



Jörg Lau

Muslims and the decadent West

Opinion surveys conducted in the UK and Germany report a growing tendency among young Muslims to reject mainstream norms. Their affirmation of Muslim identity and its critique of decadent western culture is an act of dissidence, argues Jörg Lau. The reservations of the non-Muslim majority towards self-segregating practices can be understood as a sign that the Islamic critique of decadence has been understood and its moral presumption rejected. Nevertheless, some commentators maintain that if young Muslims reject society, they have been driven to do so. An act of self-exclusion is thus reinterpreted as the fault of the majority. This alliance between liberalism and religiosity is coming under increasing criticism, not least from Muslim women who know the value of freedom better than most.

The origins of modern Islam's critique of decadence go back to a church in the Midwest, or to be more precise, in Greeley, Colorado. In 1948, an Egyptian official called Sayyid Qutb was sent by his ministry of education to the State College there in order to study the American education system. He described the society of the American small town in his letters and articles. One incident, which is still famous in the Islamic world today, concerns a dance night in one of Greeley's many churches. According to Qutb, after the evening service, the minister turned down the lights in the presbytery and put "Baby, it's cold outside" on the record player in order to coax the last wallflowers onto the dance floor: "The dancehall quivered to the sounds of the gramophone and was full of seductively intertwining legs", wrote Qutb. "Arms embraced hips, lips touched lips, chest rubbed on chest, and the atmosphere was full of desire."

With its well-tended gardens, Greeley appeared to Qutb to be "so beautiful that one could think one was in paradise". Metaphysically, however, the Midwesterners were homeless: "The most important thing for these people is taking care of the garden, which they do in the same way that a shopkeeper runs his shop, or a manufacturer his factory. There is no sense of beauty or artistic taste behind this activity. It is the machinery of organisation and order, devoid of any spirituality or aesthetic joy". Another time, he wrote: "Everywhere there is laughter and 'fun', and at every corner embraces and kisses. However, one never sees real contentedness on their faces".

In a tone somewhat reminiscent of contemporaneous observations by another unhappy intellectual — Adorno in *Minima Moralia* — Qutb portrays America as both uninhibited and joyless, materially rich but spiritually poor, agitated and intellectually shallow, democratic yet conformist. Qutb, who was executed by Nasser in 1966, was one of the most influential intellectuals of the last century. After his return to Egypt, he became one of the chief ideologues of the Muslim Brotherhood. His work *Milestones*, which calls for struggle against the West and invokes the West's malign influence on the Islamic world, has become the manifesto of Islamism. Even today, every young jihadist with

intellectual pretensions must read it. Because Qutb's image of the West was mainly formed in Colorado, it wouldn't be facetious to say that Al Qaeda's roots lie in Greeley. Qutb was a temporary visitor who stayed for six months and never set foot in the West again. However, the image of the decadent West is shared by those who are no longer guests but remain strangers nonetheless.

The beginning of 2007 saw the publication of findings from one of the first comprehensive surveys of British Muslims' opinions, entitled *Living Apart Together*.¹ They demonstrated the deep ambivalence felt by British Muslims towards the West, which vented itself through moralising cultural critique. Young Muslims have the impression of living in a decadent country that has forgotten its own values, pays too high a price for its freedoms, and is increasingly losing its sense of morality. Note, however, that this is not the usual case of the elderly complaining about the decadence of society in comparison to a morally intact past. It is the younger generation that is turning its back on the present.

This is something new in the history of migration: instead of realising their parents' dream of social advancement and respect, the second and third generations are turning away from the majority in moral indignation and cultivating feelings of superiority. Instead of taking up the struggle for recognition with the established majority, they themselves refuse to recognise the majority society under the banner of an opposing religious identity. How should European societies deal with the fact that a considerable — and growing — percentage of immigrants and their children reject them as decadent and see cutting themselves off as the solution? This is an exact description of the situation in Britain and it is one that is leading to resentment against Islamic immigrants throughout Europe.

