Christina von Braun, The Headscarf – an Empty Signifier

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"The woman in Islam" has become a popular theme in western society.[1] Many publications deal with the dark sides of the "other" society: forced marriages, honor killings, or genital mutilation. In the process, people often overlook the fact that, although these practices are frequent in Islamic societies, they are by no means limited to them. Female circumcision, for example, is not mentioned in the Koran, and when an Islamic country in Africa expressly issues a fatwa *against* genital mutilation, as Somalia recently did, no more than a few lines are devoted to this news in the western press. Honor killings and forced marriages (justifiably) dominate the headlines for weeks on end and are viewed as "associated with Islam." Why are there no headlines announcing Somalia's fatwa?

"The woman in Islam" is a much more complex issue than many a western publication would admit (tellingly enough, they almost always refer to a single region and use it to generalize about Islam as a whole). It is sufficient just to read the studies carried out by female authors from Egypt, Turkey, Morocco, Algeria, and Palestine, or to compare the positions of women living in Pakistan and Bangladesh, to realize that there is no such thing as the woman in Islam, but that instead there is an abundance of different testimonies, living conditions, and experiences that shape female life, sexuality, and the gender order.

Undeniably, many women in Islamic countries are disadvantaged: as legal persons as well as in issues of property. But it is astounding that the same people who get so upset about the oppression of women in Islam" so rarely refer to the fact that in the West the wage gap between men and women is still almost 30 percent, not to mention the persistent glass ceilings in many companies, especially in the finance sector. It wasn't so long ago that women in the West began struggling for equal rights. It's also true that many intellectuals in Islamic countries are menaced by fundamentalist currents. But this very hostility to intellectuals and the prevalence of sexism are symptoms common to all fundamentalisms, whether they are of Islamic, Christian, or Jewish origin. The word "fundamentalism" comes from the American Bible Belt, and was used to describe conservative Evangelists. Its impact there can be seen for example in the threats and actual attacks against doctors and clinics that perform abortions—abortions that are permitted by law. On Whit Sunday 2009, a doctor named George Tiller was shot to death in Wisconsin. The

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[1] This essay takes up some aspects of the author's book (co-written with Bettina Mathes), *Verschleierte Wirklichkeit. Die Frau, der Islam und der Westen* (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 2007).

scene of the crime: a church. The act was perpetrated, like the previous attacks against physicians, in the name of Christian teachings. Fundamentalism—whether of the Christian variety or otherwise implies a "literalist" interpretation of the holy scriptures, as sociologist of religion Martin Riesebrodt puts it: "Fundamentalist thinking is shaped by the experience of crisis and sees the cause for the crisis of society as the apostasy from eternal, divinely revealed principles of order that were handed down in writing and put into practice in an ideal society: the 'Golden Age' of a Christian, Islamic or other ancient community."[2] Fundamentalists project this Golden Age onto the past, an age in which there was ostensibly complete harmony between scripture and life. Riesebrodt calls this projection onto the past a "utopian regress."[3] In fundamentalism a holy scripture is declared to represent a divinely willed "original state"; this is therefore a form of unconditional faith in what is written, whereby admittedly and paradoxically it is thus implicitly understood that God could only have created the supposed 'original state' when systems of writing (created by man) already existed. In fact, all three "religions of the book" are based on alphabetic systems of writing that either preceded them (the Semitic alphabet of the Jewish religion, the Greek alphabet of the Christian faith) or followed them (the Arabic writing used in the Koran).[4]

Invoking text is all the more remarkable since most varieties of fundamentalism are characterized by a merely superficial knowledge of the holy scriptures. Egyptian President Mohammed Anwar al-Sadat's assassin was—amazingly enough—offered the opportunity at his trial to justify his deed theologically. The hearings revealed a striking ignorance of the Koran and its various interpretations. A similar lack of knowledge would surely also be exposed upon closer inspection of the arguments put forth by Christian and Jewish fundamentalists. Fundamentalism spreads where the fundament is lacking—more precisely, the religious fundament. In these situations simplistic answers emerge for complex questions; people claim that their own position represents "absolute truth" and whoever holds other views is stigmatized and demonized. Fundamentalist trends can be observed today in all three religions of the book. And many secular debates on the woman in Islam are hardly any less simplistic than those of the fundamentalists.

