Thinking Space Europe and the Challenge of Islam

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THINKING SPACE EUROPE
AND THE CHALLENGE OF ISLAM

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Michiel Leezenberg ist an sich Philosoph, der aber auch klassische Sprachen und allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft studiert hat. Er lehrt als „associate professor" Wissenschaftphilosophie an der Universität von Amsterdam und ist in Europa, aber auch in Nahost und in Afrika als Vortragender gefragt, da er sich auf die Philosophie des Islam und auf den „Islam in der modernen Welt" spezialisiert hat. Besonders lesenwert ist sein Buch über ‚Islamitische filosofie', das 2001 auf Niederländisch erschienen ist. Regelmässig meldet er sich im NRC Handelsblad mit Überlegungen zu Hintergründen von politischen Ereignissen in Nahost zu Wort. Deshalb ist er hervorragend geeignet, um zu unserem Thema ‚Denkraum Europa' im Hinblick auf den Islam zu sprechen. (Antje von Graevenitz)

The idea of a Europe as a 'thinking space' proceeds from a tacit image of Islam, or the Islamic world, as its absolute antipode, or – to retain the spatial imagery – as a heterotopia that stands for everything modern Europe has combated, overcome, or rejected. Remarkably few academic philosophers have ventured to discuss Islam and the Muslim world; and when they do, they risk reproducing precisely the self-congratulatory and reductionist narrative of Western progress, emancipation and secularization that nowadays is increasingly being taken over by xenophobic right-wing parties. As a result, all too often, present-day public debates implicitly or explicitly present Muslims, Islam, and the Islamic world, as in crucial respects essentially different from Western liberal secular sensibilities, and hence as possibly unassimilable to modern liberal states. This

attitude may be found not only among openly xenophobic or anti-Islamic authors, movements and political parties; also among more critical and self-critical liberal secular authors, one often finds tacit assumptions or explicit claims that the Islamic world is 'not yet secularized,' bound by tradition, and 'not yet having experienced, or passed through, the Enlightenment.'[1]

It has proved tempting, and is undoubtedly illuminating, to study the extent to which present-day islamophobia reproduces the conceptions and mechanisms of twentieth-century antisemitism. There are plenty of models helping us to do so. Thus, over seventy years ago, Jean-Paul Sartre argued that (French) antisemitism was based not on any real experience of Jews, let alone directed against any real oppression by Jews, but rather on a *choice* for a particular kind of life, determined by bad faith.[2]

In many respects, Sartre's account is outdated, and problematic in its own right; but whatever its shortcomings, it may help us to better understand the relative impermeability to rational counter-argument and empirical evidence to the contrary that is characteristic of both antisemitism and islamophobia. Thus, basing oneself on such analyses, one could set out to formulate a similar phenomenological critique of early twenty-first-century islamophobia as based on the idea of the Muslim as shaping experience, rather than the other way around. As has been observed by various authors, early twenty-first century Islamophobia shares many features with mid-twentieth-century antisemitism, including a moral panic about alleged projects or attempts to conquer or dominate the world, a paranoid and unfalsifiable mistrust of seemingly assimilated individuals as a fifth column, and last but not least a – to my mind highly significant – sexual dimension. The latter is particularly clearly visible in recent media hypes concerning, for example, the alleged mass rape by Muslim refugees at Cologne Central Station

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[1]   The most famous philosopher to do so in public discussions is perhaps Jürgen Habermas; see for example his 2008 essay, 'Die Dialektik der Säkularisierung' (available at https://www.blaetter.de/archiv/jahrgaenge/2008/april/die-dialektik-der-saekularisierung). A similar attitude, however, may be found among many journalists and academic philosophers alike.

[2]   Jean-Paul Sartre, *Réflexions sur la question juive* (Paul Morihien 1946).

during New Year's night 2015-2016; the auctions of female slaves held by IS or the so-called 'Islamic State;' and the interminable discussion whether Muslim women wearing a headscarf symbolize or embody Muslim patriarchic oppression rather than free individual choice.

