

Short message about a vicious spiral against Muslims in France

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Hello everyone, I am Christopher Pollmann, professor of public law at Lorraine University in Metz in East France. With my modest English, I would like to draw your attention to a vicious spiral of isolation, violence and humiliation which could endanger the Muslim population in France.

Studying the murderous attacks committed in the name of Allah, we can notice a widespread confusion between *motives* and *causes*, confusion operated in a strange complicity between killers and governments. The killers try to forget about their past, made out of emotional loneliness, failures and humiliations, and to get rid of their self-image as losers. But as German sociologist Klaus THEWELEIT has shown¹, they are haunted by their destroyed bodily experience. Since they are in vengeance against society, only a widely despised reference such as radical Islam will appear noble enough to dignify them. Governments *equally* speak of Islamist terror, in order to externalize the problem of those brutally socialized youths, that is make responsible a religion instead of violence in families and society. This also helps to reaffirm national identity.

In a deep crisis, French people indeed feel the need to reassure themselves about their identity, and “*one of the surest ways to confirm an identity, for communities as well as for individuals, is to find some way of measuring what one is not*” (I quote the US sociologist Kai ERIKSON²). In the past, the idea(1) of the “*grande nation*” could thus be derivated from the colonies France thought of civilizing or from a hostile Other such as the Germans, the British or Jews. None of these groups is still available for national demarcation. That is where Muslims are helpful. In a few days, the government will present a

1 Klaus THEWELEIT, *Male Fantasies*, vol. 1: *Women, Floods, Bodies, History*; vol. 2: *Male Bodies – Psychoanalyzing the White Terror*, Univ. of Minnesota Press 1987.

2 Kai T. ERIKSON, *Wayward puritans. A study in the sociology of deviance*, John Wiley & Sons : New York et al. 1966, new ed. 2005.

new bill officially pointing to Muslims as a threat to the country. This stance against Islam renders its practice always more visible by pushing more and more Muslims to reappropriate Islamic symbols and especially the veil they are stigmatized with. Much more than a scapegoat, Muslims thus replace the traditional pillars of negative identity construction.

Together with numerous other authoritarian tendencies, this quest for identity will intensify as president Emmanuel Macron is in competition with extreme-right's Marine Le Pen. He will probably face her again at the next presidential election in Spring 2022.

In the early 1940s, my mother was profiting from the expropriation of Jewish families. My present engagement is a small response to the responsibility my family history has placed me in. Thank-you!

Message about a vicious spiral against *laïcité* and Muslims in France

Hello everyone, I am Christopher Pollmann, professor of public law at Lorraine University in Metz in East France. You may have heard about the recent rise of *islamophobia* in France. The term was created by the jurist Alain QUELLIEN in 1910¹ and may be contested for minimizing the problem, but that is not my issue here. (Nor do I want to question *Zoom* of Californian billionaire Eric Yuan.) With my modest English, I would rather like to draw your attention to a vicious spiral of isolation, violence and humiliation which could endanger the Muslim population and more generally social peace in France and elsewhere.

Surely you are aware of the murderous attacks which have been committed in the name of Allah since 2012 in France. The big question now is whether these religious *motives* reflect the *causes* of violence. Let's ask the German sociologist Klaus THEWELEIT, author of *Male Fantasies*² (which is about Nazi violence) and of a recent book³ about the broken inner world of contemporary assassins. One may also quote related research by Bessel VAN DER KOLK (*The body keeps the score*)⁴ and Peter A. LEVINE (numerous books on *Healing trauma*)⁵. Theweleit shows that the killers – Nazis, Islamists, Christians, anti-communists, ... – live their *corporeality* as fragmented and chaotic, enjoining them to crush human life in order to seal their torn bodily experience. Their “*ideologies are interchangeable*” and cannot be considered as *causes*. However, they don't want to be reminded of their personal history, made out of emotional loneliness, failures and humiliations, and prefer to dignify themselves. As they are in vengeance against society, only a widely despised idea, belief or other reference will appear noble enough to them.

It is here that individual destiny connects to the global picture. In France even more than in other Western societies, Islam has been steadily devaluated now for more than 30 years. If this was first due to right-wing movements, public authorities have become more and more active against Muslims. In 2004, a huge majority in Parliament adopted a statute prohibiting wear of religious symbols at school which was in fact directed against the Islamic headscarf. And in a few days, the government will present a new bill against “*separatism*”. The only currently visible separatist tendencies in France are segregated housing, schooling and tax paying amongst its most wealthy

1 Alain QUELLIEN, *La Politique musulmane dans l'Afrique occidentale française* (1910), Hachette 2013.

2 Klaus THEWELEIT, *Male Fantasies*, vol. 1: *Women, Floods, Bodies, History*; vol. 2: *Male Bodies – Psychoanalyzing the White Terror*, Univ. of Minnesota Press 1987.

