

## Where is Islam going?: responses to Werner Schiffauer

By Deniz Kandiyoti,

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**Deniz Kandiyoti:** We have just listened to a wonderfully nuanced, multi-layered account of a close inspection of a particular Islamic community in Germany.

What I heard Werner Schiffauer say is that first we have to understand the internal logic of the believers in these groups. You have told us that you feel that their radical critique of democracy was based on a fundamentally different notion of society, which you called 'the network society'. This contrasts with the conflictual formation of a liberal democracy as we know it. You linked this also to ideas of self which stand in a relationship of radical alterity to the ideas of individual autonomy that we see in the West.

So here we have a model of a radically different cultural formation, which is incommensurable in many ways with what, broadly speaking, we call 'the West' - with its democracy, enlightenment, and individualism.

Now, of course, this is an argument that is made not only by Islamic fundamentalists. Many diverse movements in the world make these claims, for their own reasons, because they want to develop projects of a certain kind. Today, there are politicians in Russia and China saying: 'oh, we can't have a western democracy because we are radically different from western Europeans.'

So, the first thing we have to do is to study the contexts of these claims of exemption from democracy. We need not take arguments of Islamist politicians any more at face value than those of Chinese, Russian or anyone else.

The second thing is that you talked about the concept of 'self'. In Turkey, at least, I'm very aware of this, age-old split between *sharia* and *tariqa*. It started in the Ottoman times. *Tariqa*, which is the taming of the self, or *nafs*, is an individual path, which is quietist and does not make a bid for state power. Political Islam however necessarily does make a bid for state power, since you can only live Islam fully under an Islamic state, and the state of Islam is either there, actualised through state formation, or you are living in '*dar al-harb*' (literally 'the abode of war'- the lands not under legitimate Muslim rule.)

### Turkey: Islamism as citizenship politics

But, when we get to contemporary Turkey, I am very interested in the distinction you drew of the very different paths that the Milli Görüş took in Turkey, as it became part of a multiparty democracy, and the path that Kaplan and his associates took. In order to understand this properly, we have to consider many different aspects. One is the relationship between diasporic groups and their home countries. Another at least as important, is the way in which transnational influences play out differently in diasporic communities and in the country of origin.

What you have done, in short, is to occlude the role of the German state and the way in which imperfect notions of citizenship in certain communities changed the nature of Islamist politics.

I will give a concrete example. You said that the Welfare Party changed fundamentally. But you didn't explain that this was because in Turkey, an Islamist position is essentially part of making a bid for citizenship. In other words, by entering the multiparty political arena, the Welfare Party was engaging in populist politics in a country that was very divided and fragmented, especially after the 1980s created chasms between a majority of people who were becoming more impoverished, and the newly-rich class getting wealthier. As a result, Islamists started invoking the notion of the *umma* (the entire Muslim community as a united entity) when they recruited support. That had the very important function of illuminating these differences of class, but being able to include everybody as citizens, as part of the *umma*.

Now in Germany, a large majority of German Turks do not have citizenship rights. They cannot vote: their rights are very truncated. This is now changing to some extent. But becoming part of an Islamist movement has a very different meaning and function for Muslims in Germany and in Turkey.

In Turkey, taking an Islamist trajectory is a legitimate road, indeed the alternative road to becoming part of an elite and to social mobility. If you cannot access universities because you are from a poor background, you go through the Islamic schools, which are there to produce *Imams* and *Khatibs* (Muslim clerics), but which also provide many others with a very good point of entry.

So, I recognise the value of some of the arguments that you made around notions of unity, truth and in particular, the third generation's rather modern take on how to interpret texts on a rather more individual basis; but would also propose that the answer to what happens to Islamist groups in Germany cannot be found in the logic of Islam itself, whether or not it is presenting an alternative model of a network society.

In brief, what your approach conceals from view is the independent effects of specific contexts, and how people articulate themselves in the actual societies to which they belong. An Islamist in Turkey is given a citizenship stake in Turkish society. He does not receive this in Germany. And this is what I would like to hear more about.

