



Ali Fathollah-Nejad, Navid Kermani

"I won't be an Uncle Tom"

A conversation with Navid Kermani

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Prominent German-Iranian author Navid Kermani speaks to Ali Fathollah-Nejad about Islam and Iran, European values, and why he won't have anything to do with the Islam industry.

Ali Fathollah-Nejad: You say yourself that you prefer writing in German, but speaking Farsi! How come?

Navid Kermani: I speak better German than Farsi, but when I hear the Persian language abroad, it feels more familiar to me. When my daughter was born, the first words I spoke to her — although I hadn't thought about it before — were Farsi. Farsi was simply the first language that I heard, and that stays in the ear.

AF-N: And you don't think that has much to do with the sound of the language?

NK: Of course Farsi has a very pleasant sound, but I imagine the same is probably true of Finnish. It's simply a matter of principle: bilingualism does not mean that both languages are identical, but rather that different languages cover different areas and in ideal circumstances broaden the horizon of one's own language. In Germany we have got used to the idea that being monolingual is normal and that bilingualism is something akin to a disease. In the history of civilization it has actually been the custom to speak two languages — for example, one language for day-to-day business and a more elevated language for other occasions. Or people would live in a city where many languages were spoken, be that Azeri and Persian, or Czech and German. Many of the greatest German poets and writers were not German in the national sense.

AF-N: In October 2005, you gave a speech¹ to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the reopening of the Burgtheater in Vienna. Influenced by your trip to Morocco, you talked about the blood-spattered frontiers that fence Europe in. Has Europe lost its humanist ideal?

NK: No, I wouldn't go that far; it does exist. Rather, we should ask whether Europe is also bringing its humanist ideal to bear against those who are not Europeans. After all its bloody experiences, the many victims and crimes,

which are truly unbelievable and unique and which did not exist to such an extent in other cultures, Europe is today a continent that has achieved a state of comparatively tolerant and humanitarian coexistence. I am very happy to be in Europe. I also genuinely feel European, with everything that that entails: the European Enlightenment and the ideals of the French Revolution, and the fact that diversity is not only accepted, but appreciated and valued as something worthwhile in itself — as was also the case in the Ottoman Empire or under the Habsburgs. Europe was only capable of doing this after it had attempted to drive this diversity out by force. I fear that Europe is now in the process of losing this love for humanity once again; for one thing, through the way it deals with those who do not belong to Europe. Here Europe is betraying its ideals every single day, starting with foreign policy, where it is only — or almost only — material interests that count. This also has to do with people who want to come to Europe — here the border fences of Ceuta and Melilla are only one example among many — whom a German minister of the Interior then talks about as if they were a disease. One can always say that things are no better elsewhere. That may be some consolation, but I refuse to think like that. Actually, I can only measure Europe against what it wants to be. Europe was always a kind of utopia held out as an alternative to nationalistic pragmatists. This utopia has become reality. The summit meetings which take place between the European nations, the complete naturalness with which people deal with one another today, travel around or even argue with one another — all that could never have been foreseen fifty years ago. Europe is no longer just an empty word. When you look at what Europe used to be and how far it has come in these fifty years, and if you then think fifty years ahead, Europe could really become a good place.

AF–N: Historically there have been a great many critics who, for all their youthful love of Europe, have been sorely disappointed in retrospect. One example is the former president of the writers' association PEN [Poets, Essayists and Novelists], Said. In 1992, Said, who was of Iranian origin, wrote a "letter to Europe".² It begins with the story of a young Iranian living under the dictatorship of the Shah who longs for Europe and its liberal freedom, but as soon as he arrives is very disappointed in this Europe. Said writes: "He has become tired, because you, Europe, understand their [the dictators'] language better than ours. He is tired because you always want to be the victor, never a friend. Because you put day-to-day pragmatism above decency, above fraternity. Yet where there is no love, no understanding can grow either!" Frantz Fanon, one of the prophets of anti-colonialism, concludes: "Let us leave this Europe!" Is that the wrong conclusion?