Today, it is almost impossible to convey the fact that at the beginning of the modern era the Islamic "other" was seen positively. At first, the European critique of culture used the Muslim as a means of self-relativisation. Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* established the pattern for Western self-criticism. The fictitious letters of the Persian envoy shine a merciless light on all the dark corners that the local Europeans refuse to see. The Muslim castigates our obscurantism, the superficiality of our fashions, our immorality, and the false pomp of our institutions. The "other" is no longer the barbarian whose backwardness flatters our sense of superiority. He's a challenge to our reason. Montesquieu developed an enlightened-dialogical vision of universal reason: in Paris, his Persians also learn to look at the patterns of thought and behaviour of their homeland with new eyes and to doubt their conventions. The Montesquieuan letters generate rationality from the relativisation of East and West. Since then, relativism, irony, and self-alienation in the eyes of the "other" have been the foundations of the Western Enlightenment.

But how should we read the *Persian Letters* presented to us by today's sociologists in the form of opinion surveys among European Muslims? 86 per cent of British Muslims between the ages of 16 and 24 say that religion is "the most important thing in life" for them. 36 per cent believe that apostasy should be punished with death. 37 per cent would prefer to send their children to an exclusively Islamic school. 37 per cent would rather live under *sharia* law than British common law. 74 per cent want women to wear headscarves. 13 per cent "admire organisations like Al Qaeda that are prepared to fight against the West". Religion is of increasing importance for British Muslims — and this is truer of the younger generation than it is of the first two generations of immigrants. Young Muslims feel they have less in common with non-Muslims

than do their parents. They are more in favour of separate Islamic schools and *sharia* law than are their elders.

The new religiosity among young people can't be understood as a return to their parents' traditional way of life. Young people's religion is highly politicised. Whereas their elders made an effort to assimilate, young people consciously stress their otherness in public through strict Islamic clothing. If every third British Muslim in the survey is in favour of *sharia* law and the punishment of apostasy with death, then this is a dramatic finding — especially in a country like Great Britain, which traditionally has dealt with questions of national identity in an emphatically casual way. The country had got into the habit of simply assuming that "Britishness" was attractive. Now, however, it is faced with a growing group within the population that is turning away both from the lifestyle of their parents and the mainstream and its norms.

The affirmation of Islamic identity, in the sense in which it is understood by young people, is an act of dissidence in religious garb. The emotional core of this new politics of Islamic identity is, as can be seen in the surveys of public opinion, a cultural critique of decadent western society. In the language of cultural relativism, it lays claim to the "right to cultural difference". Once this right has been won, the moral absolutism of a superior culture, whose essence ought supposedly to have a rehabilitative effect on the West, asserts itself. The belief that the corrupt and compromised West has no values worth defending is the lowest common denominator of the statements that the British researchers heard from young Muslims.

There are indications that a representative study in Germany (why hasn't one been undertaken yet?) would yield similar results. This is suggested by recent interviews with a group of women who wear headscarves conducted by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation. The women, like the British Muslims, displayed considerable remoteness from Germany. Only a few even had contact to non-Muslims. The higher the level of education, the weaker the ties to Germany, and the stronger the conviction that Islam is superior to Christianity and that "people of different beliefs are not equal before God". The women saw their Islamic identity as a sign of their moral superiority over their non-Islamic environment — and the more educated they were, the stronger they believed this. Moreover, the higher the school qualifications, the more often they supported a theocracy.

The findings of the study *Das Kopftuch — Entschleierung eines Symbols?* [The headscarf — the unveiling of a symbol?] were studiously played down. They did not fit the picture that commentators wanted to see. The women were portrayed as the victims of a prejudiced society; according to the authors, they justifiably felt themselves to be "rejected from and discriminated against by German society". Hence, they understandably had little interest in German citizenship. German society, it was argued, must accept that the women who wear headscarves belong and enable them to receive an "equal stake". A "purely confrontational stance" would achieve nothing.² The media presented the study as an admonition to finally lay off the tiresome question of the headscarf, if only for the sake of peace.