### **The beginning of wisdom: taking believers seriously**

**Werner Schiffauer:** This is a valid criticism, but it stems partly from the difference in our respective disciplines. As an anthropologist, I worked quite intensively with the Kaplan community and with ordinary believers. I did not study the upper echelons. And when I was talking to the members of the community, I was struck by the fact that they, in fact, were seekers after truth. They were believers. I felt that a proper understanding of them would have to take into account the very fact that they are believers and that they have to be taken seriously as believers. As a result I have to ask: how do they construct the world?

Now one problem I have with some theories of religion to be found in religious sociology or political science, is that sometimes they do not take into account that aspect of belief. Rather, they see it as an ideology that is interchangeable. You, for example, mentioned Russia, and China, as if it really wasn't very important what they believe, because each has not so much a belief system as a way of functioning - a strategy.

Where I agree with you is that every religion is indeed embedded in society and in political systems. And speaking of Germany, I would not say that citizenship rights had that much

importance. In the 1980s and 1990s - it is changing slowly now - it was still true that the majority of the Turkish population had a strong commitment to returning to Turkey. So, that first generation was really not interested in procuring citizenship rights (for example, the right to vote). They were interested in social rights, which were in fact quite well provided for. So this never became a political issue.

However, when it comes to the diaspora, the community in Germany reacted quite differently from their Turkish counterparts, developing their ideas and their concepts in a direction which took them away from practical political issues. Benedict Anderson once coined the phrase, 'the long-distance nationalist' for those nationalists who are scattered abroad, Jews who are in America for example, or Muslims in Germany. They were long-distance Muslims, in the sense that increasingly and for a generation they identified with a long-distance Islam, which became diasporic Islam, which turned into an imaginary Islam, which was not at all involved in actual politics.

That is why it took a very different road from that which developed in Turkey, where radical Muslims became more integrated into party politics from practical necessity. People in Turkey were not persuaded by factions like the Kaplan movement, that were set apart from the mainstream. In Germany, these movements split because there was space enough, and audience enough, for this kind of Utopian Islam, devoted to a radical return to the sources of religious inspiration, back to the origins. That is the real difference between Turkey and Germany. With the second generation it becomes even more pronounced.

What is interesting in Germany with the development of Milli Görüş, is that it is very active among the faithful in urging them to acquire German citizenship. This is typical of a new generation taking over the leadership, replacing the old generation: they are very much into trying to create a realistic politics, in order to arrive in Germany. This is in a way the counter programme, or the third generation programme for a more pluralistic outlook. They make a particular point out of acquiring citizenship, going through German institutions and going for a kind of empowerment *in* society, and not *against* society. These are some of the options which we are discussing today.

### **An Islamic reformation?**

**First audience member:** The title of your talk is 'Islamic Extremism and German Democracy'. It seems to me that those are very loaded categories. I am troubled that you have not taken time to show the highly contested nature of the very notion of Islamic extremism in relation, for example, to the notion of German or western democracy, and how those two are very uneasily pitted against each other, especially after 11 September.

For example, how does a group of Islamic fundamentalists see themselves vis-à-vis the German state? Then there is the notion of western civilisation represented in the Christian discourse that emerges out of the White House, for example, 'WE fight an absolute EVIL'. Tonight, I thought I was going to get some kind of insight into how those prescriptive categories relate to each other and how maybe they could challenge each other - not remain abstractions.

*Werner Schiffauer:* I could have given a broader account of Islam in Germany, and shown the different groups, and their embeddedness in German society. That would have been a rather academic talk. What I was trying to do here was something else. I have looked at the group which among the Turkish Sunni Muslims has the reputation of being the most radical, which has a lot of similarities with **Hizb ut-Tahrir** in Britain. I have tried to show you how they see things. These perspectives are shared throughout all Islamist circles, and they refer extensively to those great Islamic thinkers, Sayyid Qutb and to Maududi as their points of reference.

