Islam and We

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Islam and We

After 9/11, a lot of books were published about Islam with the intention to explain to highly uninformed readers what is going on in the world of Islam. I have read some of these books. Most of them are trying to conceptualize a more proper image of this second-largest world religion than the reports about terrorists killing in the name of Allah would do. They are stressing that radical Islamic Fundamentalism, with its hatred of Western civilisation, is just the matter of small minority groups within the widely diversified religious concepts of the Islamic world. Nevertheless, these groups exist. And it is not just one clique of Talibans; it is a loosely connected network of groups spread over many countries.

Last week, David Rieff wrote in an article in the *New York Times Magazine*: “The conflict with jihadism is a contest between modernity and antimodernity, and, as we are discovering to our cost, obscurantism has a far larger constituency and a far more powerful hold on the popular imagination, certainly in the Islamic world, than most people imagined a generation ago.”

Is that right? Is it really a question of modernity versus antimodernity and, as the author seems to assume, at the same time a question of Christian enlightenment versus Islamic obscurantism? When does modernity start? Was the National Socialism, with its intention to erase whole populations and cultures from the planet, already modernity or was it still obscurantism? If religion is to blame for terrorism against civilians, why only Islam? Instead of providing a satisfactory answer to this bundle of questions, I invite you for a short walk through European history.

I grew up in Austria, a Roman Catholic country, which in the sixteenth century, after Martin Luther’s Reformation, in most of its parts became a Protestant country. In a war, which lasted thirty years, the Austrians were forced to become Catholics again. According to the chronicle of our local church, in the village where I grew up there was only one survivor of this war, who hid under the bridge that crosses the village river. All the Reformed inhabitants of our village were killed by the multinational allied army of the Roman Catholic Counterreformation. The village was destroyed and emptied. Then new people came in, Catholics, most of them refugees from Bavaria who managed to escape the advance of the allied Protestant armies. Among them were my ancestors, who bought the remains of one of the destroyed farmhouses. When my brother married a Protestant woman fifteen years ago, she and her son became the first non-Catholics to inhabit the village in the past four hundred years.

I tell you that story just to remind you that the history of religion is a history of killing and destruction. Some people wonder how a suicide bomber can commit his crime in the name of Allah. How can a terrorist pretend to be a deeply devoted religious person and show no mercy to innocent people at the same time? Some of the perpetrators of 9/11 came over from Germany. And there they were members of an Islamic centre in Hamburg. Is there a specific inclination to violence in Islam which other religions don’t have? I don’t think so, although there may be differences between the religions. But the archetype of merciless destruction, the role model of ruthless killing, the paradigm of unscrupulous murdering you will not find in the Islamic world, you will find it in the Christian world.
Sure there was total and merciless destruction before. Remember what the Romans did with Carthage. They just erased it from the surface of earth and later built their own city. The few persons left were sold as slaves. Remember what, according to Homer, the Greeks did with Troy? They just wiped it out.

Why did the Romans and Greeks do that? They did not do it on behalf of a religion. They did not declare it a holy war. The Romans did it for the sake of their empire, because Carthage was the wealthiest city in the Mediterranean. And the Greeks, as legend has it, did it in order to recapture Helena, the most beautiful woman on earth.

In the saga of the Trojan War there is a particular episode which always broke my heart: The war is finally over. All the Trojan heroes are dead. All the houses and palaces of the city of Troy are burned down, their inhabitants assassinated. There are only a few exceptions. King Priamos is still alive and also his son Polites who lives in the Greek camp as the special darling of King Menelaeus from Sparta. Menelaeus loves this kid; he wants him to stay alive. But Odysseus, known as the smart guy of the company, says: We have to kill him! This boy is an eyewitness for everything we have done. This boy has seen all our cruelty, all our mercilessness against the people of Troy. If we don’t kill him, the moment he is grown up he will build up an army for revenge. There is no choice for him to do something else. In order to avert further killings we have to kill this boy. And so they did it in front of the eyes of his father, and then they killed the father.

Was there any religion involved? No. There were Gods on this side and Gods on that side, but none of them is to blame for the order to assassinate an innocent little boy. This mythological episode tells us something else. It shows how the logic of war ruins the mind of everyone who is involved. If you go to war you create a culture of war and a special logic of war which you can’t overcome for a very long time.

Let me go back to religion. The first holy war, the first war with the intention to erase the enemy in the name of God, took place on the Christian side. And, call it a coincidence or not, it was launched against the world of Islam.

You probably know the city of Amiens in France, which has the most beautiful Gothic cathedral. One hundred years before this cathedral was built there lived a hermit and quite successful preacher, Peter of Amiens, also known as Peter the Hermit. After Pope Urban II in 1095 appealed for the Holy Crusade in order to liberate the Holy City from its Islamic inhabitants, Peter the Hermit began a tour of France and Germany, preaching the merits of crusade as he went. But Peter’s speeches appealed not to trained knights, who usually followed their princes and kings on crusade, but to laborers, tradesmen and peasants. It was these untrained and disorganized folk who followed Peter the Hermit most eagerly to Constantinople in what became known as "The Crusade of the Poor People." They departed half a year before the official crusade began. You know what they did? Since there were no Muslims in Central Europe in those days, they started in Germany, killing all the Jewish people they could get hold of. And why did they do it? What was their remuneration? The Pope and Peter the Hermit granted them forgiveness of all their sins and redemption in paradise. Doesn’t that sound familiar?