There are, though, a few outstanding Islamic scholars and authors who are developing a more differentiated picture of Islamic societies. Most of their texts are available in translation if they aren't already written in English or French. All of these writings raise one question, though: What

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[2] Martin Riesebrodt, *Fundamentalismus als patriarchalische Protestbewegung: Amerikanische Protestanten und iranische Schiiten im Vergleich* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1990), p. 19 [Translation of quotation by the translator].

[3] Ibid. p. 21.

[4] See, for example Christina von Braun, *Versuch über den Schwindel. Schrift Bild Religion Geschlecht*. Munich: Pendo Verlag, 2001).

significance can we attribute to the fact that there is such an abundance of western texts about the "Orient"? Put in another way: What do these many texts tell us *about the Occident*? When we study the "dialogue" between Orient and Occident we are quickly confronted with the dilemma that the Occident writes far more about the Orient than vice versa. Certainly, there are a host of political texts (and militant acts) to be found in the countries of the Orient (or coming from these countries) that are directed against the West. They often originate in the circle of the Muslim Brotherhood or other fundamentalist groupings. These texts don't even pretend to be neutral or scientific. They are usually openly polemical. More complicated are the texts written by the West about the Orient, because they claim to take an "objective" or unbiased view of the East. It is this very claim to neutrality and objectivity that deserves a closer look.

That the Occident has written more about the Orient than vice versa is on the one hand a sign of the many fantasies that Orientalism has spawned. On the other hand, it is also an indication of the self-image of the Occident, which likes to assume the guise of a neutral, cross-cultural "universality." Interest in the Orient masks the fact that the West's perspective is anything but objective and neutral. The western gaze at the Orient and its "strangeness" construes a "superior" structure of knowledge and perception. Yet behind this structure—and the objects under its scrutiny—a position is revealed that can be identified in the way these objects are described as strange, other, irrational, or backward—characteristics familiar from gender studies as means of constructing female otherness.[5]

Not only human beings, but also cultural encounters can be decoded using a set of tools borrowed from psychoanalysis. This was already attempted by Algeria-based psychiatrist Frantz Fanon, who described the penetration fantasies underlying colonialism:

> Every rejected veil disclosed to the eyes of the colonialists horizons until then forbidden, and revealed to them, piece by piece, the flesh of Algeria laid bare. The occupier's aggressiveness, and hence his hopes, multiplied ten-fold each time a new face was uncovered. […] Every veil that fell, every body that became liberated from the traditional embrace of the *haïk*, every face that offered itself to the bold and impatient glance of the occupier, was a negative expression of the fact that Algeria was beginning to deny herself and was accepting the rape of the colonizer.[6]

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[5] See Christina von Braun, *Nicht ich. Logik, Lüge, Libido* (1985) (Berlin: Aufbau-Verlag, 2009).

[6] Frantz Fanon, "Algerien legt den Schleier ab," in Fanon, *Aspekte der algerischen Revolution* (Frankfurt/M.: Suhrkamp, 1969), p. 26. [English translation from "Algeria Unveiled," in Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Grove Press, 1965) p. 42.]

Fanon's text on the Algerian war of independence has taken on new pertinence in the face of today's headscarf debate, because it makes it clear that this "rape" was not so much of the individual woman as of the Algerian nation as a whole. But Fanon also described how women experienced their unveiling individually: as alienation from their own bodies. He wrote about women who *shed* their veils during the Algerian Civil War in order to pass as unsuspicious "converts" to European society and thus be able to smuggle weapons and news:

> One must have heard the confessions of Algerian women or have analyzed the dream content of certain recently unveiled women to appreciate the importance of the veil for the body of the woman. Without the veil she has an impression of her body being cut up into bits; put adrift; the limbs seem to lengthen indefinitely. When the Algerian woman has to cross a street, for a long time she commits errors of judgment as to the exact distance to be negotiated. The unveiled body seems to escape, to dissolve. She has an impression of being improperly dressed, even of being naked. She experiences a sense of incompleteness with great intensity. She has the anxious feeling that something is unfinished, and along with this a frightful sensation of disintegrating.[7]

Paradoxically, the West uses similar images today of "unease," "lack of volition," and "insecurity" to describe the body of the woman *under* the veil.