But Celaleddin Kaplan, this group's leader, makes his own synthesis of such references to introduce the reestablishment of the Caliphate in Turkey, which is his aim. In this respect, he is very Turkish. He claims that he should become the caliph because the Caliphate once existed in Turkey: so a Turk should become the new Caliph. Very nation-centric for a community that claims to be internationalist.

I am sorry that I disappointed you. I was attempting to reconstruct the notions and visions of that particular extremist community, their ideas and impressions about society and the self. It is true that I have contrasted these ideas with a very abstract notion of democracy. But the western notion of democracy is less a Christian notion, than the notion of a conflict culture, and a certain kind of perception of the self - this is my hypothesis.

The other idea I proposed was that returning to the script, the kind of scripturalism which was the key resort of the Reformation and Calvinism, was the very basis of European democracy. It is not Enlightenment, in my opinion, which is the basis of European democracy, but Reformation, scripturalism and fundamentalism. That very return to the sources and its attendant critique of traditionalism - take society as a project, do not take anything for granted because your teachers told you that to - that is the spirit of democracy and it is also the spirit of the self, the new individualism.

I wanted to show that there were very similar tendencies in dealing with Christian traditions which formed the basis of European democracy, to those now visible in the new forces dealing with Islamic traditions. My argument is that this is no accident, because there is an inner logic in these processes, so that we can predict that at some point - when individual access to the script becomes possible - people have to start to listen to each other. They cannot take their own interpretation as the final verdict. And this, in turn, has a potentially enormous effect on the development of the community as a whole.

**Second audience member:** Can the west or western Europe learn from the Islamist critique of aspects of western democratic culture? I don't think you have to be terribly abstract to concede that the Turkish military shutting down the Welfare Party is unlikely to encourage people to believe in parliamentary democracy.

I'm a little puzzled by your reference to Calvinism as the matrix for modern democracy. Although one of the benchmarks of Calvinism was *sola scriptura* – scripture alone – and although Calvinists gave up the belief in an infallible church, they kept the notion of an infallible book, the Bible.

I wonder whether this is not another example of our need to turn Islam into a latterday western-type civilisation, as it were, remaking it in our own image, making it tame and domesticating it, making it acceptable to us? Isn't Professor Schiffauer's thesis just wishful thinking of this type? Shouldn't one have more respect for the integrity of the Islamic religion and take its demands more seriously?

**Deniz Kandiyoti:** On this question of the Islamic reformation, ironically enough, I dare say this might have taken place if it was not for the colonial west. When we look at the evolution of the Ottoman Empire, there was a process of secularisation within Islam itself. In most countries, especially in the Arab world, one of the reasons why it had to beat a hasty retreat was because of its entanglements with the west.

So we return to the first question we were asked: does Islam offer an ethical critique? I think that at the moment we are again being offered a kind of critique which is actually a critique of capitalism. Whether it comes from deep ecologists or from Muslims, it is actually saying rather

the same thing: that these materialistic and consumerist societies are destroying souls and the environment.

Of course, Islamists have their own vision of the way out from this. But they are, I believe, inscribing themselves inside a whole group of critiques of modernity and of capitalism. One of the examples I like is of the Islamist holiday camps in Turkey. They consider the whole concept of a holiday in itself a sad by-product of capitalism, which has divided work and leisure. The Muslim life, they believe, seamlessly puts together work, worship and leisure - so that you don't need this crazy dislocation of working like robots for eleven months, and then make for the sea. Muslim holiday villages are based on completely different principles. I think we can only understand this sort of critique if we put it in the broader context of a malaise within capitalist society - including the anti-capitalist movements in the west which may not seem to have too much to do with Islam.

**Walter Schiffauer:** If you will excuse me, for me this is a little bit too neutralising an approach to the issues involved.

First, I feel Islam doesn't need a reformation, because it is in the middle of a process of reformation already! Here I agree with Dale Eickerman and others. This anti-traditionalist impetus which is connected to scripturalism precisely is the reformation impetus in Islam: this gesture which involves going back to scripture and criticising tradition from that position is a way towards building new models of society and of the world.