Sartre has already observed that the situation of Jews (or, as he puts it, 'the Jew') in France involves an odd combination of sexual attraction and repulsion;[3] and much the same may be said about present-day xenophobic attitudes to Muslim migrants in Europe. In recent years, individuals and parties not known for their feminist ideas or emancipatory agendas have referred to refugees and immigrants from Muslim-majority countries as 'testosterone bombs' who threaten 'our women.' This hypocritical concern for European women's sexual safety is not only a prototypical ingredient of contemporary forms of sexualized nationalism; more generally, it is part of a cherished broader self-image of Europe. At present, however, the idea, or ideal, of Western women as free and emancipated is increasingly challenged by precisely the same populist, nationalist and xenophobic movements: all over Europe, one may hear increasingly loud, numerous, and well-organized voices speaking up against abortion, gay marriage, and the like, all in the name of defending 'family values' – whether or not in the name of religion.

One indication that the European self-image of Enlightenment, emancipation and secularism is relatively impervious to rational argument is the fact that it is blithely reproduced at the very same time it is challenged from within. The stereotypical representations of Muslims simultaneously reproduce and reinforce the widespread self-image of Europe as the continent where philosophy originated and flourished, where the scientific revolution took place, and where the Enlightenment triggered the secularization of society and the emancipation of the people. At the very moment that the long-assumed identification of modernization with secularization is increasingly being challenged not only in the Islamic world but worldwide, including in Europe, we still witness self-confident slogans

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[3] I have discussed the sexual dimension of contemporary debates concerning Islam and Muslims in *De minaret van Bagdad: Seks en politiek in de islam* (Prometheus 2017).

that 'Islam has not known an Enlightenment,'- as if different cultural spaces necessarily have to pass through the same historical phases. Likewise, the suggestion that the Enlightenment does not necessarily or simply stand for progress and emancipation, but knows a dialectic of its own, as famously argued by Adorno and Horkheimer, seems to have been forgotten in debates, as has Europe's twentieth-century history, which – even if one disregards the history of colonialism and decolonization – is marked by violence of an unprecedented scale and extent.

Against such appropriations and reductionist images, one line of argument is the somewhat apologetic counternarrative that the Islamic world has itself known an Enlightenment of sorts during the flourishing of classical Islamic philosophy in the tenth and eleventh centuries CE; that later contacts with actors and ideas of the Western Enlightenment did indeed leave deep and permanent traces in the modernizing Islamic world; and that the Medieval Islamic scientific and philosophical tradition made possible not only the intellectual flourishing of the High Middle Ages in Europe, or what has been referred to as the 'Twelfth-century Renaissance,' but also have arguably influenced Copernicus and the scientific revolution.[4] Even this counternarrative, however, has been challenged in Islamophobic circles. Authors like, most famously – or notoriously –, Sylvain Gouguenheim have claimed that Greek philosophical learning reached Medieval Europe not at all through Arabic translations, but as the result of the efforts of Greek-reading monks at Mont Saint Michel in France.[5] Gouguenheim's work is based neither on detailed study of primary sources nor even on recent secondary literature; but apparently, the dogma that Islam and enlight-

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[4] For the medieval Islamic philosophical tradition as a trigger of the Twelfth-century Renaissance, see Dimitri Gutas, *Greek Science, Arab Culture* (Routledge 1998); for possible Islamic scientific influences on the 15th-century Renaissance and the scientific revolution, see George Saliba, *Islamic Science and the Making of the European Renaissance* (MIT Press 2011). For a popularizing narrative on modernizing and enlightened tendencies in the Islamic world, see Christopher de Bellaigue, *The Islamic Enlightenment: The Modern Struggle Between Faith and Reason* (Bodley Head 2017).

[5] Sylvain Gouguenheim, *Aristote au Mont Saint-Michel: Les racines grecques de l'Europe chrétienne* (Seuil 2008).

ened philosophical rationality are mutually exclusive as a matter of definition is too attractive to be given up that easily.

But – and this seems to be a, if not the, major difference with earlier antisemitism – it is not only Western Islamophobes who are keen on reproducing and reinforcing an absolute Manichaean opposition between the civilized, secular West and the violent, religion-saturated Muslim world. A number of Muslim activists and movements, most notoriously al-Qa'ida and IS or the so-called 'Islamic State,' have actively and emphatically proclaimed the wholesale rejection of modern Western moral values and political institutions. Thus, IS propaganda has systematically and deliberately presented Islam (or rather, its particular reading of that faith) as the absolute Other of everything that modern Europe, and the West more generally, claims to stand for: democracy, secularism, women's emancipation, gay rights, respect for religious minorities, cultivation of art and architectural monuments, and so on. Such claims, it should be noted, were part of a carefully orchestrated and professionally managed media campaign aimed at antagonizing Western audiences and recruiting Muslim supporters. This campaign was duly reported, and effectively supported, by the overwhelming if not hysterical attention for IS in Western mainstream media, which saw the movement as rejecting everything the West stood for or embodied, and thus reproduced exactly the image IS propagandists wanted to project.

