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Ihr IxTheo Team



Kermani's writing on Islamic religion

Navid Kermani is not only known for his writing and journalism, but also for his academic expertise as a theologian. In this context, we should be aware of his dissertation and his second book, both written on an area of Oriental Studies, but which by now are also much discussed in Religious Studies and related fields. It is hardly possible to overstate their importance for the emerging field of Islamic Theology in Germany, and they also offer exciting access points for dialogue between Christian theologians and Muslims, to the effect that the conversation between Muslims and Christians in Germany has reached a higher standard.

In a manner analogous to his literary writings, Kermani's academic treatises are intended as correctives, in a sense, they also act as literature and cannot be cleanly distinguished from it. Like the Christian theologian Johann Baptist Metz¹, Kermani deliberately polemicizes in order to draw a line against traditional interpretations of Islam and to afford new perspectives to Muslim- Christian dialogue. Its theoretical limitations can be justified by the fact that there is no *one* Islam, just as there is no *one* binding version of Christianity, which entails that questions of their relative importance can only be debated from particular points of view.

¹ Cf. Johann Baptist Metz, *Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft. Studien zu einer praktischen Fundamentaltheologie*, 5th edition (Mainz: Grünewald, 1992), 165.

Kermani elaborates in his most recent publications that it is his project to reposition Islam within the Jewish tradition in Germany.² His second book in particular may be understood as an intentional provocation directed at both scholars of Christian religion and Islam, resulting in a new effort to adjust the role of Muslims in Germany and in the West. For this reason, I will begin with this text and focus on the problematic of theodicy, then shift to a discussion of Kermani's dissertation, and finally attempt to characterize Kermani's fundamental theological concerns as it manifests itself throughout these two works.³

1. The Terror of God

In his habilitation *The Terror of God. Attar, Job, and the Metaphysical Revolution*⁴, which was developed in the atmosphere of a deep mutual exchange among Jews,

² Cf. Navid Kermani, *Zwischen Koran und Kafka. West-östliche Erkundungen* (München: Hanser 2014), 7.

³ In the following paragraphs I will use parts of a text which has already been published in my article *Developing Christian Theodicy in Conversation with Navid Kermani*, in Michelle Voss Roberts (ed.), ...%.

⁴ I will be using the following abbreviations in my text: TG for Navid Kermani, *The Terror of God - Attar, Job and the Metaphysical Revolt*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011); GB for Navid Kermani, *God Is Beautiful: The Aesthetic Experience of the Quran*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

Christians and Muslims at the *Wissenschaftskolleg* in Berlin, Kermani presents an encounter with the problem of evil which sticks to the tradition of practical-authentic theodicy.⁵ He refers to Job's rebellion against God and he quotes Kant's critique of all speculative theodicy.⁶ In this tradition he criticizes all forms of doctrinal theodicy and he pleads for a complaint, lamentation and even accusation against God because evil exists.

The main source for this line of thought in Islamic tradition seems to be the Book of Suffering of the Persian mystical poet Attar (1145-1221). He "teaches that the paths taken by those who quarrel with God can lead straight through the heart of Muslim piety." (TG, 163). Here we can discover remarkable parallels to the Book of Job and the practice of everyday theodicy. In the same manner that the dialogue portion of the Book of Job begins with Job's despair about his life and his desire for hastening his own death (see Job 3), the fools who serve as protagonists in Attar's poetry, are filled with despair and longing for death. "Oh God, he spoke, granter of souls, why did You give us souls at all if You take them again? It would be better for me if I were not" (TG, 135). And just as the despairing Job knows no other recourse than to quarrel with God (Job 19, 25), even though he is already aware that God is his persecutor, so do the fools act in seeking God's help in their desperation, and they suffer that God does not answer them: "An idiot asked

⁵ Cf. Regina Ammicht-Quinn, *Von Lissabon bis Auschwitz. Zum Paradigmenwechsel in der Theodizeefrage* (Fribourg-Freiburg: Herder 1992) ; Johann Baptist Metz, "Theologie als Theodizee?," in *Theodizee – Gott vor Gericht?*, W. Ölmüller, ed. (München: Wilhelm Fink, 1990), 103-118.

⁶ Immanuel Kant, "Über das Mißlingen aller philosophischen Versuche in der Theodizee," in *Berlinische Monatsschrift*, 1791 (Akademie-Ausgabe VIII), 255-271.

for a piece of bread, Said, all hope is lost, now only God can help. You wretch, called a fool, you are wasting your time. When hunger was rampant, I tried my luck with God. For many years, it was war and dead people were everywhere. What did it get me? Not even a breadcrumb” (TG, 155). The fools do not hesitate to discuss openly their experience of God’s darkness and his absence, which was to become so crucial via Jewish lines of reception for Christian theology after Auschwitz. They criticize God and call him their opponent and persecutor. Attar writes: “He has made faith bitter for me today, what will He do to me tomorrow?” (TG, 139). And Kermani notes: “It is the fools, the crazy people, the idiots, who call out most loudly in the *Book of Suffering*, what most believers hardly dare to think: that God has evil intentions. A fool is asked if he knows God. ‘How could I not know Him! He is the one who cast me into misery.’” (TG, 141).