The Crusade of the Poor People never arrived in Jerusalem. These poorly armed crusaders in the name of God were annihilated in fights with the Turks. But half a year later, the official Crusade began and that one reached the Holy Land. After four weeks of
occupation, they attacked the city of Jerusalem and perpetrated a huge massacre. Their intention was to clean the holy site with as much unchristian blood as possible. Here we have an unprecedented killing of civilians, of men, women and children. If we speak about massacres in the name of God, the First Crusade was the mother of it all. It frightens me to the bone when I hear that the war against Iraq is viewed as a crusade. If you start killing in the name of God, then there is no ending, since there are obviously several Gods around in this world and it is very unlikely that you will ever get the job done completely.

I was educated as a choir boy in a monastery. Our teachers, most of them monks, did not bother us with stories like that. The cloister belonged to the order of the Cistercians. The monastery was founded in 1137 by Bernhard of Clairvaux, a French monk who was very successful in expanding the order of the Cistercians and who later was canonized. On the twentieth of August, which is the saint’s day of Saint Bernhard, we had to interrupt our school vacation and come back to the monastery in order to solemnize a special celebration with songs from Mozart, Schubert, Haydn and the Gregorian Choral, of course. I liked this worship of the founder of our monastery a lot. After the mass we were invited into the convent, the inner part of the monastery which was closed to women. There we got excellent food and wine and were even allowed to smoke cigarettes. Imagine, I was ten years old. Saint Bernhard was a good fellow for us.

No one ever spoke to us about the fact that Bernhard of Clairvaux appealed for the Second Crusade. And he was quite successful. He stirred up the mood and provoked enthusiasm in France, in Flanders and in Germany. Some years later, yet another fact that never was told to us by our religious teachers, he founded the order of the Templars, who were in charge of safeguarding the pilgrimage to Jerusalem. And they developed their special military strategies and techniques to get the job done, as our military nowadays would say. Every paramilitary organization from Columbia to the West Sahara knows for a job like this you need money. Therefore, they developed a high profile banking system which soon became a major resource for the private businesses of European dynasties. Later, when the times of the crusades were gone, they fell out of favor with the Roman Catholic Church. Suddenly they turned out to be terrorists. The Holy Inquisition was in charge of their prosecution. And you know what happened? Most of them were killed, including their last grand master, Jacques de Molay.

Why do I tell you that? Because I have to insist that we, the Christians, invented the holy war. Although I no longer consider myself a religious person, I am deeply rooted in Catholic tradition and in Catholic culture.

At last I want to tell you another personal story. My first encounter with Islam happened, without knowing it, when I was seven years old and had just learned how to read. One of the first books I read had the title Hatschi Bratschis Luftballon, which is: The Balloon of Hatschi Bratschi. It’s the story of a cruel man in oriental clothing who is flying in a balloon over the countryside in order to kidnap children. He picks them up and they will never come back.

Who is Hatschi Bratschi? Well, the name sounds a little bit Arab, doesn’t it? It reminds you of the Hajj, the journey to Mecca that every Muslim should do once in his or her lifetime. That is a hint, but it is not the whole story. The author of the book, Franz Karl
Ginzkey, used to be an officer in the Austrian Hungarian Marine. So highly decorated with prizes and medals the author in his lifetime was, so forgotten is he nowadays. But in my childhood this author still was a big shot and his children's books were very popular. How the hell did he come to this story of an oriental kidnapper?

In the sixteenth century the Islamic Ottoman Empire was extremely successful. For the Islamic world it was the beginning of the end of the Mameluke Period. The Ottomans took over Iran, East Anatolia, Syria and Egypt. Not enough that they had already the whole Mediterranean under control, they continued their expansion to Central Europe and took over Iraq, the Balkans and Hungary and suddenly, in 1529, they besieged Vienna. The Austrian army with some good luck managed to fight them back, but 150 years later, in 1683, they besieged Vienna again. This time it was only with the help of a Polish, Bavarian and Saxonian army that Austria could succeed.

The Ottoman Empire had an elite troop called the Janissaries. This highly disciplined army of the Janissaries first was made up of prisoners of war and later of kidnapped children from the conquered Christian territories. When this elite troop was founded in the fourteenth century it was blessed by the Islamic mystic Haci Bektas Veli, who remained some kind of a spiritual leader of the Janissaries. He was the founder of the Bektasi Order of dervishes and one of the first Islamic scholars who wrote in Turkish instead of Arabic. The city, where he is buried, later was named after him, Hacibektas. It is still a “holy” place in Turkey.

Let me finish my paper with four quotations from Haci Bektas Veli:

A nation where there is no equality for women cannot progress.
Honored are those casting light to the fountain of thought.
Blame no nations and humans.
Do not forget that ever your enemy is a human being.

The Janissaries were abolished in 1826 after they revolted against the Sultan. One hundred fifty years later, little Josef gets to read as his first book the story of a Muslim who kidnaps children. And in this book, Hatschi Bratschis Luftballon, an Islamic mystic, Haci Bektas Veli, who was addressing the importance of equality of men and women, turns out to be the eponym for an Islamic terrorist.