One should not reduce IS's short-lived military and political gains to the one dimension of Islam, however: otherwise, it would be impossible to explain why this particular form of violence emerged only in the early twenty-first century, and only gained a foothold in this specific part of the Islamic world, which was already in disarray by several years of escalating ethnic and sectarian conflicts, if not outright civil war.

Moreover, the extensive if not eager media coverage of IS atrocities has effectively served to distract public attention away from, in particular, the Syrian regime's quantitatively far worse record. In fact, however, in comparison with the decades-long organized state terror exorcised by the Baathist governments in Iraq and Syria, the actions of IS, no matter how horrendous and despicable, are rela-

tively small fry.[6] More importantly, IS tactics and technologies of governing through terror are in fact in many important respects shaped and inspired by the former.

Much has been made of the Wahhâbî theological backgrounds of IS, which are adduced by friend and enemy alike as justifications of the genocide of Yezidis for being infidels; of the selling of captive women into (sexual) slavery; and of the widely publicized killings of homosexuals, Shi'ites, and foreign captives.[7] To some extent, this attention is justified, as this Wahhâbî-inspired theological language is exactly what IS uses, or used, in its propaganda. One should not overlook the differences with the form of Wahhâbî Islam that serves as the state religion in Saudi Arabia. The most important of these differences is that IS ideology and practice, unlike state-sponsored Saudi Wahhâbism, is revolutionary: whereas Saudi Arabia's Wahhâbî scholars have always been loyal supporters of the house of Sa'ûd, and have unquestionably accepted the worldly authority presupposed by the latter's quasi-trial patronage, IS has consistently aimed at overthrowing whatever order or power was in place locally. Although it made temporal alliances with local secular Arab-nationalist forces or tribal leaders, IS tended to sideline or eliminate these allies as soon as they had gained power.

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[6] For example, in the Syria war, an estimated 250,000 civilians have lost their lives, the vast majority as the result of artillery shelling or aerial bombings by the Assad regime; IS is held responsible for at most an estimated one-tenth of this figure (incidentally, the US-led military campaign against IS-occupied Mosul has also been reported to have claimed the lives of an estimated 10,000 civilians). Reports by organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch suggest that from 2011, literally tens of thousands of Syrians have been tortured to death in Assad's prisons. All of these crimes, needless to say, are routinely denied by the regime's propagandists, even in the face of overwhelming evidence.

[7] See, for example, Rukmini Callimachi, 'ISIS enshrines a theology of rape,' *New York Times*, 13 augustus 2015, available online at (http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/14/world/middleeast/isis-enshrines-a-theology-of-rape.html?_r=0). In fact, however, this article hardly if at all discusses any actual theological justifications of IS's treatment of female prisoners. Recently, academic scholars have focused on the wider movement of 'Salafism,' rather than on the specifically Saudi Arabian 'Wahhâbism;' for a thorough discussion of Salafî ideas, currents, and theorists in the twentieth century, see Henri Lauzière, *The Making of Salafism: Islamic Reform in the Twentieth Century* (Columbia University Press 2015).

Moreover, underneath IS's Islamist surface and its propagandistic veneer lurks a secular and highly professional organization, built up primarily by personnel from Saddam Husayn's intelligence and security apparatus, which had been in power, and had operated as effectively as ruthlessly, until the Iraqi regime was ousted in 2003.[8] And indeed, IS rule is characterized not just by the seeming religious zeal of its foot soldiers – a highly visible and highly successful propaganda tool in the days of its rapid expansion in 2013 and 2014 – but also, and at least as much, by the gathering and exploiting of intelligence gathered by local informants, and by the systematic use of terror as a tool of government. The latter two are reminiscent of, and indeed directly inspired by, in particular, Saddam Husayn's Baathism in Iraq, which in turn had carefully copied various tools and technologies of government from Communist Eastern Germany, and in particular from the Soviet Union under Stalin.[9] Among these are the cult of the leader, the pervasive presence of domestic intelligence and security services, and the systematic use of terror as a tool of government. Baathism, in short, is Stalinism with an Arab face; by extension, IS is Baathism with an Islamic face.