NK: I'm well aware of all that. There was a reason why I decided to give my speech to Europe on the 50th anniversary of the Burgtheater from the perspective of refugees. I deliberately went where Europe behaves most shabbily, where Europe is at its most brutal. And even as I write about how Europe is betraying its own ideals, I believe in those ideals. Otherwise none of this would matter. The greatest Europeans, those who believed in Europe most passionately, were the very ones who criticized Europe most fiercely; whereas those for whom Europe was not so important cultivate a more or less pragmatic relationship with the European project. Look at the national leaders of today — Angela Merkel, Tony Blair or Nicolas Sarkozy in France. For them, Europe is no more a part of their political identity than it was for the political generation after the war, whether leftwing or rightwing, right up until Kohl, Schröder, Mitterrand and Chirac. They still had a recollection of the war and grew up with the idea that Europe is something to be fought for. But for the current lot, Europe has become an *economic* community and, in my view,

has lost something fundamental.

For another thing: let us consider the affair of the refugees in North Africa. What is happening there is utterly brutal. And it is happening in the name and on behalf of the Europeans, even if it is to some extent Moroccan policemen who are bringing about this evil. But the reason they are so brutal is that they are put up to it by the Europeans — and there I cannot find many words to defend them. And also the way we deal with asylum-seekers, the way malicious language is used, to an extent, about foreigners and other cultures, and the way politicians even exploit that resentment in their election campaigns — for instance in Denmark, Austria or Holland — all that is hideous. And yet in spite of all that, taken as a whole, things are still better than they are in Iran. Of course the choice between Merkel and Schröder was very far from the ideals of the European Enlightenment, but at least it was a choice. It is only the things one prizes highly that one can also criticize passionately.

AF-N: You say that the lovers of Europe have in the past also been bitter enemies of Europe. The political scientist Dieter Oberndörfer³ remarked of the "ethos test" which the CDU is attempting to put into practice: "Knowledge of the history and culture of Germany are no guarantee of a positive identification with Germany. Some outstanding experts in German history and culture were nevertheless bitter enemies of Germany." What sort of concepts are hidden behind the national and European setting?

NK: Of course, the framework of the German nation state is a different one from the wider European context. I think we all know that. It is precisely the German nation state which is founded upon the unity of race, blood, religion and culture — and that includes the right of citizenship. The consequence of this is that a Russian who had a German mother four or five generations ago is more German than a Turkish immigrant whose family has lived in Germany for three or four generations and only speaks German. That means that you cannot *become* German, since Germany is not a community of values, but still a national and ethnic category.

Europe, by contrast, is a community of the will. Europe has never claimed to be a unity. It is not a question of smoothing out differences, but rather of retaining differences by neutralizing them politically. A community of the will means that it is one's *values*, not one's origin, that are shared. Values are things people can sign up to, or not. There are many Europeans who do not share the European values — fascists and rightwing radicals, for example. In this sense they are less European than a Turkish intellectual who is prepared to go to jail for those values. That means that Europe's borders cannot be defined like national or linguistic borders, but that Europe is emphatically defined by values.

You can feel this fear, defensiveness and spirit of mistrust in the citizenship questionnaires that are to be introduced in Germany.⁴ That of course conflicts completely with what Europe actually is — quite apart from the fact that such tests are completely abstruse and ridiculous anyway. The absurd thing about the whole debate is that the very people who most opposed the '68 revolutionaries and what followed — such as gay marriage and the like — are the ones now making gay marriage into the generic concept of the European Enlightenment. I hope that people can continue to laugh about this state of affairs. But I fear that everything is going to become so serious that one loses the will to laugh.

As much as I love Europe and think of myself as a European, I feel very suspicious. Everyone knows what happened in Europe sixty years ago. Srebrenica was only ten years ago — that was in Europe and took place before the eyes of the European Union. The European soldiers stood and watched as 7000 Muslims were massacred within the space of a few days. What Europe has achieved so far is as endangered as it is valuable. I don't think the forces of liberalism in Germany are very strong — possibly because Germany does not have a long tradition of coexistence with other cultures, as England does for example. I still feel very at ease in my city and my surroundings. But I am afraid that all that could collapse.

AF–N: You support the idea that Muslims should also study the Bible and the Torah. Why is that important?

NK: I think that an Islamic religion has to develop its own structures even within Germany and Europe — ones different from those in an Anatolian village — and that the religious belief of today will change over the course of a few generations. It is important to have a modicum of knowledge of other people's religious beliefs, especially when one lives alongside members of other religions. In any case, I take the view that one can only adequately understand religions, even one's own, when one studies them in the context of their neighbouring traditions. No religion has ever come into being in isolation, but always through a process of exchange with other religions. If we do not understand the questions Islamic theology is attempting to answer, we will not understand the answers either. That's why the study of religious traditions must not be delegated to the subject "dialogue with other cultures", but is at the very core of an understanding of religion. The context of Islam is, above all, that of Judaism and Christianity, and the same goes for Christianity and Judaism too.