Given such a dark picture of God, it does not come as a surprise that the fools Attar quotes finally rise up against God and damn him on account of his evident lack of clemency. Thereupon, God no longer appears superior to humans: “no, He is much worse. He has no manners, and disregards the most basic rules of politeness, decency and charity” (TG, 149). A fool calls out to the heavens: ““If what goes on down here does not move Your heart, You can take mine. Is Your heart really so stubborn?”” (TG, 163).

Kermani’s suggestion is more than unusual for Muslim theology because Islamic tradition usually criticizes the idea of accusations against God. The qur’anic Job for example is not a rebel at all, but he is more like the silent sufferer and servant of the narration of the first two chapters of the book of Job. Job’s rebellion which starts in the third chapter of the biblical book of Job does not occur in the Qur’an (cf. Q 21:83, 38:44). Kermani is totally aware of the fact that this is typical for the Qur’an: The Qur’an does

not permit any form of lamenting piety, let alone one that accuses God.” (TG 129) But instead of drawing consequences on Islamic piety from this observation, Kermani explains that the Qur’an cannot open up space for lamentations or even accusations against God because the Qur’an is conceived as the speech act of God. This is the decisive difference between the intention of the Bible and the Qur’an. Whereas the Bible can open up the floor for people’s lamentations and complaints because it is written by humans with the help of the Holy Spirit, the Qur’an is understood by most Muslims as God’s direct speech. And because of this literary category complaints and accusations against God simply do not make sense in the Qur’an. “The textual concept itself already precludes the possibility of humans complaining about God, as it is He who speaks in the first person in the Qur’an.” (TG 129) This observation does not suggest the consequence that lamentations, complaints and even accusation of humans are impossible within the Islamic tradition.

Kermani uses this insight to invite his fellow believers to look through the Muslim tradition and to rediscover the tradition of lamentation and complaint in it. The attitude of protest against suffering which is strongly demanded by atheists is then not anti-theistic, but it has to be adopted by believers. Moreover, believers are able to make sense of this protest because they have someone to address in their accusations. They can include their complaints in their prayer and their dialogue with God and they integrate it into the theistic perspective. This is at least what those believers are doing who are presented in Attar’s writings.

In Attar's book there are believers who ask why God persecutes them and why he leads them into misery.⁷ "In The Book of Suffering it is the fools, the crazy peoples, the idiots, who call out loudly what most believers hardly dare to think: that God has evil intentions. A fool is asked if he knows God. 'How could I not know him? He is the one who cast me into misery'."⁸ Especially the most pious people insist that God has to take responsibility for his creation. They persist in asking God to change the destiny of the deprived. Even though they live in ardent desire for God and accept all blows of fate, they do not stop asking God for help and blaming him for his lack of compassion because of their solidarity with other oppressed people; "in their despair, they are more religious than the believers who praise God, but turn a blind eye to the real state of His creation." (TG 167)

The fools Kermani cites do not stop at the ambiguity of the concept of God. They do not simply lament the terror of God. Rather, they remind God of the promises he made to Creation. The main idea of this kind of theodicy consists of insisting on God's justice against the injustice of the world. Thus, Kermani does not defend the existence of God's justice but he demands from God to show it. Thus, the idea of this approach of theodicy is to oblige God to show his justice and mercy himself. The theologian does not have the task to defend God, but to demand his self-defense. Theology then cannot be affirmative, but only demanding and postulating. The protest against God's lacking self-defense is part of the task of theology and also the practical fight against suffering.

All of these ideas are well known as practical theodicy in Western thinking. But Kermani gives an unusual shape to them and he seems to be one of the first Muslim theologians to

⁷ Cf. TG 139: 'He has made faith bitter for me today, What will He do to me tomorrow? (34/4,341)'

⁸ 27/9, 251f., quoted TG 141.

consequently buy into this tradition of theodicy. It is very obvious that he is influenced by Jewish intellectuals in this line of thinking who are also quoted by Christian theologians who are in favor of practical theodicy (as for example by Karl-Josef Kuschel who seems to have been an inspiring intellectual sounding board during Kermani's time in Berlin).