The major difference between Iraqi and Syrian Baathism and IS practices resides, of course, in the latter's distinct economy of visibility: whereas both the Iraqi and Syrian regimes tend, or tended, to hide their crimes, or to flat-out deny responsibility for them, and to make video footage and other evidence of their atrocities available only to a very select audience of party members and/or intelligence personnel, IS openly and indeed brazenly boasts of its acts of violence. In its defiant showing of video footage of the execution of prisoners, of auctions of female slaves, etc., however, IS is behaving less like a territorial state seeking recognition from the international community and from the international juridical order than

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[8] The presence of veterans from the Iraqi Baathist security services in the upper echelons of IS was first discussed by Christoph Reuter, 'The Terror Strategist: How Secret Files Reveal the Structure of Islamic State', *Spiegel Online*, 18 April 2015; available online at http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/islamic-state-files-show-structure-of-islamist-terror-group-a-1029274.html.

[9] On the horrors, and the Stalinist character, of Saddam Husayn's rule, see in particular Samir al-Khalil, *Republic of Fear* (University of California Press 1989).

like an organized crime ring trying to secure its territory by means of the public display of violence.

An instructive parallel, or possibly model, for this behavior may be found in present-day Mexican drug cartels, several of which produce and circulate video footage of gruesome executions of members of rival gang in order to intimidate their opponents. In the Islamic world, there is no evidence of such public and videotaped executions prior to the 1980s: to the best of my knowledge, the first video footages of executions were images of an American hostage in Lebanon in the 1980s; perhaps more importantly, Islamic insurgents in the two Russian wars in Chechnya started circulating video footage of gruesome executions of Russian POWs in an effort to undermine the morale of the invading Russian army during the mid-1990s. it is unclear whether and to what extent IS has copied these particular models; but the presence of Chechen veterans among its ranks is not in doubt.

In short, in its ideology, propaganda tactics, and in its systematic resort to violence or terror as tools of government, IS is a thoroughly modern phenomenon, which cannot and should not be explained from classical Islamic theology. I would like to conclude my discussion with a digression on one of the most famous classical Islamic theologians: the famous, or notorious, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328). No Medieval Muslim scholar is quoted or referred to as often in both IS propaganda and Osama bin Laden's messages.[10] At first sight, he seems to fit the bill perfectly: he is known to have inveighed against the Mongols, against monistic Sûfî mysticism, and against any innovation he saw as threatening the absolute status of the sharî'a. Add to this the fact that he wrote an voluminous book rejecting Greek logic, and the picture of Ibn Taymiyya as the prototypical obscurantist Islamist zealot dismissing Western philosoph-

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[10] There are no detailed recent studies of the Islamist use, or abuse, of Ibn Taymiyya in Western languages. A classical, if by now in some respects outdated, study is Henri Laoust, *Essai sur les doctrines sociales et politiques de Takî-d-Dîn Ahmad b. Taimîya* (Institut français d'archéologie 1939). For a biographical study, see Caterina Bori, *Ibn Taymiyya: Una vita esemplare* (*Rivista degli studi orientali*, Supplemento monografico, vol. 1, 2003); for a collection of recent essays, see Yossef Rapoport & Shahab Ahmed (eds.) *Ibn Taymiyya and his Times* (Oxford University Press 2010).

ical rationality, rejecting influences from alien cultures, and preaching violence against unbelievers seems complete.[11]

Yet, there are good reasons to resist this attractively reductionist image: in all likelihood, Ibn Taymiyya would have been appalled at the crimes that movements like al-Qa'ida and IS have committed in his name. For example, in his letters and fatwas, he repeatedly argued that noncombatants, in particular women and children, should not be targeted in wars, and that prisoners of war should be treated humanely and with respect. Thus, in his voluminous writings, we find no legitimation whatsoever for indiscriminate acts of terror like the September 2001 WTC bombings (nor, more generally, for suicide assaults – another thoroughly modern phenomenon), nor for the propagandistic use of POW executions.[12]