We must not forget that the veil has also been an integral part of the history of the Christian world of the West. Many people like to gloss over this fact today, although up until the 1960s and 1970s many prominent women in western culture—movie stars like Grace Kelly, Brigitte Bardot, and Jeanne Moreau, or royalty such as Queen Elizabeth II and Queen Fabiola—were often photographed wearing headscarves. When we still see such scarves today, for example worn by rural farming women, we tend to view them as a component of traditional rural folk wear. In reality, however, they are a relic of a notion that is widespread in Christian society: that a woman should cover her head as soon as she is married. An historical examination of the veil reveals that it is not a woman's *veiling*, but rather her *unveiling* that calls for an explanation.

On the History of the Veil[8]

The veil was not invented by Islam; it wasn't even part of Islam from the very beginning, but was instead adopted in the course of its confrontation with the older, pre-Islamic cultures and the two

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[7] Ibid., p. 42 [p.59].

[8] Translator Jennifer Taylor wishes to acknowledge consultation of an extract of Christina von Braun and Bettina Mathes's book *Verschleierte Wirklichkeit. Die Frau, der Islam und der Westen*, which was translated from German to English by Rupert V.D. Glasgow in 2007. The English translations of quotations in this section of the text are taken from Glasgow's version. Eds.

other monotheistic religions Judaism and Christianity.[9] Although today we view the veiling of women as a specific feature of Islam, it is in reality an element of the "unity of the Mediterranean" and was widespread among Jewish and Greek women, in Syria, and in Byzantium. The veil was initially a status symbol reserved for women of the higher classes only. In Islamic lands as well, the veil was initially worn only by Mohammed's wives and later by women of the patrician classes. It was only in the ninth century that it became an obligatory element of civilian (as opposed to the sacred) female dress, its form varying by region and depending, as it still does today, on which of the many groupings within Islam a woman belonged to. Describing the veiling of women as a genuine Islamic custom is, according to religious historian Leila Ahmed, who teaches at Harvard Divinity School, "a distortion of historical facts"[10] that ignores the exchanges and the continuities among the various cultures and religions in the Middle East and Mediterranean.[11]

The veil and headscarf have political, sexual, religious, and social meanings that combine and overlap: the head covering can connote class affiliation, regional distinctions, or religious belief as well as signifying the status of femaleness. The veil can be traced back all the way to early antiquity as both attribute of goddesses and a garment worn by ordinary mortal women. The earliest evidence comes from Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean region. In ancient Greece as well, the veil was part of the attire worn by married women from the upper classes. Brides likewise wear a veil over their face as a sign of their modesty—a custom practiced by both the Jews and the Greeks and later adopted by the Romans. In Hebrew the literal meaning of the word for bride (*kallatu*) is "the veiled one." By lifting the bride's veil the bridegroom symbolically exposes her pudenda, and by thus "knowing" her he symbolically performs the sexual act.[12]

While the veil as an attribute of the goddess symbolizes her independence as well as the unavailability of what is sacred—the unmarried priestesses of the Roman goddess Vesta, for example, guarded an inner realm protected by curtains and hidden from the sight of mere mortals, where they performed their rituals unseen—in the secular sphere, a wife uses the veil to demonstrate her association with a man (her respectability) and thereby distinguish herself from the prostitute, who was forbidden from donning the veil under threat of severe punishment. In

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[9] For a detailed account see Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam. Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).
[10] Ibid., p. 5.
[11] Ibid., p. 36.
[12] Alfred Jeremias, "Der Schleier von Sumer bis Heute," in *Der Alte Orient*, 31 (1931), p. 33. On the religious symbolism of the veil, see also Moshe Barasch, "Der Schleier. Das Geheimnis in den Bildvorstellungen der Spätantike," in Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann, *Schleier und Schwelle II. Geheimnis und Offenbarung*, (Munich: Fink, 1998), pp. 181–204.

