



# Islam and the West: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida (Religion and Postmodernism)

By Mustapha Chérif

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In the spring of 2003, Jacques Derrida sat down for a public debate in Paris with Algerian intellectual Mustapha Chérif. The eminent philosopher arrived at the event directly from the hospital where he had just been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, the illness that would take his life just over a year later. That he still participated in the exchange testifies to the magnitude of the subject at hand: the increasingly distressed relationship between Islam and the West, and the questions of freedom, justice, and democracy that surround it.

As Chérif relates in this account of their dialogue, the topic of Islam held special resonance for Derrida—perhaps it is to be expected that near the end of his life his thoughts would return to Algeria, the country where he was born in 1930. Indeed, these roots served as the impetus for their conversation, which first centers on the ways in which Derrida's Algerian-Jewish identity has shaped his thinking. From there, the two men move to broader questions of secularism and democracy; to politics and religion and how the former manipulates the latter; and to the parallels between xenophobia in the West and fanaticism among Islamists.

Ultimately, the discussion is an attempt to tear down the notion that Islam and the West are two civilizations locked in a bitter struggle for supremacy and to reconsider them as the two shores of the Mediterranean—two halves of the same geographical, religious, and cultural sphere. *Islam and the West* is a crucial opportunity to further our understanding of Derrida's views on the key political and religious divisions of our time and an often moving testament to the power of friendship and solidarity to surmount them.

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- Rank: #553696 in eBooks
- Published on: 2009-05-15
- Released on: 2009-05-15
- Format: Kindle eBook

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The sentiments at the heart of this book are admirable: an understanding that democracy is constantly evolving (democracy is the only political system... which accepts its perfectibility.... Democracy is always to come); the belief that it is only by engaging the Other that we can end humanity's struggles; the need to remember that there is no single way of being Muslim or Western. However, the ideas are enervated by their poor presentation; the conversation between Derrida and Chérif is meandering and esoteric and not intended for a general audience; furthermore, this slim volume is also deeply repetitive and all but devoid of actionable suggestions—readers will be frustrated by repeated calls for dialogue that come unencumbered by suggestions as to how to work toward that goal. The book's most peculiar flaw is its paucity of Derrida—the short conversation is overwhelmed by two introductions, a conclusion and a touching afterward—a eulogy to the philosopher, who died some 15 months after this discussion took place. (Oct.)

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### Review

"Focusing on the crucial but largely underestimated role that Algeria, his country of birth, has played in Derrida's philosophical itinerary, Islam and the West presents Derrida's interpretation of the interdependence of politics, religion, and faith in a new light, shows that his ideal of 'democracy to come' has a strong universalist component, and, finally, adds to his fascinating understanding not only of Islam but of the Arab as the ultimate figure of exclusion and dissidence in the post-9/11 era." - Giovanna Borradori, from the Foreword"

### About the Author

**Mustapha Chérif** is professor of philosophy and Islamic studies at the University of Algiers, a visiting professor at the Collège de France, and the author of *L'Islam, tolérant ou intolérant?* **Teresa Lavender Fagan** has translated numerous books for the University of Chicago Press.

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