Ibn Taymiyya's rejection of Greek logic is also rather more interesting and substantial than would seem at first sight. He does not simply dismiss foreign logical methods as foreign or alien to Islamic culture (the concept of 'culture' in its modern sense of a people's collective habits, customs, norms and values not being available at this stage anyway); rather, he provides a lengthy argument against the epistemological pretensions of, specifically, Aristotelian syllogistic to provide a means for producing indubitable knowledge about the world. Aristotle, and more relevantly here, his Muslim followers, held that so-called demonstrative syllogisms, which proceed from indubitable principles, like definitions capturing a thing's essence, and which use flawless logical methods, can yield indubitable substantial knowledge about the world. Ibn Taymiyya wrote a lengthy refutation of this epistemological pretension, arguing at length that definitions fail to capture the essences of things, and that syllogistic arguments fail to yield undisputable truths. In short, his is a systematic – dare I say philosophical? – refutation of the

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[11]   *Radd 'alâ al-mantiqiyyîn* ('Refutation of the Logicians'), 2 vols., Dar al-fikr al-lubnânî, 1993; for an English translation of a fifteenth-century summary by al-Suyûtî, see Wael Hallaq (tr./ed.) *Ibn Taimiyya Against the Greek Logicians* (Oxford 1993).

[12]   For more detailed discussions of suicide terrorism by Muslim actors, cf. my 'Suicide Bombing and the Modern Nation State: Antiliberal Performance or Biopolitical Protest?', forthcoming in M. Leezenberg, A.-M. Korte & M. v. Bruinessen (eds.), *Gestures: The Study of Religion as Practice* (Fordham University Press).

epistemological claims of Aristotelian logic, arguing that the latter may be formally correct, but says nothing about the real world, which consists of individual entities rather than the universals involved in scientific statements and logical arguments.

Whatever one thinks of these views (which bear some surprising similarities to the logical empiricist claim that logical truths are tautologies and say nothing about the world of empirical observation), the important point to keep in mind here is is that Ibn Taymiyya's is a lengthy and patiently reasoned argument against the epistemological claims of his opponents, rather than a sweeping condemnation or rejection. Even the most radical of Medieval Muslim theologians, that is, is rather different, far more interesting, and incomparably more rationalist than appeals to his authority by self-proclaimed present-day followers would suggest.

In short, contrary to what many self-appointed Islam critics believe, there is such a thing as 'modern Islam,' which in crucial respects is qualitatively different from classical Islamic civilization. In fact, the present-day Islamic world has more in common with modern Europe than with classical Islamic civilization. Present-day politicized and revolutionary forms of Islam are thoroughly modern phenomena. Their roots lie in part in Western and Central European ideas that gained currency during the Enlightenment and Romanticism. They have also been shaped by modern nationalism, which defines the states in the contemporary Islamic world as much as in Europe, and as much as, or even more than, religion. Importantly, however, they have also been shaped by local dynamics, and by specifically Russian – and, later, Soviet – models. Above, Marxist-Leninist and Soviet influences on Baathism – and by extension on IS Islamism – have already been discussed. Likewise, the political strategies of terrorism, and more specifically, suicide terrorism, not only have a distinctly modern character, but arguably also have a genealogy that goes back to nineteenth-century Russian anarchism rather than to any premodern Islamic sources. In fact, classical Islamic political thought was decidedly anti-revolutionary in outlook: even as radical a thinker as Ibn Taymiyya approvingly quoted the traditional saying that 'sixty years of tyranny do less damage than one night without a ruler.'

In many respects, contemporary political Islam has stepped into the vacuum left by the sudden and rapid disappearance of communism as an anti-Western, or anti-liberal and anti-capitalist, ideology and technology of government; and in the case of many Arab countries, it has unquestionably been marked by decades of Marxist-Leninist influence both in the articulation of political ideologies as in the implementation of governmental practices. Often, these Marxist-Leninist roots of contemporary politicized Islam are completely overlooked, if not vocally denied, not only in public debate, but also in many academic discussions.[13] In this respect, the opposition between the Islamic world as a domain of dogmatism, intolerance, violence, and religious obscurantism and the European thinking space as the sphere of Enlightenment, emancipation and progress, is rather less absolute than Manichean media reports, and even the self-presentations of some academic philosophers, would have us believe.

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[13]   Thus, not only a philosopher like Habermas completely overlooks the twentieth-century history of the Islamic world and the crucial role played in it by communist actors and influences; also the anthropologist Talal Asad, currently one of the most influential authors to present a communitarian picture of Islam as a 'discursive tradition' in crucial respects different from, but by no means inferior to, Western secularized post-Enlightenment reason, systematically downplays the importance of Marxist-Leninist influences on the modern Arab Middle East.