Christianity, by contrast, the veil signals the renunciation of sexuality and reproduction, without however completely suppressing the other possible meanings. Finally, to cite one final paradox, the veil can mark the woman's body as absent and mysterious, *and* it can symbolize that invisible "secret of virginity" hidden within the female body. Many depictions of the Annunciation thus showed Mary busy spinning and weaving when the angel arrived to announce that, though a virgin, she would give birth to a son.[13] Following the "discovery" of the maidenhead in the eleventh century, the veil came to symbolize the invisible hymen of the virgin.

The semantic richness of the veil is great, touching on political, religious, physical, and many other dimensions. It plays an important role in the encounter between Islam and western society, because it also has a long tradition in Christian society. Of the three religions of the book, only the Christian faith ever required women to cover their heads when entering a house of God. This utterly divergent significance attributed to the veiling of the woman in the Christian faith can be explained by examining the differences between how the religions are structured. Unlike the Jewish religion or Islam, Christian doctrine proclaims at its heart a message of unveiling, set down in the last book of the New Testament, the Revelation to John. The Greek word for revelation is *apokalypsis*, literally "unveiling," which is composed of *kalypta*, referring to a sort of veil-like shawl, and the prefix *apo* (= away from, off). The Latin concept of *revelatio* also denotes a symbolic act of unveiling (*velum* = veil or curtain). Both the Jewish and Islamic faiths assume a hidden God who must not be depicted—thus remaining veiled—and with whom the believer cannot come into direct contact: he must therefore veil himself when confronting Him. For this reason, when both Moses and Mohammed received the revealed Word, it was necessary for them to veil their heads. In the Hebrew Bible it is said that on the Mountain of God, Moses "hid his face; for he was afraid to look upon God" (2 Moses, 3:6), while in the case of Mohammed, tradition has it that, prior to his abduction, as he felt the approach of God, he called out: "Wrap me up." In fact, in Islamic tradition Mohammed is also known as "the Veil Man" (dū l-himar).[14] In two suras of the Koran he is explicitly addressed as "O Veiled One" (73:1) and "O Covered One" (74:1). As a "religion of unveiling," Christianity obeys a different logic. The notion of unveiling implies being able to see and comprehend the Truth of Christ, i.e. the secret of God, unconcealed, in the form of Christ, the "word made flesh," in other words, the Son of God made *visible*.

[13] Ibid., p. 39.
[14] Ibid., p. 60.

These far-reaching differences have implications for the symbolic gender order in the three Religions of the Book. In all three religions gender relations can be seen as a mirror of the relationship between God and Man. In Islam and Judaism there is an insurmountable boundary between God's eternity and human, earthly mortality that is reflected in both aniconism and in the principle of gender segregation. "Restrictions for women," according to Islam scholar Malise Ruthven, "are closely bound up with conceptions of sacredness."[15] The veil worn by women symbolizes the borderline drawn between the divine and the worldly. At the same time, it is derived both historically and etymologically from the curtain that protects the private from the public. It is not revelation (*revelatio*) that takes priority here, but rather the concept of the veil—*hijab*—which originally meant partition or curtain. A distinctive architectural feature of Islamic women's chambers is the so-called *mashrabiya*. This is an ornamental screen usually made of wood, which lets air and light through. Since it is not completely closed, women can look through it without being seen themselves. The *mashrabiya* is an architectural form of veil, and conversely the veil is a wearable, textile form of *mashrabiya*.

In Christianity by contrast, the boundary between God and Man is lifted. The prevailing ideal is accordingly one of gender *symbiosis*. Here again Paul set the standards by drawing an analogy between the relationship of Christ to ecclesia and the relation between the sexes. Christ is viewed as the "head" of the church, and the community of believers as its body: "So also ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife, loveth himself."[16] The law of the indissolubility of marriage, which out of all religions of the world is known only to Christianity, can hardly be made more tangible than through the image of a head married to its own body. Also contributing to this symbiotic gender order is the fact that in the Christian faith woman is seen as a "likeness"—or reproduction—of man.