3 Klaus THEWELEIT, *Das Lachen der Täter: Breivik u. a. Psychogramm der Tötungslust*, Residenz: Salzburg/Wien 2015 (in French: *Le rire des bourreaux. Essai sur le plaisir de tuer*, Seuil: Paris 2019).

4 Bessel VAN DER KOLK, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*, Penguin: London 2015.

5 Peter A. LEVINE, *Waking the Tiger – Healing Trauma*, North Atlantic Books: Berkeley/Ca. 1997.

inhabitants. But the bill does not deal with this widely known problem. Instead it officially points to Muslims as a threat to the country. It will be disclosed on December 9, 2020 in order to mark the 115th anniversary of the still valid law adopted in 1905 which separates churches from the state and institutes the principle of *laïcité* (secularism).

That is where some legal details are essential. The government likes to pretend that its action is meant to accomplish *laïcité*. In reality, it does almost the contrary to what says the text of 1905. *There* we see reaffirmed the freedom of thought and of worship for everyone without exception, including schoolchildren (article 1 of the law). In order to guarantee this, public authorities have to stay neutral in religious affairs (article 2). With the help of the 2004 law mentioned before, a fundamental semantic change has operated: religious neutrality no longer just concerns government, but is extended to more and more categories of citizens in the public space, starting with pupils and profiting of the apparent similarity between *public authorities* and *public space*. As any freedom, freedom of religion is of no use on the toilet cabin and only makes sense in public. That is why the 2004 law is contrary to *laïcité*. But what is the reason for this restriction?

Here we will enter identity politics. As many other countries, France is in an increasingly deep multiple crisis. From the first ‘oil shock’ of 1973 until the current pandemic, French people therefore feel the need to reassure themselves about their identity, and “*one of the surest ways to confirm an identity, for communities as well as for individuals, is to find some way of measuring what one is not*” (I quote the US sociologist Kai ERIKSON)⁶. Indeed, it is the “*boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses*” (to quote the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik BARTH)⁷. In the past, the idea(l) of the “*grande nation*” could thus be derivated from the colonies France thought of civilizing or from a hostile Other such as the Germans (called “*Boches*”), the British (“*Rosbifs*”) or Jews. None of these groups is still available for national demarcation. That is where Muslims are helpful, especially when they can easily be recognized as such, thanks to their outfit or their *halal* diet. I would claim that the stance against Islamic symbols renders the practice of this religion always more visible by pushing more and more Muslims to reappropriate these symbols and especially the veil they are stigmatized with. Much more than a scapegoat, Muslims thus replace the traditional pillars of negative identity construction. Perhaps they are about to become the French equivalent of Blacks in the United States, and islamophobia gets a “*respectable racism*” (quoting the French sociologist Saïd BOUAMAMA)⁸.

6 Kai T. ERIKSON, *Wayward puritans. A study in the sociology of deviance*, John Wiley & Sons : New York et al. 1966, new ed. 2005.

7 Fredrik BARTH (ed.), *Ethnic groups and boundaries. The social organization of culture difference*, Universitetsforlaget : Bergen and Allen & Unwin: London 1969.

8 Saïd BOUAMAMA, *L'affaire du foulard islamique: la production d'un racisme respectable*, Le Geai bleu: Lille 2004.

Let me sum up: The link between massacres and Islam is purely contingent, due to the bad image of Islam in the Western world. But in a strange complicity, both killers and governments have an interest in speaking of *Islamist* terror: killers get rid of their self-image as losers, and governments can externalize the problem of brutally socialized youths, that is make responsible a religion instead of violence in families and society, and thus reaffirm national identity. Together with numerous other authoritarian tendencies, this quest for identity will intensify as president Emmanuel Macron is in competition with extreme-right's Marine Le Pen. He will probably face her again at the next presidential election in Spring 2022. The danger of such identity wars is that the dynamics of moral panic can't be controlled and might possibly lead to persecutions of Muslims in France.

In the early 1940s, my mother, employed by the *Third Reich's* counter-espionage in various European countries, was profiting from the expropriation of Jewish families. My present engagement for *laïcité* – which in my eyes stays the most valuable frame for mutual respect and understanding – is only a small response to the responsibility my family history has placed me in. Thank-you!