This is modernity, reformation - and something very similar lies at the basis of our own democracy. Yes, Calvinist Geneva did believe in the infallible holy book. It was not a democratic society. But, insofar as I am a Weberian, I see the roots of our present society in that moment.

Second, I would not place too much of the burden of causality on the process of secularisation as such. What is very interesting is that every scripturalist - which means believing in the absolute message from on high - nevertheless has to translate the Word and its meaning into the contemporary context.

That is what matters, ultimately. Because this necessary process of interpretation and explanation, recognised both in Islam and Christianity, sooner or later makes its impact on the development of the community.

The key questions always arise: how to refer to the script, how to analyse it, whether you reopen the gates of interpretation or not. And it is the so-called 'fundamentalists' who sooner or later have declared that it will be necessary to re-open the gates of interpretation.

So you see, what matters is not whether there is a scripturalist attitude or not. What counts is the way of reading, and how you adapt what you have read to present-day society. This is the crux of the matter.

Third, about Islamist criticism on modern-day society, philosophers coming from an Islamic background will one day cease to refer to Islam, but take the ideas from Islamic visions of the world, and articulate them in a secular way. This is what made Jewish philosophy powerful and influential - not their religious philosophers, who existed for centuries, but Adorno and Horkheimer, who never explicitly referred to religion, but who, if you analyse it, were rephrasing in a secular manner ideas which come straight out of their Jewish tradition – thus, in a way acceptable to others.

Today, Islamic philosophy is far too 'Islamic' for that – it is not yet a secular philosophy based on the Islamic message. That would be the point when the ethical message can be articulated for all of us.

### **The politics of Muslim identity: Turkey, Germany, Britain**

**Third audience member:** *The Guardian* has been running a series about the approximately 1.5 million Muslims in Britain. How many live in Germany? Are they mostly of Turkish origin? We have been talking about Germany, but are there any moves to relate to Muslims in the whole of Europe? What do you think would be the impact on the Muslim community in Germany if Turkey became a member of the EU?

**Werner Schiffauer:** I think there are now slightly more than 2 million Turks living in Germany. Around 60 - 70% are Sunni Muslims; others are Alevi. There are in total around three million Muslims in Germany.

The European-wide Muslim population is fascinating. It is ethnically very segregated. Turkish Muslims have very little to do with the Arabs, and the Arabs very little to do with the Pakistani Muslims. If you look into the bin Laden connections, there are no Turks involved at all. That is not to say that no Turkish Muslim would ever have been involved. But evidently, it was unlikely. They would have been isolated.

And when you look at the agenda of Turkish Islamist groups, they are very different from the Arabic Islamist agendas. Turkish Islamists are much less excited about Palestine. The future of the Aya Sofia mosque in Istanbul is a much bigger issue; so is Kemalism. Thanks to the transnational flow of ideas, you will hear about American bases in Saudi Arabia now, but basically the Turkish Islamist groups are not interested. And of course, there is a language barrier.

**Deniz Kandiyoti:** I could add that within Turkey, unexpectedly, Islamist groups who were previously against the EU, which they saw as a 'Christian club', are now espousing Europeanism and have become extremely pro-European, because they have figured out that they can better press for their rights to continue to operate as legal parties as members of the EU. Before, they were virulently anti-European: so it was quite a surprise.

**Fourth audience member:** What I found particularly interesting about this whole discussion is how different the situation is in Germany or Turkey from Britain. I came today from inspecting a Muslim school in Leicester, and I have been to two other Muslim schools in the English midlands in the last month.

These school students, and their teachers, are fervent Islamists - or at least their parents are. But they are also British citizens. They are born here. They have the same rights as other British citizens. And in some cities in the midlands, they are in the majority in fact. Now it is a fact that no political party takes any interest in people unless it is seeking votes. So this must have an impact on people of different faiths who have come to Britain during and after Empire. These are British citizens. *Briton held in Guantanamo Bay*, say the headlines. If a Turk from Germany were held there, would one read *German held in Guantanamo Bay*? No. We have extreme voices, of course, but British Muslims can express what they want by voting for it. Doesn't the absence of that electoral status encourage greater interest in religious ideas among Muslims in Germany?