The profound differences between the religions also engendered a different appreciation of sexuality. In the Christian religion the veil symbolizes in some cases the choice of sexual asceticism and lifelong virginity. By donning the veil, a chaste woman signals her status as "bride of Christ." The veil of the Christian virgin is a sign of her withdrawal from the world, signifying how she has overcome her sexuality in order to turn her body into a "sacred vessel dedicated to the Lord."[17] Judaism and Islam by contrast reject celibate communities of women (or men), just as they do Christianity's demonization of sexuality. Sexuality is instead generally seen as positive.

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[15] Malise Ruthven, *Der Islam. Eine kurze Einführung* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2000), p. 127.
[16] Ephesians 5:28.
[17] Quoted in Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Reunciation in Early Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 259.

"Unlike the virgin Jesus, the Prophet of Islam is extolled as someone who enjoys not only the company of women, but also the pleasures of sexuality. [...] Sexual pleasures are a foretaste of paradise," writes historian Malise Ruthven. This high regard for sexuality does not mean, though, that women have "free reign" over their sexuality. As in all cultures, sexuality in Islam, as in Judaism, is subject to a host of regulations, the most important common feature of which is an emphasis on the separation of the sexes that affects both genders. "It can even be said," maintains sociologist Nilüfer Göle, "that in the Islamic system there are many more prohibitions on men and women being together than curtailments of women's rights."[18] That the veiling of women in public space did not necessarily entail the suppression of female sexuality but rather indicated a specific way of dealing with it, is substantiated by the comments of Turkish women who dropped their veils with the founding of the Republic in 1923: they perceived this measure as equivalent to a "neutralization of their sexual identity," comparable to that of unveiled western women. It was clear to them that as soon as a woman shows herself unveiled in public, her "sexual energy" would have to be domesticated in other ways. As an "emancipated," woman with equal rights, she could only be viewed as asexual. "In other words," Göle writes, "the Kemalist woman may have removed her facial veil and shawl, but instead she has 'veiled' her sexuality, publicly armored herself, made herself 'untouchable,' 'unattainable.'" Unveiling thus demands a specific form of internalized self-discipline new to Islamic cultures, which envelops the body like a second, invisible and therefore seemingly "natural" skin: a tissue of cultural disciplinary techniques that might also be described as a kind of "super-ego" that covers the skin (but is at the same time internalized).

The veil is an "empty signifier," and ongoing changes in the way this symbol is charged can also be witnessed in the Islamic world. The Koran's seemingly clear command on the veil, cited by all of its advocates, is anything but explicit,[19] and in any case much less straightforward than Paul's exhortation in his first letter to the Corinthians, which forms the Christian basis for women's veiling.[20] The ambiguity of the statement on veil wearing in the Koran, as well as the varying messages sent by this practice, have led to different perceptions of head coverings in the various Islamic countries. The spectrum ranges from the complete veiling of Taliban women to the scarf that Muslim women in Pakistan or India loosely wrap around their head.

The western fixation on the veil often hinders us from recognizing political controversies and

[18] Nilüfer Göle, *Republik und Schleier. Die muslimische Frau in der Moderne* (Berlin: Schiler Verlag, 1995), p. 91.
[19] Surahs 24:31. cited in the German translation *Der Koran*, trans. from the Arabic by Max Henning, with an introduction and notes by Annemarie Schimmel (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1991).
[20] Corinthians 11:3–16.

secularization tendencies occurring *within* Islamic societies. Both historically and more recently, the veil and unveiling have repeatedly been used as tools to achieve political ends. This was as true for Iran during the Shah's regime as it was for the country's religious revolution under Khomeini. In Afghanistan under the Taliban, the requirement for women to veil themselves was connected with massive repressive measures. On the other hand, the veil has also been used by women themselves as a political weapon. When Sultan Mohammed V of Morocco was exiled by the French, women in many Moroccan cities exchanged their traditional white veils for black ones—drawing on this symbolism to demonstrate their solidarity with the ruling house and support for national independence.