One can see here a good example of the refusal of parts of the western public to take no as an answer. The retreat into a parallel society is, in the end, blamed on the receiving society. It is explained by a social discrimination that quite simply leaves no other choice. According to the logic, if the women turn away from society, then this can only mean that they were driven to do so. The

possibility that they consciously rejected integration in favour of "cultural difference" is simply excluded. The politically correct paternalism of the study is symptomatic of the debate on integration: an act of self-exclusion is, in the end, reinterpreted as the fault of the majority society.

It is dangerous to understand the Muslim critique of the West by simply pigeonholing them as victims, since this deprives Muslims of the right to form their own opinions. Such an understanding is basically narcissistic: it always interprets the problem of integration in terms of failures of the majority and refuses to take seriously Muslims' criticism of the West or their desire to be different. The heated debate on banning the headscarf has given rise to a false set of alternatives: whoever is against prohibition must accept the headscarf as harmless, while whoever sees the headscarf as a problematic signal must be in favour of banning it. However, it is quite possible to be against the prohibition of the headscarf on the basis of liberal principles without ignoring or extenuating the illiberal position underlying the neo-Islamic politics of identity.

The headscarf is just one element, albeit an especially important one, of Islamic symbolic politics. An extensive everyday culture is developing with Islamic pop music, Islamic TV-muftis, fashionable *jilbabs* (frock with trousers), *niqabs* (the veil), and "burkinis" (a swimming suit for the whole body including headdress). One can find on the right websites forms to download in order to apply for exemption from sex education lessons and school trips. Shops adhering to the rules of Islam are identified by *halal* certificates. Internet *fatwas* from online sheikhs offer direction to the diaspora. Put simply, in all areas of life cultural differences are being marked out anew. Within the group, the right to difference very quickly becomes an obligation: scholars offer their expertise on how Muslims should separate themselves off from the unbelieving majority in the most minute of everyday matters.

On the popular website *Islamonline*, famous sheikhs from the Arab world and the diaspora offer fatwa-chat for all situations. Can a Muslim make an April Fool of somebody as a joke? No: Imitation of the West. Can a schoolchild contact a Christian girl by e-mail in order to convert her to Islam? No: It could lead to prohibited contact. Can I as a Muslim eat synthetic bacon that is only made from *halal* ingredients? No: It might give you a taste for real bacon. Can a girl give a present to her sweetheart on Valentine's Day? No: Imitation of the West. Can I use a lipstick which contains alcohol? Double no. Can a Muslim taxi driver drop off his customers in front of a bar or casino? Only when he would otherwise lose his job. Can a Muslim celebrate mothers' day? No: Imitation of the West.

A full-blown fatwa-industry is dedicated to the Islamicisation of the modern. The most intimate things are defined. All of life is neatly divided into what is permitted and what is not. There's always an episode from the life of the prophet from which a solution can be derived. There are no questions left open; every ambiguity is thoroughly disposed of. Those who submit themselves to the rigid regime of the sheikhs are rewarded with the good feeling of having clearly set themselves apart from the corrupt world of the infidel.

Those who refuse to send their daughters on school trips, to sex education lessons, or to co-educational swimming lessons are making a stand against the moral abjection of these activities. Internally, the headscarf can be a symbol of orthodoxy; externally it is the practical expression of the cultural critique of the

West and its lax customs. That's also why it provokes such hostility in our debates. The headscarf not only suppresses women and girls: the sexualisation of all contact between the sexes via the headscarf is also insulting to men. By turning girls and women into sex objects, the veil also intrudes on the privacy of the man. The veil accuses the male gaze of uncontrollable desire. While there's no doubt that racism and xenophobia exist in our society, it's foolish to dismiss the anger that accompanies the symbolic quarrels over Islamic self-segregation as "Islamophobia". The reservations of the non-Muslim majority towards these practices can be understood as a sign that the Islamic critique of decadence has been understood and its moral presumption rejected.

