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Werner Schiffauer

“ DEMOCRATIC CULTURE AND EXTREMIST ISLAM”

WERNER SCHIFFAUER

DEMOCRATIC CULTURE AND EXTREMIST ISLAM

When the Caliphate State of Metin Kaplan was banned on 5th December 2001 **1)**, one of his supporters said on camera: “If one is a Muslim, one is not a democrat. If one is a democrat, one is not a Muslim.” Democracy is condemned by these believers in a very literal sense. The supporters of the Caliphate State regard democracy as the embodiment of the rule of polytheism. This is equated with the rule of evil as such: Consequently some members of the community went so far as to see in democracy the *deccal* himself, the Antichrist, who also appears in the final battle between good and evil of Islamic eschatology.

Now one might think, that is all that needs to be said on the subject of democratic culture and extremist Islam. I believe, however, that this subject is more complex than the explicit statements might lead one to suppose. My argument is this: The internal logic of the fundamentalist gesture itself gives rises to developments which call it into question and - under favourable circumstances - can transcend it from within. In order to elaborate this thesis I would like to examine the radical critique of democracy in the Kaplan community **2)** and clarify what conceptions of individual and society it is based on.

The discontent with democracy

My interlocutors in the Kaplan community were imbued with a vision of unity. “Once one has understood, that ultimately everything is one, then one has understood Islam.” The idea of a *single*, all-encompassing God is combined with the idea of a *single* undivided community. It finds ritual expression in the so-called five pillars of Islam: In the confessional formula (“I testify, that there is no God but Allah, and I testify, that Mohammed is God’s messenger”), no less than in the ritual prayer, through which at five fixed times of the day Moslems form a circle spanning the world and oriented to the spiritual centre of

Mecca, or in the requirement to be charitable, which is linked to an admonitory formula: Only by way of the commitment to God can man act responsibly in the world; only by fulfilling his earthly duty can he do justice to God. The requirement to fast and the pilgrimage to Mecca are based on the same idea.

This unity is not an unstructured one. The ideal of the inner structure can be exemplified by the star motif of Islamic art. The illustration reproduced here shows an inlay work on a 16th century Koran folding lectern.



Evident at first sight is the way the elements interlock. Each element breaks down into smaller elements. These smaller elements, however, combine to make up new totalities. It is a picture puzzle, in which the parts can be constantly rearranged. Depending on the shape which has just emerged, an individual element may now be found inside and now outside. Something else is noteworthy. The border cuts through the pattern arbitrarily; there is, therefore, something capricious about the framed section. The game could be continued to

infinity. This unity is not closed, but open. It is an integrated totality, whose individual elements balance one another and are in harmony.

This star motif always seemed to me like a visual rendering of the social and political vision of my interlocutors. The societal units interlock. Each unit - family, kinship group, professional group, community, neighbourhood, enterprise - is related to the whole just like one of the larger or smaller elements of the star motif to the pattern as a whole. They form, as one would say today, a network. The peace of society depends on the balance of the elements. Attention to boundaries plays a special role in the preservation of the balance. The ideal is not to supersede, to dissolve boundaries, but to deal wisely with them. Boundaries must never be absolute, precisely because this would make the interlocking and internal interpenetration impossible. Their consolidation threatens the peace of society. No less threatening, however, is the dissolution of boundaries. This is associated with *fitne*, chaos, disorder, *tohu bohu*. In everyday life this culture of the boundary is expressed by a refined and elaborated ritualism: The sphere of the other is observed and respected.

The idea of *jihad* is inscribed in this vision. *Jihad* means “unceasing endeavour” - and only one meaning of *jihad* should be translated as “holy war”. Ultimately *jihad* is directed at forces which want to disturb the balance of the social order. At the level of the individual *jihad* means the battle against the *nefis*, desire, which does not accept the boundaries and calls them into question: here, therefore, *jihad* means work on the self. At the level of society it is the will to power, the will to exploitation and expansion which does not heed boundaries and thereby calls the balance (and ultimately the beautiful order) into question. In this case there is a requirement of active resistance - if need be the Muslim is called upon to take up arms. The Christian idea of a principled profession of non-violence, was always very alien to my interlocutors. They emphasised, however, that the use of force was only legitimate as defence. Both the resistance to the *nefis*, that is, desires, egoism, as well as the resistance to usurpation, that is attack, colonialism appeared to them to be prescribed by reason. They emphasised the earthly responsibility for the maintenance of the beautiful and rational order.