The veil was politicized long before the advent of colonialism. When the Sheik of the Algerian city of Constantine was murdered by his rival Hasan Pasha in 1792, the women of the city exchanged their white *haiks* for black ones overnight. In other areas the veil became a symbol of women cutting themselves off *from foreign Islamic rule*.[21] The veil has thus recurrently been used as a symbol to distinguish a group from a majority or from foreign rule, which sometimes, but by no means always, originated in the West. *Un*veiling likewise resonates with political symbolism: for example in Algeria's struggle for independence, where unveiling became a strategy for "disguise" and a tactic in the partisan battle; or in the building of a secular Turkish nation state. In Iran the veil was called into play twice during the twentieth century to help establish new regimes. In the 1930s Reza Shah, father of Mohammed Reza Shah, who was later overthrown by Khomeini, proclaimed compulsory unveiling of women on the model of Turkey, a ruling that was later reversed by the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which compelled women to once again cover themselves. Women who wanted to protest against the Shah's dictatorship did so by demonstratively wearing veils.

The 'Veiled Orient' as "Mystery"

The veil is not merely a garment that conceals and reveals; it is also an ancient symbol for mysteries that elude our gaze. Western culture has always understood mysterious things as a challenge to gain new awareness. For the Turkish sociologist Meyda Yeğenoğlu, the veil serves on the one hand "as a screen around which Western fantasies of penetration revolve." On the other hand, she argues that "what is outside is paradoxically what makes the West what it is, the

[21] This was the case for the Mzābites, for example, who split off from other Islamic peoples at an early date and in the seventeenth century migrated to a group of oases in southern Algeria. They were called the "Puritans of Islam." This Puritanism was expressed in strong endogamy—men being obligated to marry women from their own community—as well as the complete veiling of the women, with only one eye exposed. The Mzābites live in one of the most inhospitable regions of North Africa and are among Algeria's most successful merchants. Because of their association with Puritanism and economic dynamism, they have often been compared with the Calvinists. See Maxime Rodinson, *Islam und Kapitalismus* (Frankfurt/M: Surhkampf, 1986).

excluded yet integral part of its identity and power."[22] For the West the veil thus becomes a means of *creating* mystery.

Many recent statements and texts by politicians, legal authorities, journalists, and sociologists can be read as "literary" texts—as treatises that tell us something about the desires, the longings, and the fears of their authors and their age. In his book *Orientalism*, Edward Said portrays to what extent western culture has transformed the Orient into a grandiose novel:

> The Orient is not only adjacent to Europe; it is also the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages; its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other. In addition, the Orient has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience. Yet none of this Orient is merely imaginative. The Orient is an integral part of European *material* civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles.[23]

Because the encounter between Orient and Occident involves so many subtexts and unconscious content, this encounter harbors many paradoxes. Freud said of the unconscious that it knows neither the "logical laws of thought" nor the contradiction; nor does it take any consideration of reality.[24] A similar "estrangement from reality" characterizes the Occident's fantasies about the Orient. The fantasies range from the erotic Odalisque to the powerless, servile woman, serving as cover picture for the "Riddle of Islam" [*Der Spiegel*, January 1998 issue] as well as for suicide bombers. This material is capable of developing such a tremendous political impact precisely because the Orient is viewed as a novel. It is always a possibility (or a fantasy), not reality, that sets our feelings aflutter, and this principle is especially true when the fantasies are charged with sexual imagery. In this sense we can say that the "enigmatic" western subject finds its mirror image in the so-called riddle of Islam.