Western intellectuals are highly receptive to Muslim cultural critique since it often closely coincides with the western tradition of self-critique. The *Persian Letters* model can become a trap. Timothy Garton Ash commented on the alienation of British Muslims in *The Guardian* (10 August 2006) thus:

Another possible reason is that Britain now has one of the most libertine societies in Europe. Particularly among younger Brits in urban areas, which is where most British Muslims live, we drink more alcohol faster, sleep around more, live less in long-lasting, two-parent families, and worship less, than almost anyone in the world. It's clear from what young British Muslims themselves say that part of their reaction is against this kind of secular, hedonistic, anomic lifestyle. If women are reduced to sex objects, young Muslim women say, I would rather cover up. There is almost a kind of conservative feminism. Certainly, it's a socially conservative critique of some aspects of British society, particularly visible in their generation [...] The idea that these young British Muslims might actually be putting their fingers on some things that are wrong with our modern, progressive, liberal, secular society; the idea that rational persons might freely choose to live in a different, outwardly more restricted way; these hardly feature in everyday progressive discourse. But they should.

It is breathtaking how here "progressive discourse", anomie, binge drinking, liberalism, sexism, and hedonism are blended together into an equation of self-deception. The question often asked after 9/11 — why do they hate us? — would thus finally be answered: because we are worthy of hate. When it gets busy below the waistline, resistance grows beneath the headscarf. The veil is a bulwark against Western sexism. In the tone of liberal self-critique, Timothy Garton Ash takes up the arguments of the Islamists. The propaganda that the Ayatollah Khomeini used to justify the introduction of the headscarf in Iran following the revolution has found its way to Oxford.

Chahdorrt Djavann, an author with Iranian roots, experienced at first hand the blueprint for the "feminist" justification of the headscarf in post-revolutionary Iran. In her furious treatise *What does Allah think of Europe?* she remembers post-revolutionary Iran: "'Muslim women', it was said, could only develop and emancipate themselves thanks to the Islamic laws which protected them from Western decadence. Muslim women rediscovered their self-respect, their propriety, their belief, their honour, their identity, and their willpower in that they made Islamic values their own and rejected the model of emancipation that had led to the decadence of Western women. In Western societies, women were reduced to commodities through adverts and pornography [...] Our veil protected us; it confirmed our Muslim identity, our Islamic belief." The Shah

had been defeated, but the struggle for moral renewal went on — in the Islamic world, as in the West.

Writing in *The Guardian* at the beginning of 2007, the Pakistani–British author Sarfraz Manzoor called for an inversion of the debate on integration: at a time when the country was "wondering how to respond to a culture of rampant disrespect, it is worth considering whether [people] could learn from Muslim values. Muslim children are more likely to be brought up in two–parent families rather than the single–parent households that are increasingly common in Britain". Manzoor is a young secular intellectual who loves the pop culture that Islamists see as a symbol of western decay. Nevertheless, he plays into the hands of their identity politics when he speaks of "Muslim values". British society, he urges, should integrate itself into this sphere of values rather than vice versa. The "home–grown terrorists" of 7 July 2005 "were so integrated into white society that they emulated its worst characteristics. Integration did not save them, it created them". This is an elegant kind of loss adjustment, in which Islamist terrorism is described as a consequence of the decadence of the West. From this perspective, terrorism is a desperate form of cultural critique.

Cultural theorist Christina von Braun has described the importance of the headscarf in the same way. In a comprehensive study, she offsets the veiling of women in Islam against the exposure of women in the West. The interpretation of the veil and headscarf as a "symbol of patriarchal subjugation and 'Islamic fundamentalism'" simply serves to mask Western violence against women, she argues. "If we speak so often of the oppression of women in Islam and the male violence inflicted upon them, then this also seems to have the function of distracting from the potential for violence against women in the West." According to von Braun, the violence "to which the West believes veiled Muslims are subjected is paralleled by the violence of the West's voyeuristic gaze. And the violence of the circumcision of the clitoris, which in the West is rightly seen as a violation of human rights, is paralleled in Western cosmetic surgery and the self–harm that young women (and increasingly men) inflict upon their bodies".³ The latter is, of course, much worse, a more subtle form of violence in that women inflict it upon themselves. Honest, old–fashioned repression in the East is contrasted to the insidious poisoning of western women with false images of themselves.

