

Beyond Colonialism and Secularism: The Peace Prize of the German Book Trade for a “true” Muslim, German-Iranian Navid Kermani

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October 18, 2015, Navid Kermani, a German born German-Iranian author, was awarded the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade. This is among the most prestigious prizes in Germany. His speech is entitled “Jacques Mourad and Love in Syria” and dedicated to the fate of that Syrian-Christian priest who was kidnapped by the Islamic State (IS or ISIS) the very day in May 2015 Kermani learned he was being awarded that prize. His long speech was aired live on TV (second channel, ZDF) and published in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (pages 10 and 11) the following day. Kermani is a troubling, even perfidious author and this article will tell you why.

Father Mourad is only important to Kermani, to the degree that he loves Islam. This is the starting point of Kermani’s entire speech and approach. Mourad was freed recently, thanks to the efforts of some Syrian citizens. Those helpers, though, are not portrayed as citizens, but as Muslims. And this is the core aspect of Kermani’s point: to show the world that Islam is love and we all should embrace Islam as much as he does. He uses the word “Islamic Fascism” exclusively for the Islamic State (not for al-Banna, al-Qaradawi or the Shia Iranian regime), which is denying the legacy of Islam in his view. Worse, Kermani says that we are living in a time where the true Islam is hidden behind the wall, and he knows the true Islam and Quran, which is spiritual kinship, poetry and love.

He praises the “spirituality of Ibn Arabi”, the “poetry of Rumi”, the “historiography by Ibn Khaldun”, the “poetic theology by Abdulqaher al-Dschurdschani”, the “philosophy of Averroes” or the “travelogue by Ibn Buttuta”, not to forget the “fairy tales of 1000 and 1 nights”. For Kermani, Islam does not at all need a time of “enlightenment” – as the old examples of Islamic writing, as mentioned, were wonderful examples of enlightenment. So Kermani seems to rewrite the entire history of modern philosophy, including European and western thought from the 17th century and the time of enlightenment in the 18th century, to argue that Islam was at least as modern or enlightened as these European philosophers. Impressive, no?

Kermani ignores Albert Hourani and Ahmad Kasravi, who both dealt with modern thinking in the Arab and Muslim (Iranian) worlds. Kermani ignores these writings in his speech.[i] Kermani’s reference to Nasr Hamid Abu Zaid is rather selective. Abu Zaid focused on the danger for a vibrant and many-voiced interpretation of Islam, as reformer aš-Šāfi‘is rejected the personal factor when interpreting the Quran – this also meant a push back of reason, as Muhammad was seen infallible as early as in the 9th century. In addition, American political scientist Shadi Hamid stated in a 2014 study, based on his own field research: „[t]he vast majority of Arabs have no a priori ideological opposition to Islamism as such“. German Islamic Studies scholar Tilman Nagel analyzed Sufi-Islam, which in his view is rather based on breaking the individual in order to set Sufi-Islam as representative of the prophet. Finally, Kermani’s reference to Ibn Battuta is remarkable, as he was seen as a plagiarist as early as in the 14th century; today we know that all his reports are taken from other authors.

Who, then, is responsible for the decline of Islamic thinking and the true Islamic world? Kermani says:

“All people in the Orient have witnessed a brutal, bottom-down modernization by colonialism and secularist dictatorships.”

According to the German Prize winning author, the Iranian Shah urged his soldiers to pull down the headscarves of Iranian women in 1936 – those women did not reject the headscarf by themselves, they were forced. Imagine! However, Kermani of course neither mentions any kind of feminist outrage against religion and the headscarf, nor Atatürk’s approach to the West and his concept of anti-religious secular Turkish statehood which has been largely destroyed by today’s Erdogan and his colleagues.

“Modernity” was always seen as “violent” in the “Orient,” says Kermani. In Europe, we have a rather positive view, “despite backlashes and crimes”. This is all this proud Muslim writer has to say about the unprecedented crimes of Auschwitz and the Shoah! He seems to be completely ignorant about Jews and Jewish history. For him Treblinka or Sobibor were obviously rather “backlashes” or simple “crimes” that did not change the optimistic outlook of European history.

Antisemitism, let alone anti-Zionism, today’s most dangerous form antisemitism, are not mentioned once in the entire speech. While he portrays the Iranian Shah as violent and despotic, the 1979 Islamist revolution is not mentioned either, and no mentions of today’s threats by Iranian leaders to eliminate the Jewish state are nowhere to be found in his long speech.