For the West, the Orient has become a "total work of art" as philosophy and sociology, literature and film quote one another and legitimate the whole constructed fabric as "truth." Strange,

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[22] Meyda Yeğenoğlu, *Colonial Fantasies. Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 47

[23] Edward Said, *Orientalismus*, Frankfurt/M., Berlin, Vienna 1981, p. 8 [Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979)]

[24] Sigmund Freud, "Das Unbewußte," in Freud, *Gesammelte Werke* Teil X (Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 1952), pp. 263–303, here p. 286; and Freud, "Neue Folge der Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse," XXXI. Vorlesung, in: *Gesammelte Werke*, Teil XV, Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 1952), pp. 62–86, here p. 80.

though, how this truth clings so to the symbol of the veil. One gets the impression from the debate on the headscarf that the West has attached a great deal of its unconscious, unwritten, repressed questions to this item of clothing (or disguise), which appears to have become a screen for a host of projections of the western ego. Novalis back in his day already suspected that the veil had acquired this function: when his hero is in the end finally permitted to lift the veil from the goddess of Sais, he discovers beneath it none other than his own countenance. In other words, if the veil had not already existed, the West would have had to invent it in order to harbor its many fantasies of itself in the mirror of the Orient. That's why it should make Europeans think twice when France bans wearing the headscarf in school based on the argument that France is a secular country, while the German state of Baden Württemberg explains its headscarf-free schools by pointing out that German society has been shaped by Christianity. The result is the same: off with the headscarf! But the justifications are contradictory—and they always serve to vindicate the self: a negative variation on the Peace of Westphalia, *cuius regio eius religio*.

Western Unveiling

The fact that the Christian faith views itself as a religion of *unveiling* would become a determining factor for the secular western world. The Occident owed many of the innovations that led to a rapid growth in knowledge during the Renaissance to the Arab region. This goes for medicine and mathematics as well as for many technological advances. In some fields, however, completely new inventions came from the West: in particular clockworks, book printing, and visualization techniques such as central perspective, the telescope, microscope, and later photography and film. The technologies of clockworks and book printing, for example, would contribute to a phase of flourishing innovation in the West during the Renaissance. This can also be said of the visualization techniques with which the Christian paradigm of *revelatio*, or unveiling, migrated from theology to the worldly and scientific realm. In the search for earthly "truth," the Occident invented a plethora of optical devices that enabled a steady stream of new *dis-coveries* to be made. This push for revelation also lent itself to certain aspects of sex. Thanks to the new visual apparatus, unknown worlds could be penetrated and "dark continents" brought to light. Whether it was the human body, the natural environment or actual foreign continents, the object of knowledge was always imagined as a female body that was to be "deflowered" and unveiled by science. The momentum of this *dis-covery* process was reflected in developments in medicine and in the arts: by Titian or Dürer, for example, who demonstrated how the artist could penetrate the mysteries of the female body with his eyes and employing the tool of central perspective. The trend continued in the medical anatomical drawings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; a statue from 1800 that still adorns the entrance to Paris' École de Médecine shows a female

figure ripping her own clothes from her body. Underneath are the words: *la nature se dévoile devant la science*.

From the mid-nineteenth century onward—or more precisely, with the advent of photography (that eye that, in a strange parallel with the veiled woman, can see without itself being seen)—this unveiling was no longer conceived allegorically, but instead led to the actual disrobing of the female body in photographic portrayals. Its unveiling accompanied the development of modern optical devices and culminated (temporarily) in the invention of the bikini in 1946. Ever since then, it would be hard to find a product or a magazine that does not use naked skin for advertising purposes. This rapid unveiling to which the female body has been subjected in western society over the last hundred years is mentioned astonishingly rarely in connection with the headscarf debate—and when it is, it is understood as a sign of female emancipation and freedom. In reality, however, the disrobing of the female body serves to demonstrate the power of the gaze and its ability to recognize the "truth."

Photography played a critical role not only for the western system of knowledge, but also for colonialism: both in the emergence of western harem fantasies and in the violent unveiling of the Muslim woman. The one-eyed, seemingly disembodied gaze of the photographer, which cannot be returned, penetrates the space and the body and does not tolerate any private (taboo) zones. Today's technology has discovered how to make this symbolic veil of the seeing subject invisible; the early cameras even demanded of the photographer that he cover his head with a black opaque cloth strikingly similar to the veil worn by Muslim women. European photographers opened studios in Algiers, Cairo, or Istanbul to take pictures of supposed harem scenes (which they in reality had never witnessed) and of half-unveiled women in lascivious poses and luxurious settings. These staged pictures were sold in large numbers as postcards in the European colonies.[25] The publishers back home made sure that the apparently realistic photographs of unveiled beauties appealed to western fantasies of the Orient. The photos that Englishwoman Grace Ellis took inside a real Turkish harem and sent to a British newspaper were conversely rejected as too unrealistic.[26]