Whereas the East has the veil, goes the theory, the West has sex tourism: "Although it is true that prostitution also exists there, countries like Iran, Libya, Algeria or even tourist–friendly Egypt are not on the western sex tourists' map. The one–sided indignation about Islamic forced marriages may be a result of this refusal to take part in the trade." We see forced marriages as scandalous because the chaste Orient denies entry to Western sex tourists? This has to be the most bizarre projection of gender theory's deep–rooted hate of men onto the debate on Islam to date. The pattern of Islamist propaganda — Islamic propriety against Western depravity — is used by cultural theory as a means of interpreting the cultural conflict around the veil. For Christina von Braun, the veil is a form of resistance against the voyeuristic gaze with which the West penetrates the East and seeks to deflower its innocence. It wants to rob the East of its differences because capitalism strives to drag everything into its system of exploitation: the tearing of the *hijab* from the woman is a symbol of the colonial land grab.

This is a paraphrase of Franz Fanon, the ideologue of liberating, anti–colonial violence. Fanon wrote that the removal of the veil "opens up to the colonialists

a horizon that had been closed and bit by bit shows them bare Algerian flesh". In this way, "every exposed face" in turn increases the aggression of the occupiers. According to Fanon, each discarded veil "expresses in a negative way that Algeria is beginning to deny itself, that it accepts rape by the colonialists". A remarkably misogynistic argument: a woman who removes her veil offers herself up to be raped. The postcolonial thinker Fanon formulated the idea and the Islamists adopted it. Originally this argument referred to Algeria under French occupation. Today, it is also employed by preachers in the West.

In August 2006, the Australian Grand Mufti Taj Al-Din al-Hillali spoke of the woman's obligation to cover up: "Uncovered flesh" attracts the cats, said the mufti. "If you take out uncovered meat and place it outside on the street, or in the garden or in the park, or in the backyard without a cover, and the cats come and eat it [...] whose fault is it, the cats' or the uncovered meat's?" The *de facto* permission granted by an influential preacher to rape women without a headscarf provoked worldwide indignation.

Of course, the gender theorist von Braun doesn't see herself following the same line argument as the mufti. Nevertheless, she does do so if, like Fanon, she glorifies the veil as a symbol of anti-colonial resistance and defence against sexism. Intellectual self-hate is glaringly evident in both cases: for Fanon, the western tradition of Enlightenment, to which he owed his education, became an object of hate. He equated it to colonialism. Accordingly, de-colonisation had to mean the violent obliteration of the European. This wasn't only a metaphor. Sartre summarised well the murderous consequences of Fanon's thought, saying that to shoot a European meant to "kill two birds with one stone, to destroy the subjugator and the subjugated at the same time. Only a dead man and a free man remain." In the same vein as Fanon's attack on the Enlightenment, Christina von Braun denounces feminism as advancing the cause of the white man, the enforcement of a western lifestyle, and thus cultural colonialism: "What is most problematic", she said recently in an interview, "is that a certain western form of feminism sets itself up and says: you only need to become like us, and then you will be happy."

According to von Braun, feminism is used as a pretext for forcing the oriental woman to accept the law of the market. Sayyid Qutb exposed the happiness promised by the emancipation of women as an invitation to corruption long before Christina von Braun. In his most famous work, *Social Justice in Islam*, Qutb described the advance of women in Western societies as "a form of slavery and exploitation". Ultimately, the employment of women serves the "exploitation of the customers' sexual urges". When women get on in business, government, and the media, it is because they exploit their attractiveness. And we know, suggests Qutb with a knowing wink to the gentlemen, "what they must give in order to be successful". Even "when they don't have to give anything — which is unlikely — we know the hungry desire and greedy looks that threaten to devour their bodies".⁴ The founder of modern Islamism ogles the Western public sphere and the ever-increasing self-assurance of the women active within it with a pornographic gaze. For this gaze, an office or shop in which male and female employees work together can only be understood as a kind of brothel. As such, it is the occidental inversion of the oriental harem fantasy.

