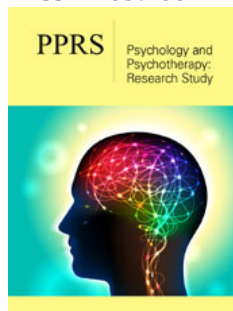


# The Crisis of Islam

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## I.

About 30 years ago the book «Zwang zur Häresie» (Heretical Imperative) was published. In it, the sociologist of religion Peter Berger formulated that under the conditions of modernity, or more precisely, of pluralism in modern societies, it is not possible for the subject to hold on to the tradition in which he or she grew up. [1] Every subject, in the course of its development—mostly in the context of adolescence—comes to a point where it recognizes that the tradition in which it stands is only one among many. This realization necessarily leads to a rupture: no matter how the subject develops, everything becomes different simply because it has to make a decision. Even if the subject decides to hold on to tradition, it loses its character of self-evidence and becomes a renewed tradition. If, on the other hand, the subject decides to leave the tradition behind, it faces the challenge of creating a completely new tradition. Berger's theorem originated in the context of a sociology of religion focusing on Christianity, but it can be generalized and applied to other religions as well.

Following Berger [1], Martin EM & Scott A [2] examined the three monotheistic religions in their current forms in the 1990s and drew up a typology that questions the subject's decision as to how, if religion is adhered to, it is placed in relation to modernity: The reform-oriented type is characterized by the attempt to renew religion with the aim of minimizing tensions between it and modernity as far as possible. The orthodox type is based on the attempt to preserve tradition (especially traditional practice) as completely as possible, while the fundamentalist type is characterized by the effort to bring religion into opposition to modernity. Further research followed up on these studies [3]. As plausible as these considerations are, they fall short: On the one hand, freedom opens up for the subject in modernity, which it can use for far-reaching decisions. On the other hand, however, something is also lost with the break with tradition. The entry into modernity means a deep crisis for the subject. Before asking how the subject resolves this crisis, it is first necessary to pursue the question of what has triggered the crisis and what it does to the subject. In addition, the question arises to what extent the tradition in which the subject has stood up to now can help it to overcome the crisis.

## II.

Recently, the French psychoanalyst Fethi Benslama pointed out that the traditional order in many Islamic countries dissolved in the course of colonialism. It was this, he said, that led to the subject, embedded in the traditional order, entering into a crisis. This crisis, he argues, was not ended by decolonization but, on the contrary, was additionally exacerbated. [4] Benslama thus shares the diagnosis of rupture, of crisis. In contrast to the sociologists, however, he does not directly ask how the subject resolved the crisis by making a decision, but first highlights how extreme the experience of crisis was or still is: the subject was gripped by a radical despair. To put it bluntly, Benslama interprets the break with tradition as a trauma, that is, as an experience so overwhelming that it can hardly be processed by the subject. And this trauma demands «cultural work. Only through such can the trauma be overcome. He tries to contribute to this cultural work on two levels: on the one hand, by dealing with the tradition in which the subject stood, and on the other hand, by analyzing that solution to the crisis which has become attractive to many Muslims in their despair, radical Islam. In his late

writing «Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische religion» (The Man Moses and the Monotheistic Religion) Freud had formulated the thesis that Islam was to be understood as a «recovery of the father» [5]. This corresponds to Freud's understanding of religion as an expression of an infantile need for protection. The subject, detached from his bodily father, longs for a substitute and finds it in the mental construction of an instance to which superhuman power is attributed [6]. Compared to Judaism, to which Freud devoted himself primarily in his study, the Islamic recovery of the father was characterized by the fact that, on the one hand, it led to a pronounced self-consciousness, the self-consciousness of a «chosen people,» but, on the other hand, it did not lead to a deep anchoring of the relationship to the one God within the subject.

In Judaism this had been brought about by a consciousness of guilt. This was due, Freud assumes, to the fact that Moses was murdered. In Islam, however, there is no reason for any kind of consciousness of guilt. Benslama takes up the Freudian formulation of the «recovery of the father,» but does not relate it to the one God in whose service Mohammed, who grew up fatherless, placed himself as a prophet, for it is said of him that he must not be presented as a father. In contrast to Judaism, the one God is not conceived as a father god in Islam. But the one over whom the one God was recovered, according to Benslama, was a father. In Judaism, according to Freud, the recovery of the Father was through Moses. In Islam, according to Benslama, it was another figure through whom the reclamation took place: Abraham, who was understood as the first Muslim and whose fatherhood was decidedly made the subject. In the center of his contribution to a necessary «cultural work» Benslama puts Abraham, more precisely, that family constellation, to which, besides Abraham, also Sarah, Hagar as well as Isaac and Ishmael belong.