AF–N: How is it possible, as a writer, to promote the cause of enlightenment at a time of apparently irreconcilable differences?

NK: It's probably impossible to talk much to those people, like terrorists for instance, who have drifted off completely. Dealing with them is a job for politicians and the security services. But we must try to stop more people following such individuals. If we adopt the cultural language with which such political conflicts are articulated, we will become part of the problem ourselves. Nor do I think that we will solve the Palestinian problem by means of a "dialogue of cultures". Such a dialogue may constitute an element of a possible solution and be useful for a particular level of discussion; but this conflict is a territorial conflict, a national one. I don't believe that we should discuss the question of nuclear weapons in Iran on a theological level either — that is a purely political issue. The same goes for the question of Muslim immigrants in Europe.

This subject of "Islam", who or what is that supposed to be? And who or what is the subject "West" supposed to be? We can already see what differences there are in the West alone, between, let us say, the America of George W. Bush and a Europe that has come out against the Iraq war. Who or what is meant by "Islam"? Do we mean Wahabism? And what about us? Do those of us who grew up here and see ourselves as Europeans belong to the West or to Islam? These concepts give rise to identities that are in practice very complicated. And we reinforce those concepts by accepting them. That means that people like us suddenly think of themselves primarily as Muslims, given that apparently we don't belong to the West. Many end up radicalizing themselves as a result and are then nothing other than Muslim. The people who

have crossed the line into terrorism were often remarkably well integrated. In fact they were completely Western, but there came a point when they realized that ultimately they did not really belong after all. They then constructed an Islamic identity for themselves that has nothing to do with the Islam of their mothers and fathers.

In this respect I see my task as a writer as one of problematizing things — that is to say, breaking down fixed identities, describing contradictions and ambivalences, and not creating generic, superficial tags. For me, an Iranian intellectual who campaigns for democracy has much more in common with an English intellectual than with a farmer fifty kilometres outside Tehran — and not only in terms of his views, but also in terms of the culture he grew up with, the ideals he stands for and the kind of life he leads. That means that the divide does not simply run between the West and Islam, but right through the middle of Iran. The same is true in the West: I would say that someone like Susan Sontag had much less in common with an evangelical minister from the Bible Belt than she did with Orhan Pamuk. The only problem is that people base their political or military action on such caricatures. Osama bin Laden or the September 11 terrorists who attacked the World Trade Center — *the* symbol of the West — have a particular idea of the West and used acts of terrorism on the basis of that idea. Conversely, more and more Western politicians are operating on the basis that there exists one particular Islam which has to be tackled. And the moment these caricatures lead to political action, one has to take them seriously. And then it is no longer enough to say, "The reality is more complicated."

AF–N: The highlighting of complexities is therefore a major goal of yours as a writer. But at what point does frustration set in an environment partly characterized by very strong concepts of the enemy, by simplifications and cultural stereotypes? Or is an intellectual tireless in his engagement?

NK: I'm utterly frustrated on this level. If I've been taking part in a debate, I often feel annoyed afterwards. It's always these talk shows with the Muslim and the critic of Islam. I've noticed that I find it easier to get through them if I mostly ignore all that, rather than if I were to try to join in the discussion on the same level. "Islam is this, Islam is that!" — "But Islam isn't like that at all!" I immediately find myself taking up a defensive attitude that I absolutely can't stand: I mean, my real task is criticism, not justification. I have to choose: either I take these debates seriously, play my part and become a defender of Islam or multiculturalism — or indeed a denouncer of Islam, whatever role I get landed with. Or else — and this is much more important to me — I write my books, with a view to people still reading them in twenty years, fifty years, hoping that they won't be too affected by debates that we will hopefully have forgotten all about in a couple of years.

AF–N: Is that a frustrated retreat from public discourse?