Nevertheless, an increasing number of objections are being raised against this fateful alliance between our home-grown cultural criticism and the Islamic critique of decadence. More and more voices are being heard that oppose this

game. One is the journalist Akbar Ganji, a former bodyguard of Ayatollah Khomeini, who for years has been persecuted and harassed in Iran because he dared to question the moral pretensions of the Islamists. Which society is more moral, asks Ganji, Islamic society, which regulates and segregates women, or the Western one, which gives them freedom? "Why could girls and women use public transport without any problems before the revolution? Why, after the revolution, do they have such problems that even forced gender segregation on busses can't protect them any longer? Women don't want to be seen as sex objects, but that's what the Islamic Republic has reduced them to. Everywhere, women are the target of hungry eyes."

Qutb's image of the degenerate West, which, as can be seen from the aforementioned opinion surveys, is capable of winning the support of the majority of Muslims, has recently been challenged by a whole series of authors who themselves have so-called immigrant backgrounds. The German Green Party MP Ekin Deligöz is one of them. In 2006, she urged Muslims to "Take off the headscarf! Arrive in the present." Likewise, the Islam scholar Necla Kelek, writing in *die tageszeitung*, has appealed to Muslims "to learn to love individual freedom".

Or Emel Algan, the daughter of the founder of the Islamic organisation Milli Görüs and former activist herself. She revealed publicly how she abandoned Islamism together with its symbol, the headscarf: "It wasn't easy to remove the headscarf, which had already become something natural, because through it I had developed a self-image bound up with moral values. I needed two years of research and experimentation before I could part from it, because I'm someone who doesn't do things by halves. My life without the headscarf isn't better exactly, because it was always good, but it's become different, more exciting and varied." (*die Welt*, 23 April 2007)

These critical Muslim women in the West know to value freedom — Even when freedom causes them unhappiness. In France, an initiative has been set up to encourage women and girls in the poor urban areas not to allow themselves to be treated as "whores or servants". Wafa Sultan, a Syrian living in America, says that it's misleading to speak of a clash of civilisations: "It is a clash between freedom and subjugation, between democracy and dictatorship. It is a clash between human rights and their violation. It is a clash between those who treat women as animals and those who treat them as human beings." The Egyptian journalist Mona Elthawy believes that 9/11 was "good for Muslims" because now they also have to ask themselves why the Islamists hate the West: "Whenever I heard a television presenter put this question", says Elthawy, "I shout out: 'they hate me too!'"

Of all these courageous women, the most hated is Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Dutch woman originally from Somalia who now lives in the US. In her biography, Hirsi Ali has described the experience of removing the headscarf. She received a very strict upbringing and for a time in Africa had been close to the Muslim Brotherhood. Following her arrival in Holland, she was challenged by Ethiopian Christian friends to remove her headscarf. After hesitating for a long time, she dared to do this one morning: "Absolutely nothing happened. The gardeners continued to cut the hedges. No one had a heart attack. Well, these men were Dutch, and therefore perhaps not real men. I walked past Ethiopians and men from Zaire, but no one took any notice of me. So I went to the Bosnians. No one looked at me. All truth be told, I attracted less attention than when I had covered my hair. Not a single man flipped out."⁵ Ayaan Hirsi Ali's initiation in Holland is an apt counterpart to the scene described by Sayyid

Qutb. The beautiful young women is a little disappointed that not even the Islamised Bosnians go mad when she shows her hair. Then, however, she learns to value it: "With the breeze blowing through my hair, I somehow felt bigger".

She hasn't been able to walk around freely for a long time now. Ayaan Hirsi Ali lives — like many of the above — under police protection. Only when Muslims learn to see this situation as a symptom of the decadence of their faith will things improve.

¹ www.policyexchange.org.uk/publications.aspx?id=307

² www.kas.de/publikationen/2006/9095_dokument.html

³ Christina von Braun, *Verschleierte Wirklichkeit. Die Frau, der Islam und der Western* [Veiled reality. Woman, Islam, and the West Berlin 2007.

⁴ Sayyid Qutb, *Social Justice in Islam*, Oneonta 2000.

⁵ Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Infidel*, New York 2007.

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