, Jackson often gestures vaguely toward Nietzsche's positive views on Islam, but eschews any specifics. Indeed, he does not so much as mention Almond's article—a serious omission, even if he ultimately has other fish to fry.² If Jackson had delved seriously into Nietzsche's actual remarks on Islam, it might have become clear that his praise is mostly instrumental—merely a strategic tool in the service of his critique of European Christianity—and that he has his share of criticisms to make against that religion too.³ Now, it might be argued that what Nietzsche actually says about Islam is less interesting than the ways in which his philosophy can be used to revivify it (certainly, his understanding was marred by the typical febrile Orientalist clichés). Yet the book disappoints on this front as well. One reason for this is that Jackson casts his exegetical net too widely, indiscriminately explicating all the familiar Nietzschean themes, whether or not they have any direct bearing on his specific thesis. A sharper focus would have been welcome here, and might have allowed Jackson to concentrate on formulating a more substantive, original, and interesting reading of Nietzsche. As it stands, the account he puts forth is fairly pedestrian: oddly chosen passages from primary sources are cited without much serious interpretation or analysis, the selection of secondary literature is small and seemingly arbitrary, and the overall picture of Nietzsche that emerges is surprisingly bland.⁴

Jackson often seems to underestimate the radicality of Nietzsche's thought, reducing his most challenging insights to familiar platitudes. For instance, he reads Nietzsche's proclamation of the death of God simply to mean that "society—European society—no longer had a need for the 'Christian' God, for He has outlived his usefulness" (p. 19). There is no doubt some truth to this, but surely this is not the whole story. By Nietzsche's middle-period texts, "God" comes to signify any putative higher

reality that grounds nature and serves as its transcendent source of existence, value, order, and meaning. It thus encompasses all conceptions of a supersensible realm, which is to say metaphysics as traditionally conceived. The “death” of God seems to hinge on the gradual development of the intellectual conscience—the nascent virtue of honesty that unmask such notions as anthropomorphic projections rooted in base human needs. Its consequences include the loss of belief in any higher order of Being (leaving nothing but nature as the realm of generation and destruction), the loss of all absolutes (leaving no stable, universal, eternal truths or values—i.e., no fixed measure for knowing and evaluating the world), the loss of any preexisting, overarching meaning or purpose to existence (leaving us with Nietzsche’s alternately enchanting and horrifying “innocence of becoming”), and the loss of a God’s-eye view (leaving no absolute epistemic standpoint from which reality could in principle be grasped in its totality).

This in turn throws into question the ideal of objective knowledge and the notion of reality itself as something univocal, leaving only an irreducible plurality of conflicting perspectives and interpretations. Even the apparent unicity of the knowing and willing subject turns out to be a fiction. Still further consequences follow from these; suffice to say the implications of the death of God are numerous and far more significant than just a waning interest in the utility of Christianity. Indeed, much of Nietzsche’s thought can be understood as an attempt to complete this world-changing event by thinking it through as thoroughly and honestly as possible.⁵

Jackson acknowledges in passing that Nietzsche’s attack on God is really a more wide-ranging attack on metaphysics, although he quickly qualifies this by claiming that his opposition isn’t actually to metaphysics or religion per se, but only to their degenerate, life-denying forms (p. 46). A nuanced and resourceful argument might be made for such a claim (Jackson himself doesn’t actually provide one), but at the end of the day, I am doubtful as to whether it would vindicate any established monotheistic religion without completely eviscerating its metaphysical pretenses. Now, according to Jackson’s account, because Nietzsche has presumably untethered himself from the will to truth and no longer has a serious quarrel with metaphysics, he is not really concerned one way or another with whether there is a God, or whether Muhammad received revelations, or whether the Qur’an is really the word of God (p. 32). The only relevant question for him would be whether such beliefs result in human flourishing and invigorate the species. Jackson is legitimately locking onto the quasi-pragmatic strain in Nietzsche’s thought here, but his conclusions are too hasty. Nietzsche qua genealogist doesn’t just ask about the value of our value judgments and metaphysical claims; he also asks about where they came from—that is, the conditions under which they arose, the type of people who made them, and the internal necessities or inadequacies that compelled these people to say such things.⁶ This is because he never simply rejects the will to truth; rather he complicates and problematizes it by working within its lineage and enacting it as rigorously as possible (which is to say, turning it on itself).