This Islamic vision of a network society forms the background to their critique of parliamentary democracy. Their arguments may be summed up as saying, that parliamentary democracy is based on a culture of conflict: The formation of opinion takes place in corporately constituted groups, the parties, which form opinion internally and then enter into debate with one another. They are exclusive, to a certain extent autonomous and can exist

independently. They constitute distinct identities. In such bodies the relationship of inside and outside is fundamentally different from that in the Islamic vision of the network.

Basically the democratic culture of conflict assumes the sceptical idea of duality as the foundation of anthropological constitutedness as against the optimistic idea of unity. Since no one owns the truth, regulated forms of dispute must be established. Islamicist dissatisfaction with this construction is based on the observation, that in such an order the search for reasonable solutions is exposed to powerfully distorting forces: Is it not often the case that debates are staged merely for the sake of appearances? That conflicts are started, merely for the sake of a fight? That the principal concern is the maintenance of power rather than the issue itself? In short, party democracy means discord, strife and sham conflicts.

The dream of a scholars' republic was evoked as an alternative. Conflicts that arose were to be solved by reference to the Koran, by obtaining a legal report, a fetwa. The weight of such a report is substantially dependent on the personal authority of the issuer. Thus, unlike a court judgement, the legal opinion given is only binding on someone who acknowledges this authority. But personal authority develops out of the free play of forces. As in our own university landscape more important voices become distinguished from unimportant ones, authoritative from less authoritative voices. Furthermore, every fetwa can be rescinded by better arguments. What political Muslims have in mind, therefore, is a scholars' republic or a legal opinion state.

Thus far the social and political vision. If one now looks at the actual situation in the miniature universe of the Islamicist communities in Germany, a noteworthy contrast between doctrine and reality is immediately apparent. In Germany it was from the start the case that several communities disputed the manner and means of how the social and political vision of Islam could be related to the present and realised in it. Here I am not concerned with the differences, that is, with the fact that political Islam is pluralistically organised and constituted, but with how these differences found expression. It was interesting that there was no open discussion and no openly conducted dispute about the substantial differences. But below the surface no holds were barred. The early years, especially, of the establishment of Islam in Germany, that is, from about 1968-1985, were characterised by splits within mosques and by hostile takeovers of mosque associations by competing organisations. In other words, there were deep divisions in German Islam. This was a problem, above all, for Muslims themselves, who were very well aware of the contrast between reality and beautiful

ideal. They tended to explain this in terms of human weakness and inconsistency. I had the impression, however, that the splitting was precisely a result of the consistency with which they struggled to establish unity.

There is a small everyday observation, which to me encapsulates the problems of the Islamic culture of conflict. In 1988, I and my acquaintances from the Kaplan community called on the Milli Görüş community, from which the Kaplan community had split off five years earlier. We were courteously received as visitors. I was allowed to put my questions, the hodja replied, my acquaintances listened to him politely and agreed with everything with a “*tabii, tabii*” - “but of course, but of course”. To an outsider it would have presented a picture of complete harmony. Yet hardly had we taken our leave and were out on the street again, the mood changed: The hodja’s answers were torn to pieces. The whole thing culminated in the sentence: “Did you hear, how disrespectful he was of the other communities. That is exactly why we left.” I myself was told, that there were questions I really should have asked, in order to show up my opposite number. My companions’ restraint inside the mosque reflects what I explained above on the ideal approach to dealing with boundaries: One is in the other’s space and one listens to him. To contradict him would violate the rules of courtesy, the respect for boundaries. Criticism may only be expressed, once one is outside again. The sociological problem of such an ideal is obvious: An open argument is associated with a rupture, with serious offence. “Divergence of opinion [is] perceived as weakening the group and it [is] better ... to expel the oppositional group and let it go its own way if it is too strong. Dissent is interpreted as trauma, as a kind of terrible situation, because it recalls the violence in Mecca before the triumph of the one,” writes Mernissi (1992, p 142).