The subject of his analysis is not one triad, nor are there two independently existing triads, but two triads which are identical in one point—that of the father—but otherwise different. Abraham, to whom fatherhood was promised by God, is related on the one hand to Sarah, to whom he is married, a «legal woman», who, however, despite the divine promise, initially does not become pregnant, and on the other hand to Hagar, a slave woman, an «other woman». First he has a child by the latter, Ishmael, later also by Sarah. According to the Quran, the Islamic genealogy runs from Abraham through Hagar and Ishmael. From a psychoanalytical point of view, Benslama points out two aspects in relation to the triad of Abraham, Hagar and Ishmael: On the one hand, it is significant that the relationship between Abraham and Ishmael, between father and son, does not develop in the direction of competition. It is, according to Benslama, not an oedipal one. Rather, the two find each other in the act of establishing the Kaaba, which Benslama interprets as symbolizing a phallus. Second, Benslama emphasizes that although Hagar is of basal importance to Islamic genealogy, she is (almost) absent from the Quran. This is due to the fact that she stands in opposition to the legal woman Sarah. Hagar embodies the other, the desire, the unbounded desire. That is why she was removed from the tradition, why she was repressed. And this repressed, however, reappears in the current crisis.

### III.

The crisis of Islam has lasted a long time and is still virulent. Likewise, the attempt to bring Islam into opposition with modernity can still be observed. Benslama addresses this attempt in a second study, the title of which says, if not everything, at least a great deal: «Der Über-Muslim» (The super-Muslim) [7] The study is based on the psychoanalyst's work with young people from, the banlieues of Paris. These, like all their peers, experience a rupture in adolescence, enter a crisis. They feel uprooted, have lost their youthful ideals, search for new ones, and come across the offer of radical Islam. This offers them a new ideal, a new rooting «in heaven,» and it arouses feelings of guilt in them. It gives them the impression that they are not sufficiently Muslim. This process can be understood as a renewed «recovery of the father,» which leads internally to the erection of a strict Muslim superego, a «super-Muslim. If the offer of radical Islam is accepted, this results in an enormous narcissistic boost: Just as the self-esteem of the first Muslims rose enormously as a result of their commitment to Islam, so today young people who join radical Islam feel great again.

On the other hand, however, there is also a de-subjectification: the subject submits to the program of radical Islam, a form of methodical lifestyle, and develops into an «automaton». In the 1970s, Benslama says, a process began that he calls «fatwa mania.» Countless religious advisory opinions were published in response to real or perceived questions from Muslims regarding their faith practices. One substantive focus of these fatwas, he says, has been gender relations. Benslama sees them as an expression of the «return of the repressed,» the desire for the other, the other woman. The fatwas, according to Benslama, serve to suppress this desire, which is seen as a threat to conformity to the demands of the super-Muslim. They serve to protect the community of believers «from woman as the uncontrollable and total sexual object.» Last but not least, Benslama sees radical Islam as a desire for a community into which the subject can fit and be absorbed. However, it is necessary to come to terms with the conditions of modern societies, to take a place in them, and to help shape them. «Since the advent of the Enlightenment in the Muslim world, the advocates of the organic community of Islam and those who seek to replace it with a reflective society governed by means of a nation-state, whatever the manifestations of this endeavor, have faced each other in a ferocious war that has lasted more than two centuries.»

### IV.

Finally, the crisis of Islam can be interpreted in yet another way, namely, as a crisis of certainty. Any action by the subject presupposes a process of interpretation, or more precisely, a pattern of interpretation that can be used to justify decisions and give meaning to action. This interpretive pattern, as sociologist Ulrich Oevermann has argued, emerges against the backdrop of an awareness of the finitude of life and offers an answer to three fundamental questions: where do we come from, who are we, and where are we going [8]? Since the three questions cannot ultimately be answered rationally or scientifically, a myth is needed; Oevermann speaks of a «Bewährungsmythos» (myth of probation),

since it provides the subject with those criteria with the help of which it can answer whether it has proven itself with its actions, indeed in its life. And because the underlying problem of probation is universal, man basically needs such a myth of probation. While in the past it was religions that gave an answer to the three questions, in the modern age it is also secular myths of probation that a subject can fall back on or that he has to create in order to give sense to his life. But if this is so, if therefore every human being-Overmann speaks generally of a „Lebenspraxis“ (life practice)-is dependent on a myth which ultimately cannot be proven, then the question arises how the subject can be sure of the myth, how it can be certain of it. The American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, in the essay „Die Festigung der Überzeugung“ (The Fixation of Belief), addressed this elementary question of what methods there are for «fixing» convictions or patterns of interpretation. How can evidence be established, can doubt be quieted, and can certainty be produced? According to Peirce, different methods can be used: the method of tenacity, that of appeal to authority, the a priori method, and also the method of science.