To proceed as though Nietzsche is merely agnostic about theological claims—specifically, the idea of a singular, eternal, omnipotent God who serves as the

absolute source of all being, value, order, and meaning, who vouchsafes a universal and ahistorical moral code, who intervenes in history and is intimately concerned with the most minute affairs of human beings, who demands to be acknowledged and loved by His creations, and who punishes or rewards their eternal souls in the afterlife—seems disingenuous. Jackson staves off an inevitable confrontation here by marginalizing Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics and implying that Islam is somehow life-affirming in a way that Christianity was not. If this is so—and I am not yet persuaded that it is—it would have little to do with the basic metaphysical commitments sketched out above, which are in fact common to Christianity and Islam.⁷

Intimately connected to all this is Jackson's claim that Nietzsche is not really an atheist. Again, an interesting, subtle argument could be made for this position by emphasizing the antimetaphysical and antifoundationalist dimensions of his thought, but Jackson does little more than make the assertion in various forms.⁸ No doubt Nietzsche's thought is so radical that it goes beyond atheism.⁹ But to go beyond atheism is not to return to theism. Put simply, Nietzsche's suspicion of atheist metaphysics and secular soteriologies does not make him any more amenable to traditional monotheistic conceptions of God (indeed, part of his objection to them is that they are residually, if unknowingly, religious).

A question that thus hangs over the entire book is "Why Nietzsche?" What does the self-proclaimed "godless antimetaphysician" have to offer to Islam?¹⁰ I am convinced that a sustained, honest *Auseinandersetzung* between Nietzsche and the Islamic tradition would be illuminating for both parties.¹¹ Yet by watering down Nietzsche's most challenging insights right from the start, Jackson inadvertently obstructs a serious conversation. As it turns out, the ostensibly Nietzschean insights that Jackson brings to bear on his key Islamic paradigms are for the most part fairly uncontroversial hermeneutic principles shared by thinkers much more moderate than Nietzsche: a recognition of the historical, political, cultural and linguistic situatedness of texts and their readers; the idea that we always bring a certain "pre-understanding" to the text and that there are no neutral, value-free interpretations; the realization that concepts grow and change with the passage of time, the movement of communities, and the emergence of new situations, interests, and concerns; and so forth. All of these are important points, and Jackson puts them to good use when engaging with the paradigms, but he doesn't need Nietzsche to do so.

Similarly, Jackson's attempt to apply the Nietzschean conception of the soul (the "mortal soul," the "soul as subjective multiplicity," the "soul as social structure of the drives and affects") generates some interesting insights—most notably his idea of *Jahiliyya* as the "soul" of Islam—but it's hard to shake the feeling that he has not taken full measure of the difficulties raised by Nietzsche's model. His insistence on speaking of the "essence" of Islam is just one obvious example of this (pp. 8–9). What real work could such a concept do in Nietzsche's anti-essentialist universe? As it turns out, for Jackson the essence of Islam is simply a function of what it was *originally*, in its formative period; hence, he will claim that Islam is "essentially Arab" (p. 11). But for a genealogical and anti-teleological thinker like Nietzsche, the origin of a thing is always distinct and separable from its purpose, meaning, and value.¹²

If one wanted to insist on retaining a term like “essence” within a genuinely Nietzschean framework, it would have to be reconceived as the dynamic natural history of a mortal thing characterized by a ceaseless conflict of multiple interpretations. What would happen if Jackson really applied this model—and, in general, an undiluted version of Nietzsche’s thought—to Islam? Would it have an irreversibly corrosive effect on those who took it seriously? Or might Islamic revivalists of various inclinations—Islamist as well as progressive—have serious responses and pose powerful challenges to Nietzsche as well?

Such an engagement has yet to take place. Jackson’s book is praiseworthy in its attempt to initiate the discussion, even if the Nietzsche he presents is in my view not fully Nietzschean. His treatment of the key Islamic paradigms is lucid and persuasive (chapters 4–6 are the best part of the book) even if his conclusions—that Transhistorical Islam is naive, injurious to human flourishing, and inimical to the strongest resources of its tradition—feel a bit like bursting through an open door. *Nietzsche and Islam* is an ambitious and wide-ranging attempt to rethink Islamic identity with the tools of secular modernity’s most radical thinker. It provides a valuable contribution to cross-cultural discussions regarding religiosity, secularization, pluralism, and human flourishing. If it does not do full justice to the dramatic pairing of Nietzsche and Islam, there are enough sparks here to suggest that something truly interesting and fruitful could come out of future juxtapositions. Hopefully, this study will spur more such cross-cultural dialogues.