My argument can also be backed up historically by a more detailed look at two of the communities. In 1984 Cemaleddin Kaplan broke with Milli Görüş the European offshoot of what was then Necmettin Erbakan’s Welfare Party. At the time Milli Görüş stood for the parliamentary road to theocracy. Kaplan thought this route unrealistic, especially given the experience of the state of emergency in Turkey (1980-1983). If an Islamic party grew strong enough to take power, the army would inevitably intervene. Kaplan saw the cause of this dilemma as an inconsistent application of the ideal of unity. The Islamic vision cannot only be taken seriously as a goal, the political struggle must also be guided by Islamic principles. The party should be replaced by an open movement, which would gather in everyone. The

return to the original ideals would allow the unfortunate split between the communities to be overcome, a strong position to be built up, the government to be taken over in Turkey and ultimately allow the Caliphate to be restored, the office of the leader of all believers, which was abolished by the Turkish revolution. Kaplan failed - even in his attempt to bring together the believers (quite apart from his ultimate goal of taking power). He wanted to overcome the division of Islam, but instead did more to widen it than anyone else. This was because his vision conflicted with the immanent logic of the social. He failed to take account of the inertia of established institutions. Contrary to his expectations, masses of believers did not go over to him. Thus he was presented with a dilemma: A charismatic, open movement must either take off - or it disappears. Facing defeat, Kaplan tried to save his programme, by turning the open, inclusive movement into a sect and increasingly radicalising it: This included the declaration of religious war on Turkey in 1992, the proclamation of a separate state - the Caliphate State - and declaring himself caliph. With each of these steps the borders with the other communities became tighter and harder to surmount. The history of the Kaplan community can be read as exemplary of what happens to a group which attempted to translate the idea of unity into action more consistently and radically than everyone else - and thereby merely deepened the divisions. This was also the view of some within the community. Mehmet G., a supporter from the very beginning, who was imbued with the vision of unity, told me, that he had fought for this ideal all his life - and was now forced to conclude, that he had only contributed to splitting the community yet again (Schiffauer 2000, p 195).

Milli Görüş the party which Kaplan had left, went in the opposite direction - an experience that is of particular importance in the present context. The mother party, the Turkish Welfare Party, underwent a remarkable development in the 1990's **3**). It transformed itself from a party of notables, the main strength of which was in rural Turkey (that is to say in those areas in which the Kemalist revolution only partly prevailed), into a modern party whose main support was in the *gecekondus*, the poor quarters of the contemporary big city. The expansion brought new groups into the party, and this produced two distinct tendencies: On the one hand there was a reform wing, whose principal interest was in social policy (and which as a result was willing to enter quite unprecedented coalitions), and on the other a wing which continued to emphasise the cultural struggle (Kulturkampf) against Kemalism. These two wings now co-existed, and debated their differences at party conferences. This development was to some extent reflected in Europe. Here a first revolutionary “fundi” generation, oriented towards Turkey, was followed by a second “realo” fraction, oriented to

life in Europe 4). Both in Turkey and in Europe the integration of new groups led to a process of pluralisation and the emergence of new forms of dealing with conflict. Conflicts were increasingly carried out by way of discussions and ballots and thus did not immediately lead to splits.

Now it would be an exaggeration to say that the Refah (Welfare) Party (and its successor parties today) had given rise to a democratic culture of conflict. In fact, in terms of practical politics there does not appear to be a very clear relationship between the social and political ideals of democracy and those of Islam. Necmettin Erbakan, for example, stands accused of saying different things to different audiences. This is usually seen as expression of a cunning hypocrisy. I would not want to make any statement on the psyche of Necmettin Erbakan: But one can also see his behaviour as the attempt, in everyday practice, to reconcile an emerging culture of conflict and an Islamic network culture. On the whole, however, it is evident, that the opening to a democratic culture of conflict was marked by success, whereas the radical adherence to the vision of unity led to further splits and hence greater weakness 5).