NK: I think of it more as a kind of asceticism, to help me concentrate on something. I much prefer doing a reading than taking part in a debate or a panel discussion. Besides, I've realized that I achieve a greater effect at a reading than I do with a two-minute speech on television. People go home with something that's been sparked off in their heads. They go home and ask questions — and so a dialogue begins on a different level. My vocation consists much more in creating confusion or describing the way things are than in suggesting solutions. *That* is the real dialogue of a writer: his words have to ferment within the reader and take on a different form of reality. A reader who

has been provoked by a book is a reader who reads on; and I think he then starts to take a more complex view of his life and his reality than before. As I writer I have to make a conscious decision to go with the words that stream into my head. I often have to cut myself off and ignore a lot of things. Whatever I do, I can't react to everything. A sportsman who doesn't pay attention to his body, to what he eats, is showing disregard for his job. I, as one who writes, have to pay attention to what I read. And if we're talking about effect, I would rather give one big speech once a year than speak on as many occasions as possible. Though that is purely theoretical. In practice, of course, I still talk far too much and far too often. The inflation of one's own words is terrible. I've still got to become a whole lot more ascetic!

AF–N: You, along with your wife, the commentator and Islamicist Katajun Amirpur, both wrote very strongly worded letters to the editor–in–chief of the news magazine *Der Spiegel* in which you accused the publication, among other things, of being "editorially dishonourable",⁵ when the magazine published a special feature on the themes of Islam and integration. Do you still read *Der Spiegel*?

NK: The *Spiegel* affair is irritating, since at least you know with rightwing publications where they're coming from. When I still used to read it from time to time, it seemed to me far more dogmatic than, say, *Die Welt*, precisely because it comes from a leftwing background. And then if you actually know people at *Der Spiegel* as well, you realize that that is really how it works internally: the chief editors make the articles even stronger than they already are. In the *Spiegel* discourse, people like me just do not appear, whether as writers or intellectuals. As a Muslim, you only have a place in it if you're attacking your own religion. But I won't be an Uncle Tom.

¹ "The enthusiastic Europeans are to be found where Europe is not taken for granted, in eastern Europe, in the Balkans or in Turkey, among Jews and Muslims. If you want to know how much the construct that we call the European Union is worth, you have to go to where it ceases to exist. How many of its brightest spirits has Europe lost because they stood before closed doors, because they had no valid identity papers, no visas, no foreign currency? How many Europeans only survived because sixty years ago they were allowed to cross over from Tarifa to Tangier? We have taken part in the destinies of countless European refugees through the media of literature, art and film. So why do we reflexively shout out words of hate when we encounter them from the other perspective: illegals, criminals, human traffickers, economic migrants, drugs flows, 'no more room on the boat'?" (Extract from Navid Kermani, "After Europe — Speech on the 50th anniversary of the reopening of the Vienna Burgtheater", ISBN 3–250–20006–9, Amman Verlag, January 2006)

² The reading "Letter to Europe", broadcast by ORB [Ostdeutscher Rundfunk Brandenburg], received the CIVIS Media Prize in the same year (1992). It can be heard on <http://freieradios.net/portal/content.php?id=1160>.

³ Dieter Oberndörfer (born in Nuremberg in 1929) held the chair of Political Science at the University of Freiburg in Breisgau until he was granted emeritus status in 1997. He is considered to be one of the most important representatives of the Freiburg School of Political Science and an important psephologist and expert in foreign aid. See also Dieter Oberndörfer, "Die Rückkehr der Gastarbeiterpolitik" ["The Return of *Gastarbeiter* politics"] in *Blätter für deutsche und internationale Politik* [Journal of German and International Politics], vol. 6 (2005), 725–735.

⁴ Foreigners in Germany wishing to be naturalized are to be tested by means of a wide-ranging questionnaire to determine whether they can receive German citizenship.

⁵ "Of course decent Muslims exist, but they are the exception. At least that is what media outlets like *Der Spiegel* are suggesting." Navid Kermani, "Hostile Takeover: Open Letter to the Editor", in *tageszeitung*, No.7177, 9 October 2003, p.12. This commentary was written as a reaction to the cover story "Symbol of Intolerance" of the *Spiegel* cover topic "The Principle of the Headscarf" (volume 40, 29 September 2003). In a commentary on the same

issue Katajun Amirpur, who along with her husband is considered one of Germany's foremost Islamicists, spoke of "rabble-rousing of the cheapest kind and journalistic hate campaigning, combined with platitudes, untruths and clichés"; cf. Katajun Amirpur, *The Clash with Der Spiegel*, in Qantara.de, 2 October 2003.
http://www.qantara.de/webcom/show_article.php?wc_c=469&wc_id=45

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