**Werner Schiffauer:** Yes and no. First of all, you have to remember, I am talking about a minority of Muslims in Germany. The vast majority of them are as uninterested in religion as the

German majority. In this sense I don't want to mislead you. I am talking about a particular, radical religious group.

On the other hand, voting rights are important, and this situation is in the process of dramatic change. A lot of Turkish citizens are becoming German citizens now, and acquiring German passports. It is also true that some of the most radical Muslims in Germany were amongst the first to apply for German citizenship, because they did not have strong ties to Turkish citizenship, having condemned Kemalism. For the more secular Turks, Turkey was still a national issue, and there was a sense of betrayal of Turkey in taking German citizenship. Germany did not allow double citizenship, which I regret, thereby making it into an either-or decision.

This was an issue during the 1980s and 1990s, but not really any longer. Even more important - in Britain - a fascinating discussion is under way about redefining and understanding Britishness in terms of a multicultural society. In Germany we might talk about 'multicultural society', but there is nothing comparable in terms of real conceptual work going on, and re-thinking German democracy, re-thinking the implications of Germanness.

I do get the impression that it is much easier to get these hyphenated identities here - to be a 'British-Pakistani', and so forth. A 'German-Turk' sounds politically correct, and we use terms like this or 'Turkish German', for sure, but they still sound odd and stilted. These hyphenated identities have simply not taken root in German culture.

This is only a symbol of a process and a set of phenomena which are much more deeply rooted. New discussions have to take place, and I am involved in some of them. It is a question, broadly speaking, of a multi-cultural civic culture which can give migrants a place within it. This is what has to develop in Germany.

That it has not developed thus far has a lot to do with my generation, and its resistance to the whole concept of Germanness which we associated with National Socialism. Our generation put National Socialism on the table, as a reproach to our parents. We hated to be identified with Germany, and refused to think about national identity and German political culture. But we should have thought about it - because, if we had, alongside British or French culture, we might have been able to change that culture in the direction of something more open and receptive to new immigrants. This process is just starting now. But we are trailing far behind the discussion here in Britain.

**Deniz Kandiyoti:** This also has something to do with different models of citizenship. There are the French and British models, which give citizenship by virtue of living in a country, and then other models. The most extreme is probably Israel where you can step off a plane from Russia and immediately have more rights than someone who has always lived there. Germany in some ways is very similar; you can come from Kazakhstan to Germany as a German, and immediately have more rights than a Turk who has been living in Germany for three generations.

### **The inner-Islamic world in ferment**

**Fifth audience member:** It is often said that extremism breeds extremism. We judge these phenomena by our own measures, and if one has to measure a change in attitude, it is not always easy to find an objective way of looking, for example, at the second-generation Muslim community and its effects. So, we have to consider our notion of what is deviant, for example, very carefully.

**Werner Schiffauer:** I'm an anthropologist. We anthropologists think that what we do is not so much representative analysis as 'in-depth analysis'.

That is, we take a village or a tribe or a community, and try to find out what the hell is going on there. We ask ourselves what the problems are. My colleagues in stricter, more scientific disciplines such as sociology and political science, might really try to establish and measure extremism, deviancy and worry their heads about the representativeness of this element within the wider community. But for us, well, I was aiming to understand this particular group, and what moved them, what they were looking for, and how come they were against democracy.

They *were* against democracy, and they are not the only ones in the Islamic world. They may only be a minority within the Islamic world in this regard. But this minority, in the 1970s and 1980s, was a kind of avant-garde. It set the tone. Islamism of the Sayyid Qutb branch set the tone in the Muslim world all over. As always with avant-garde movements, they are never numerically in the majority. Take the student movement of the 1960s in Europe and in the western world: perhaps 2% or 5% of the population. It is difficult to measure numerically.