Such experiences have certainly found expression in theological reflections. If it is true, that a radical and consistent transposition of the socio-political vision into the here and now often produces the opposite of the desired effect, then it may be concluded that the beautiful vision of the society willed by God is best preserved by renouncing the desire of putting it into practice on earth in its entirety: the ideal could not be achieved in the world, precisely because the world is incomplete. Every denial of this state of affairs destroys the ideal itself 6). Renunciation of the transposition does not, however, mean a retreat to the position, that religion is exclusively a private matter. The social and political vision can be retained as a vanishing point, from which the bad reality of the world can be criticised - without clinging to the belief that the order can be realised here in its totality. It is, therefore, possible to derive elements and motifs from the principles of religion, which could be significant in the shaping of civil society. Before I come back to that, I would, however, like to introduce the aspect of the individual and of individuality which is complementary to that of society.

Concepts of the Self and of Individuality

The reflections on the self in the Islamic order are also inscribed in the vision of the network society set out above. Islam emphasises the divinity (and thereby the social nature) of man.

Nefis, as I explained above, is the principle of desire, of egotism also of the autonomy of man, which causes him to forget his divinity and social nature. In Islam, the closely-related idea of finding oneself, can be reduced to the formula, that truly coming to oneself is only possible when one surrenders oneself. This idea can be spelt out in mystical terms or in terms of ethical rules. The mystical idea is more easily accessible to us today, because it links up to experiences familiar to us. In the act of love, which was always the model for the mystical finding of self, one experiences oneself most intensely - and only then - when one forgets oneself, when one disappears into or merges with the other. Surrendering oneself does not, therefore, mean denial of fullness of being - on the contrary. Mysticism transfers this experience, which in the world one can only have for a brief moment with the other, to the absolute Other - that is, God, to whom one gains access by way of one's spiritual leader, the sheikh. One experiences oneself with an unimaginable intensity in merging with God, like a drop in the ocean of the soul or like the moth which flares up in the candle flame and is extinguished 7). "Denn wo die Lieb erwachet, stirbt das Ich der finstere Despot. Du lass ihn sterben in der Nacht und atme frei im Morgenrot" (For where love awakes, dies the self the grim despot. Let him die in the night and breathe free in the rosy dawn), is Friedrich Rückert's translation of lines by Celaleddin Rumi in which this idea is given poetic form (Rückert 1988, vol.II p 13). This idea of finding the self is also expressed in terms of ethical rules. Here it is assumed, that one only truly experiences oneself, if one inscribes the law in oneself. Whereas in mysticism the dialogic concept of "I and thou" is central (and God is experienced by way of the thou), in the ethical variant the I experiences itself in that it merges with the "we" of the community. In everyday life a ritualism of little steps represents a technique for inscribing the law. Another form of the incorporation of the law is learning the Koran by heart. In these practices the word becomes flesh and the flesh becomes word. There is a beautiful translation of this idea in so called pictorial calligraphy, in which a body is formed out of the holy script 7).



The follower of the rules of ethics finds his way to a sense of self in a different way from the mystic. But the fundamental idea is the same. It is evident, that this concept of the self radically contradicts the idea of individuality, of autonomy, of the existentialist view that each human being is under an obligation only to his own law. Such thoughts seem no more than hubris. It is also evident that here there exists a tension with the idea of the individual on which a secular democracy is based.

It was above all in my conversations with older members of the Caliphate State that I met with this conception of the self. They were imbued with it - but at the same time there was a break. These men were migrants from rural Anatolia, who in their childhood had been socialised into the Islam of the village. In this Islamic life-world it is easy to acquire the feeling, that the social order, the biography of an individual and Islam constitute an interlocking unity. These men had no or only rudimentary schooling. When they came to the city, they taught themselves reading and writing - and were seized by a real hunger for reading. Yet this reading consisted mainly of popular religious texts: They read the stories of Mohammed and his companions and books about the caliphs who followed the true path or about the "Terrors of the Grave or What Comes After Death". Their reading opened up a world to these men - it gave them access to a special universe. This went hand in hand with an overestimation of the written text. The printed word seemed to them to have a particular

dignity, superior to that of the spoken word. Someone who has gained access to the truth in this way, tends to overestimate himself. There was a very marked scepticism of the Islam taught in the mosques in Turkey. We know such autodidacts from the history of the Spanish anarchists (Berger et al, 1978 p 62) or also from the Protestant fundamentalists in John Wesley's circle (Valenze 1985). Almost all of them are revolutionaries. When these men came to Germany, they found in Cemaleddin Kaplan someone who formulated what they had always thought or rather felt, but had never been in a position to express: That is, the idea mentioned above, that democracy's culture of conflict is basically unislamic, that one does not get very far with it and ends up making false compromises. It is evidence of the remarkable self-confidence of these men of the first generation, that they also said to me, that they would part company with Kaplan, if they caught him departing from the right way by even one iota - and not a few did precisely that, when Kaplan proclaimed the Caliphate State.