The veiled woman not only eludes the colonizers' gaze; she herself becomes an observer that cannot be seen. Algerian-born French philosopher Malek Alloula pinpointed why this refusal is

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[25] Malek Alloula, *The Colonial Harem* (Minneapolis: Univesity of Minnesota Press, 1986) and Sarah Graham-Brown, "The Seen, The Unseen and the Imagined. Private and Public Lives," in Reina Lewis, Sara Mills (eds.), *Feminist Postcolonial Theory. A Reader* (London: Routledge/Chapman Hall, 2003), pp. 502–519.
[26] Graham-Brown, "The Seen, The Unseen and the Imagined," pp. 502–519, 510.

so provocative:

> These veiled women are not only an embarrassing enigma to the photographer but an outright attack upon him. [...] concentrated by the tiny orifice for the eye, this womanly gaze is a little like the eye of a camera, like the photographic lens that takes aim at everything. The photographer makes no mistake about it; he knows this gaze well; it resembles his own when it is extended by the dark chamber or the viewfinder. Thrust in the presence of a veiled woman, the photographer feels photographed, having himself become an object-to-be-seen, he loses initiative: *he is dispossessed of his own gaze*.[27]

By interpreting the veil and headscarf worn by Muslim women as symbols of patriarchal subjugation and an "Islamist fundamentalism," the West also reveals something of its own ideological use of the female body in western history. As an object of *dis-covery*, woman's body has served as an allegory for enlightenment and the age of emancipation. Some of the social achievements of the modern age—such as the call for liberty, equality, brotherhood or for the Republic—were given visible, tangible form by embodying them as female figures: for example, Marianne mounting the barricades in the French Revolution, her upper body exposed. Yet depictions of the exposed female body in the West did not fail to have repercussions for the women themselves. Without bare-breasted Marianne atop the barricades of the Republic, the rapid disrobing of her body could never have been sold to the European woman as a sign of her supposed freedom and equal rights.

If we want to understand the cultural history dimension of the current headscarf debate, which leads far beyond the question of whether a headscarf conveys ideological, anti-Western or anti-emancipatory messages, we cannot avoid pondering the incredible speed with which the female body has been disrobed in the western world during the past hundred years. This does not imply any criticism of the midriff-baring t-shirt, but only the question of whether this kind of nakedness is truly a harbinger of the "emancipation of women" and as free of ideology and social pressure as some defenders of western freedom claim. There is no "correct attitude" to the headscarf issue. There can be no collective decision here, but rather only choices made on a case-to-case basis. Sometimes the headscarf does in fact signify the repression of women. In other cases, though, it is worn by young women who are on their way to joining the modern world—embarking on academic studies or jobs—but do not want to look like a "western woman." In Iran, where women are legally required to wear a headscarf, more than half of all students are female. In some disciplines, there is talk of introducing quotas for men. Among those studying in

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[27] Alloula, *Colonial Harem*, p. 14.

the United Arab Emirates, women make up 65 percent (!). Their literacy rates are also higher than those of men: 90 versus 74 percent. In Algeria 60 percent of all judges are women—both veil-wearing and not. In progressive, enlightened, emancipated Europe, we could search for a long time before we found a country where women have such an extensive influence on the dispensing of justice.

There is little reason to idealize the role of women in Islamic countries. But it is easy to get the impression that all the talk of the "repression of women" in Islam is sometimes used as a pretext for distracting attention from what are often not very emancipated living conditions for women in the West. Strangely enough, many western feminists play a prominent role in this diversionary tactic—as if it were a matter of proving their own superiority to Muslim women. One has to wonder, for example, at the strange consensus that has emerged between feminism and the Vatican. *Ex occidente lux*? We can be permitted to doubt it.

(Translated from German by Jennifer Taylor)