Today, I feel that this avant-garde is no longer the avant-garde. This is what I was trying to say. In a way, one must not take us too seriously, we anthropologists (*laughter and demur from the audience*) - but we try to say things which are hard to measure about why a certain group of people may set the tone in a much wider society, why they are attractive to others. You are right; I can't deliver proofs to you.

**Sixth audience member:** I have just one request for information. Where is the evidence that Islam, the whole Islamic world, will now be open to a critique of their sources, of the Koran, of the *Sunna*, of the *Sharia*? Isn't that just wishful thinking? Furthermore, might we have to consider the possibility that democracy is not the "way and the truth"?

**Werner Schiffauer:** I refer you to discussions taking place in many different Islamist communities. And in particular to the avant-garde that set the tone for these discussions.

I did not say that they were rejecting scripturalism. What they were rejecting was the violent, intolerant Islamism of the 1980s which led nowhere and created deep divisions between different groups. This has been replaced by discussion. This reaction is evident in Egypt, and this criticism takes a very lively form in Iran, where there is a tremendous discussion amongst Islamic intellectuals, questioning the whole idea of a theocracy.

That is what they're saying. It is trying to realise a religious idea, here in the world, and in doing so, it is an act of pollution. You pollute the divine word because you tear it down, plunging it into worldly power games. This is a fascinating inner-Islamic discussion that is taking place in Iran. Something similar is happening in circles in Turkey. And so there is a concern with the need to set up new standards of discussion. This is particularly evident among Islamists in Europe. Both among scholars, and in communities, particularly those like the Milli Görüş community. These are four examples of where I see this criticism emerging.

### **Islamism in a multi-media universe**

**Seventh audience member:** The process of globalised capitalism which has developed dramatically in the last two decades seems to me responsible for what you are describing.

The idea and practice of bourgeois democracy as we know it is in a state of disintegration, and while I agree with the person who spoke about the differences between Britain and Germany in relation to citizenship, it is a fact that even though we have the right to vote here, many people

don't feel that they want to make use of it, for very good reasons, because they are not represented in this form of so-called democracy. At the heart of Islam, as much as of Christianity, there is this cry of the oppressed. That's why they gain momentum: they are forms of protest or at least a search for a different kind of society which is not on offer in the present order.

**Eighth audience member:** I was interested in the parallel you were making between the Reformation in Christianity and the developments in the more extremist Islam at the moment.

Something missing from your analysis is what is causing these developments. If you look back to the Reformation, people talk about the evolution of the printed word and the distribution of books. It suggests an analogous process today, which is the exposure of second and third generation Muslims in Germany to German education.

Do you think that's true? Is there a link between a society being sufficiently economically developed to provide a large number of people, and particularly, immigrants with a university education, and this movement towards a questioning of scripture, which you then see moving on towards a more democratic attitude to politics.

**Werner Schiffauer:** Good question. The Reformation in Europe was exactly a coming into play of print media, which allowed these processes of reading and writing and having access to script to become a mass phenomenon. Similar processes seem to be taking place all over now.

In fact, I conflated two things. What is very evident in relation to the first generation is that the whole business of acquiring the means of reading and writing is tremendously important. The next step is going into the institutions, not just in Germany but everywhere. But of course, universities in themselves, universal and global today, were patented in Europe, and spread from there. These are, by their nature, European institutions in the way that they deal with knowledge. Critical reading is at its heart. This should be explored further.

But it is also the case that the media revolution - not only the print media, but also the audio media, such as the production and distribution of audio-cassettes - have had a tremendous effect. Sermons, for example, are distributed widely. Then there are the visual media, with the opportunity to make your own videos and spread messages all over the world. In receiving them, of course, the public makes up its own mind, and develops its own point of view. This is a process that precisely constitutes an entirely new era, with a new quality.

*Can radical Islam's return to 'origins' open a road to democracy? Read Werner Schiffauer [here](#) [0].*

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