All religions have to deal with this problem, but there is hardly any other religion where this problem as well as the attempts to solve it are so «openly exposed» as in Islam. This is true from the very beginning. Thus it is reported that Mohammed, after he received the first revelation, was seized by doubts, which were quieted only by his wife, Chadidja. She assured him that God had indeed spoken to him-through the angel Gabriel-and that he had been called to be a prophet [9]. Subsequently, various methods of stilling doubts have been of importance: especially the method of tenacity as well as that of authority [10]. And it became important what already played a role in Muhammad's first doubts: evidence through communization. The crisis into which Islam has fallen as a result of its confrontation with modernity is also, indeed is above all, a crisis of certainty. And the despair to which Benslama referred is the despair of no longer possessing certainty and thus of no longer being able to be sure how a probation can be possible and how life can be given sense.

In addition, tradition, the religious tradition, offers hardly any approaches that enable the subject to overcome the crisis in such a way that doubts can be admitted, the subject can face them and seek solutions that make possible a connection of religiosity with that autonomy that is expected of the subject in modernity. This is due, on the one hand, to the fact that, methodologically speaking, a hermeneutic approach to tradition is difficult to legitimize because of the concept of revelation as found in the Quran [11]. Secondly, in terms of content, there are hardly any approaches on the level of myth that allow to think the autonomy of the subject. This can already be shown by an analysis of that answer which is given in the Quran to the question «Where do we come from?», i.e. with reference to the myth of origin: The story of Adam and Eve is constructed differently in the Quran than in the Bible. There is no mention of two trees, that of knowledge and that of life; more precisely, the tree of knowledge does not appear in the Quran. Eating the forbidden fruit is therefore a mere disobedience that is not connected with any knowledge. It alone is followed by a punishment. The fall of

man is not, as in the Bible, also a liberation event through which people gain the ability to distinguish between good and evil and become autonomous [8-10].

## V.

In summary, the crisis in which Islam is, or rather Muslims have found themselves as a result of the rupture of tradition, is of existential significance. The certainty in life, which was supported by the traditional order, has dwindled, despair has set in, and multiple attempts at solutions have been made, including at the political level. As far as the subject is concerned, as was pointed out with reference to Berger, his solution to the crisis is based on a decision. If tradition is to be adhered to or returned to, this decision leads to various types of religiosity, that of orthodoxy, a neo-traditionalism or even fundamentalism [3]. Benslama has pointed out that the latter not infrequently recurs to a method of stilling doubt that at first glance seems incompatible with religion, that of science [4]. It is noteworthy that a certain type of religiosity, although also encountered, is rather rare in quantitative terms: reform Islam. In light of the above, several reasons for this can be considered: the problem of legitimizing a hermeneutics of sacred texts, the lack of an articulation of autonomy at the level of myth, and the way in which the Oedipus complex is resolved, to a certain extent «anti-oedipal [11].» The «recovery of the father» that characterizes radical Islam is linked to a strict superego, an «super-Muslim.» It responds to the «return of the repressed,» of boundless desire and the notion of women as «total sexual objects,» associated not least with Western culture, with a tightening of control over urges [12]. The idea that women could emancipate themselves is already not formed on the level of the myth of origin: In the Quranic variant of the paradise story, Eve, together with Adam, violates God's will, but she is not the one on whose initiative emancipation, the step into autonomy, is based. According to Benslama's analysis, woman in the tradition is either thought of as a «legal woman» or imagined as the embodiment of male desire [13]. Accordingly, it is not surprising if women, Muslim women, who want to emancipate themselves are reacted to in such a way that they are subsumed into either one or the other category. The «cultural work» that is necessary requires a variety of perspectives [14]. One of these perspectives-especially in view of the fact that a reform of Islam is at best in its infancy-is the perspective of theology. Without a different interpretation of Islam, a solution to the crisis is hardly conceivable [15].

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