Notes

- 1 – Ian Almond, “Nietzsche’s Peace with Islam: My Enemy’s Enemy is my Friend,” *German Life and Letters* 55 (1) (January 2003): 43–55, reprinted in Ian Almond, *The New Orientalists: Postmodern Representations of Islam from Foucault to Baudrillard* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2007) and *History of Islam in German Thought: From Leibniz to Nietzsche* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).
- 2 – According to Almond, “Nietzsche’s remarks concerning Islam usually fall into four related categories: Islam’s ‘unenlightened’ condition vis-à-vis women and social equality, its perceived ‘manliness,’ its non-judgmentalism and its affirmative character. . . . In all these remarks, a certain comparative tone is forever present, as if Islam was a kind of mirror in which the decadent, short-sighted European might finally glimpse the true condition of his decay” (Almond, “Nietzsche’s Peace with Islam,” p. 10).
- 3 – *Ibid.*, pp. 15–18.
- 4 – For example, the discussion of Nietzsche’s “religiosity” draws primarily upon post-Nietzschean existentialist theologians such as Paul Tillich, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Karl Barth (whose concerns he tends to project back upon Nietzsche). The only two recent studies Jackson acknowledges are Alistair Kee, *Nietzsche against the Crucified* (London: SCM-Canterbury Press, 1999), and Giles Fraser, *Redeeming Nietzsche: On the Piety of Unbelief* (London: Routledge, 2002). Other than these, he ignores the recent spate of books that have attempted to recuperate some kind of robust religiosity from Nietzsche’s thought—for example, Tyler Roberts, *Contesting Spirit* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998); Gianni Vattimo, *Belief* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); John

Lippitt and Jim Urpeth, eds., *Nietzsche and the Divine* (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000); John Caputo, *On Religion* (London: Routledge, 2001); Tim Murphy, *Nietzsche, Metaphor, Religion* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001); and Julian Young, *Nietzsche's Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Bruce Ellis Benson's excellent contribution *Pious Nietzsche* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007) would have come out too recently to be included in this study.

- 5 – Specifically, Nietzsche attempts to banish the residual “shadows of God” in order to “de-deify” nature and “naturalize” the human being. See, for example, Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), §109.
- 6 – See, for example, Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Preface, §3.
- 7 – Nietzsche himself thought that in spite of its generally affirmative character Islam was “corrupted” by the metaphysical Christian concept of judgment (i.e., Heaven and Hell). See Almond, “Nietzsche's Peace with Islam,” p. 18.
- 8 – In any case, Jackson reads Nietzsche's hypothesis of the will to power in very traditional metaphysical terms: for example, he refers to the will to power as a monistic metaphysics (p. 47), describing it as “a unifying principle” (p. 47) and as “only one substance” (p. 59). For some versions of the antimetaphysical/antifoundationist approach see Vattimo, *Belief*, and Caputo, *On Religion*, as well as Gianni Vattimo, Richard Rorty, and Santiago Zabala, *The Future of Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), and Gianni Vattimo, John Caputo and Jeffrey Robbins, *After the Death of God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).
- 9 – For one of the clearest statements from Nietzsche on this point, see *Gay Science* §346.
- 10 – *Gay Science* §344.
- 11 – Jackson deliberately brackets any consideration of Islamic philosophers, theologians, jurists, and Sufis for the sake of economy (p. 9), yet select figures from these various intellectual-spiritual traditions might prove to be more determinate and perhaps productive interlocutors in a cross-cultural dialogue with Nietzsche. See, for example, Peter S. Groff, “Al-Kindī and Nietzsche on the Stoic Art of Banishing Sorrow,” *Journal of Nietzsche Studies* 28 (Fall 2004): 139–173, and “Wisdom and Violence: The Legacy of Platonic Political Philosophy in al-Fārābī and Nietzsche,” in *Comparative Philosophy in Times of Terror*, ed. Douglas Allen (Lexington Books, 2006), pp. 65–81.
- 12 – See, for example, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Second Essay, §12; cf. *Daybreak* §44, *Gay Science* §345, and *Beyond Good and Evil* §32.

Vital Nourishment: Departing from Happiness. By François Jullien. New York: Zone Books, 2007. Pp. 176. \$25.95.

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When asked by students taking Chinese Philosophy classes with me what I can recommend as reading material, I usually say, among other things, anything written by François Jullien. Thankfully, with *Vital Nourishment: Departing from Happiness*,