I would like here to point in particular to one aspect - that is, to a tension between the manner and nature of the religious search and the content of the thinking. As far as substance was concerned, the autodidacts professed the idea, that the point is to subordinate oneself absolutely to the law and thereby transcend oneself. But they had arrived at this substance by a very individual route - by way of reading, of criticism, of choosing a teacher. But in doing so, they have already broken with a world in which the validity of these ideas was taken for granted, as it were, and not subject to analysis. These men no longer represented a message self-evidently communicated through ritual, but the consciously appropriated and reflected content of a message. This break would grow larger with the next generation.

The children of these autodidacts had passed through German educational establishments. In my book on the Kaplan community (Schiffauer 2000) I have tried to describe, how they - often via a rebellious phase - found their way to a radical form of Islam. Interestingly they often began to take an interest in the community at a point in time at which their parents were leaving it. The difference between the two generations lies in the relationship which they establish between unity and truth. For the parental generation the idea of unity came first. When Kaplan proclaimed the Caliphate state and had himself raised to Caliph, they left him. They recognised, that he was thereby giving up his original programme of a revived unity of all Muslims: Such an exaggerated claim was not acceptable to other Muslims. They rightly saw this step as taking leave of the ordained network which I talked about earlier. And someone who leaves the community is doing the devil's work. In other words, the first generation sets the idea of unity above that of truth. Or, more precisely, they had, as it were,

a procedural perception of truth. It is always possible to err, there is always someone who has a better knowledge of the never ending tradition and that is why it is important to remain in the community. In that they could appeal to the words of the prophet, that his community would never agree on an error (Goldziher 1910, p 55). The next generation had gone to German schools and universities and appropriated Islam differently - that is, cognitively and with the intellectual tools, which we have provided. These were no longer autodidacts, but young intellectuals approaching Islam within a wider perspective. The essential was separated from the inessential; facts, that had to be known from ones that could simply be looked up - although one had to know where. In other words, a hierarchical, organised, internally structured knowledge took the place of an extensive, networked knowledge. Such knowledge can easily give the younger students in particular, the neophytes, the feeling of possessing an Archimedean point from which the world can be understood - and from which it can be turned upside down. Most people who have attended our educational establishments will recognise this feeling. One can see a pivot and crucial point in the relationship of classes, of genders, of excluded and included - or also in the relationship of Muslims and non-Muslims. Whereas the first generation came to the truth via the idea of unity, the second generation came to unity via the idea of truth. What ultimately would a unity be worth, which is established on the basis of untruth? This generation saw themselves as truly Islamic revolutionaries. Here we see, therefore, a second decisive break in self-referentiality: This generation appropriated truth for itself - and demanded that the rest of the community follow them.

In a way this generation is much closer to us than that of their parents. It is noteworthy and only superficially a contradiction, that this generation was much more dependent on authority than their parents. They admired Kaplan not so much as someone who articulated, what they had always thought, but as someone who offered them a perspective, from which complex and contradictory knowledge suddenly assumed a shape.

One thing, however, was inevitable: Namely, that at some point there would be those who, appealing to scripture, would turn against Kaplan. One such case is relatively well authenticated. In 1987 a group of Islamic revolutionaries came together under the leadership of Hasan Hayr(?). When Kaplan made a political policy shift - he began to distance himself from the Iranian Revolution, which he had at first been enthusiastic about - there was a revolt by fervent Khomeini supporters. That would not in itself be so interesting, if it were not for the form of the dispute: They had read and discussed writings produced by supporters of the

Revolution and on this basis now wanted to force Kaplan to take part in a discussion. He refused and prohibited the reading of these, to him, dubious texts. The community split as a result.