This is no surprise, though, as Kermani’s wife, Islamic Studies scholar Katajun Amirpur, now a professor in Hamburg, is infamous for telling a German audience that Ahmadienedschad did not call for the destruction of Israel during his speech on October 26, 2005. Her notorious lie was also published by then leading German scholar in antisemitism, Wolfgang Benz. I

dealt with her and Kermani in my 2011 study "Schadenfreude. Islamic Studies and Antisemitism after 9/11 in Germany". In it, I said that Kermani is driven by anti-American resentment, which can be seen in his speech in Frankfurt, Oct. 18, 2015, as well. 9/11 is just mentioned in passing as an example how not to deal with Islam: he attacks the reaction to 9/11 and not the Islamist crime as such! Kermani portrays Muslims as victims over the centuries. Victims of modernity, of Arab or Iranian dictators, of America and the West and now – of the Islamic State. This equation or analogy of the West and Jihad is remarkable. He goes so far as to reject the notion that Islamism and jihad are driven by anti-Western ideology.

Kermani, to be sure, mentions today's Iran just a few times without specifying its antisemitic or Islamist agenda while he is very clear about the threat deriving from Wahhabism and Saudi-Arabia..

Not once does he deal with the Iran Deal and Iranian nuclear ambitions – and not once the threats directed at Israel.

The core message of his speech is simply: Islam is a wonderful religion, even Christians in Syrian fell in love with it. The true Muslims help Christians and fight the Islamic State.

At the end of his talk, Navid Kermani urged the entire audience, including the head of the German Parliament, the Bundestag, several MPs, and the entire cultural elite to stand up – and to pray! Imagine: a supposedly secular speech in a former church was abused by a prize-winner who prayed, of course, in an Islamic manner, while others prayed in a Christian way and even those non-religious people were urged and literally forced by the very mass of people to stand and follow the Muslim preacher Kermani.

Religion must be a case of privacy, pure and simple. Kermani did not learn this lesson, although he was born in Germany and lived in Germany his entire life. This Islamist approach is

devious, whining, and insidious, as he portrayed his entire talk as support for a Christian. For a Christian who fell in love with Islam, one must say.

At first view, people might think: Kermani wants to stop the war in Syria, that is nice and of course important, fighting both the IS and Assad. Fine. Upon closer inspection, it becomes clear that he rather abuses, in even a cynical way, the fate of a tiny Christian group in Syria for Muslim purposes. He is just telling the story of father Mourad because Mourad is in love with Islam. And finally, Kerami just uses that example to emphasize that ordinary but truly believing Muslims saved the Christian priest. His message: both colonialism, secularism and the Islamic State are anti-Islam. And he wants the pure Islam, which was enlightened, in his distorted and rather arrogant ahistoric view, even before the European enlightenment – which in fact was the first and only enlightenment, but Kermani will for sure be happy to head a pan-European textbook commission to rewrite the history of philosophy and the enlightenment and to portray Islam as the original enlightened religion and culture.

While colonialism and secular Arabs and Muslims destroyed the legacy of Islam, others embraced Islam, says Kermani, and he mentions, very intentionally, Annemarie Schimmel (1922–2003) as a good example of someone who truly loved Islam, including Sufi Islam. Schimmel was also awarded the same prize as Kermani, the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, in 1995. There was outrage about that award, as Schimmel expressed sympathy for the fatwa against and outrage in the Islamic world about Salman Rushdie's book "Satanic Verse".

Isn't this remarkable? This year, Iran did not attend the Frankfurt Book Fair because Rushdie gave a speech there. And now, a few days after Rushdie spoke, Kermani attacks him under the guise of praising Annemarie Schimmel. In 1995 there was a huge outrage about Schimmel, hundreds of book stores and publishing houses, leading bestselling authors like Mario

Simmel, leading scholars in the field like Bassam Tibi and public intellectuals like Taslima Nasrin showed support for Rushdie and disgust for Schimmel. Now Kermani praises Schimmel. And no one in Germany recognizes this affront to Rushdie by a prize winning German-Iranian agitator with a tearful voice. Arabist and Islamic Studies scholar Wolfgang Schwanitz told me in October 2010 that Schimmel also worked as a translator in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Nazi Germany and had to deal with the Grand Mufti of Jerusalem, Haj Amin al-Hussaini, a close friend of Hitler. Not a word about that from prize winner Kermani, nor in the German press. They all praise him, left, right, and center.

For observers of Islamic Studies in Germany, the Award of the Peace Prize of the German Book Trade to Navid Kermani is just another sign of the failure of Islamic Studies and the public. It is a radical change in political culture. Germany will embrace those Muslims who have strong resentments against critics of jihad like Rushdie and against America, and who do not even pretend to be shocked by 9/11. Apparently, Iranian and Islamist antisemitism is not even worth mentioning. Germany, let alone many Muslims living in Germany like Kermani, does not care about Jews and Israel any more.

Not even the dead Jews of the Holocaust are part of the agenda when authors deal with the crimes of European and German history, as a friend told me. Nor is Iranian jihad against the Jewish state worth mentioning. I fear he is right. Sunday's ceremony and the German Peace Prize of the German Book Trade for Navid Kermani is just one more proof of this.

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