That implies a further step: At some point a third generation must arrive on the scene. The beginnings are already in evidence. If an individualised access to texts is taking place in practice, this will only then not lead to complete isolation if at the same time there is a growth in understanding of the relative nature of interpretations and, therefore, of tolerance. Among sections of formerly Islamicist communities there are now declarations in favour of an Islam, which demands an independent treatment of the sources, thus establishing a capacity for criticism. Voices of this kind are making themselves heard everywhere in the Islamic world.

We are at present witnesses to the paradoxes of every movement which has dedicated itself to a return to the beginnings. It depends on the return to the relationship of individual and society as it was conceived and could also be lived in classical Islam. A critique was derived from the return to origins and a desire for change. At the same time this reception of origins has a radically anti-traditionalist aspect. Tradition appears as rank growth, as disfigurement of the pure, the revealed, the true. It obstructs and conceals the source. It has to be uncompromisingly brushed aside, in order once more to gain access to the original. With that a specific dynamic is set in motion: Imperceptibly the relationship of individual and society is recast: society is now seen differently, that is, as a project. And the individual sees himself as someone who devotes himself to the truth.

The defenders of tradition have always pointed to the dangers inherent in this anti-traditionalist impulse: What hubris to dismiss centuries of exegesis and scholarliness in the name of individual access to the tradition! And what a danger, then, of falling prey to demagogues, who in the name of origins reject the legitimate, societally anchored and integrated interpretation **8**). At the same time we recognise in such a movement the actual origin of our modern democracy. The individual makes a new approach to the traditions and derives from that a critique of society, he calls it into question and rethinks it. Of necessity this often has totalitarian - and sometimes terrible - consequences. Simultaneously, and this is what I wanted to show here, the internal dynamic, the contradictions to which this movement back to the source gives rise, contain an awareness and an admission of relativity. The individually acknowledged truths must be addressed in a new context.

All this involves processes, processes which encompass relapses, which under certain circumstances can lead to barbarism, which can produce catastrophes. I am nevertheless optimistic, that something new will emerge from this ferment. My hope is based on the history of fundamentalism as a whole. Islamic fundamentalism could develop in a similar way to Protestant fundamentalism. Over the generations it would lose its inflexible, rigorous character - and only through this loss gain the power to shape the world. This point is reached when a religion articulates itself in earthly discourse as philosophy, ie when it articulates arguments without reference to religion. I need only call to mind that Adorno (especially the late Adorno), Benjamin, Horkheimer, Derrida, to say nothing of Buber and Levinas are Jewish thinkers through and through - and that their philosophies derive their force from the secularised reformulation of originally religious contents. I can imagine, that Islamic philosophers today could use the strength of Islam in order to introduce us to a philosophy of network society, to a wise treatment of boundaries and to a rethinking of the social nature of the individual.

Footnotes

1 The Caliphate State is the most radical group of political Islam in Germany. Its goal was and is the establishment of an Islamic republic in Turkey and the revival of the Caliphate. I followed developments in this community from 1986-1995. The results were published under the title “Die Gottesmänner. Türkische Islamisten in Deutschland” (Frankfurt/Main, 2000).

2 Kaplan developed his doctrine under the influence of his reading of the pioneering Islamicist thinkers Al-Maududi and Sayyid Qutb. The reflections addressed in this paper can also be applied to other Islamicist circles.

3 Good accounts of these developments can be found in Seufert (1997) and Dufner (1998).

4 The terms “realo” and “fundi” are taken from debates in the German Green Party [trans.]

5 See on this also Amr Hamzawy’s (2000) summary of post-Islamicist debates in Egypt (p 293).

6 The most intensive debate is taking place in Iran, that is, against the background of disillusion with the Islamic Republic. Abdolkarim Soroush, for example, “has drawn the conclusion from the experience of 22 years of really existing Islamism, that religion and state must be separated: ‘Free societies, whether religious or areligious, are at once godly and human. In totalitarian societies, however, neither humanity nor godliness remains.’” (Amirpur, 2001). See also Hamzawy (2000) for the parallels in Egypt.

7 The pictures are taken from the work of Fariduddin Attar. On Attar see Ritter (1978).

8 See Carl Schmitt’s (1922) discussion of the Staatsphilosophie der Gegenrevolution (State philosophy of counter revolution)

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