Following this line of thought Kermani shows to us a possibility of affirming God in the mode of protest and resistance. If faith is articulated in the way of the faithful fools in Attar's writings, it is very close to what Kant called a postulate and helps to transform all speech of God into the mode of demanding, waiting, desiring, insisting, postulating. God himself in the Qur'an can use the indicative mood to articulate his mercy and love. But we are not able – or at least morally speaking not allowed – to respond to his love in faith and confidence without showing the oppressed face of the world to God, as Kermani makes clear. Therefore, all affirmative and theoretical speech of God has to be articulated in the mode of demand and hope. Through this shift within the speech of God it becomes clear that our faith does not ideologically justify the suffering of other people but is a way of not wanting to give up the solidarity with the oppressed. In Kermani's perspective the belief in God can be shown as a medium of expression of protest against suffering instead of its ideological justification. This reminds me of the expression of Fidèle, a good friend of mine from Rwanda, who lost his whole family in the genocide of 1994 and who adopted numerous orphans in order to help them start a better life. When we asked him: "How can you still believe in God after all the terror you had to witness in your life?" – his response was: "How can I stay human after seeing all those slaughtered people – without faith in God?" God for him is his last possibility to stay human and to hope for a better future. At the same moment he accuses the terror of God and he persists in asking

God to change his behavior. No defense or theodicy changes his desire for God who alone can be the response to his agony.

But with all respect to Fidèle and to the pious mystics in the writings of Attar: Why should we continue to blame God and hope for him in the same time? Is the attitude to which Kermani refers not something which leads to schizophrenia? The mystics in Attar's writings are also called fools and it actually does not seem to be very rational to argue like him. So why should we continue to have confidence in God? Why not use the protest as a means of getting rid of faith?

2. The Beauty of God

If we want to understand why Muslims still surrender their life to God even though they are aware of his terror, Kermani's response is given in his dissertation on God's beauty. Kermani tries to show that God really is a *fascinosum et tremendum*, i.e. his terror cannot be seen without his beauty and vice versa. And it is the beauty of God, which attracts people so much that they dedicate their life to celebrate and to respond to this beauty. And it is this terrific beauty and majesty which helps them to stand oppression and which encourages them to demand from God to fulfill the promises given by this very beauty and goodness.

The idea of reconstructing the idea of revelation in an aesthetic way was very unexpected and challenging for most scholars in Islamic studies when Kermani's dissertation came out. Here, "aesthetic" has to be understood in the broad meaning of the word *aisthesis* in

the writings of Baumgarten and Kant, i.e. it stands for all form of sensual perception.⁹ Thus, Kermani wants to show that the Qur'an is much more than a challenge for our reason.

We can learn from him that the idea of an aesthetical peculiarity of the Qur'an first occurred some decades, perhaps even centuries after the life of Muhammad. Since the 10th century at the latest it has been one of the most important elements of Muslim belief that nobody was ever able to create something as beautiful, good, thrilling and fascinating as the Qur'an (BG, 13, 83). We can find so many reports witnessing its unique aesthetical dignity for no other text in history. Let me just quote one example from those many reports Kermani is referring to in his book. It is the story of the conversion of Umar, who later became caliph:

Originally one of the most dangerous opponents of the young Muslim congregation, Umar was a man of thirty or thirty-five who was endowed with enormous muscular strength and energy, loved gambling, wine and poetry, and was considered both sentimental and short-tempered. . . . On the day of the events recounted, Umar had originally intended to kill the Prophet, but, just when he wanted to go to him, he learned that his sister Fatima and her husband Sa'id had embraced . . . Islam. Enraged, he ran to their house. From the street in front of their door, he heard someone reciting the Quran to them. Umar stormed into the room. The reciter hid as quickly as he could, while Fatima took the pages of the Quran and hid them under her legs.

⁹ Cf. Navid Kermani, "Appelliert Gott an den Verstand? Eine Randbemerkung zum koranischen Begriff *aql* und seiner Paretschen Übersetzung", in *Encounters of Words and Texts*, eds. Lutz, Edzard and Christian Szyska, FS S. Wild, (Hildesheim-Zürich-New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1997), 43-66, here 56f.

‘What was that murmuring I heard?’ Umar shouted at her.

‘You did not hear anything,’ said Fatima and her husband, trying to calm him.

Umar shouted: ‘Yes, I did, by God, and I know you are following Muhammad in his religion!’

He wanted to attack his brother-in-law, but Fatima threw herself between them so that Umar unintentionally struck her a violent blow.

‘Yes, we have converted to Islam, and we believe in God and His Messenger – so do what you want,’ cried Fatima and Sa’id cried.

Umar already regretted his behavior; the blood on his sister’s face moved his heart. In a gentle voice he asked her for the scripture. After Fatima had made him promise to return the manuscript undamaged and had also persuaded him to perform an ablution, since an unclean person must touch the Quran, she handed it to him. Umar began to recite the surah Ta Ha (no. 20). After just a few verses he stopped and exclaimed:

‘How magnificent, how beautiful these words are . . .!’

After Muhammad had finished his prayer he started home, and Umar followed him in order to profess his conversion to Islam before him (BG, 16-17).

Obviously, in this story of conversion it is the beauty of the Quran, which transforms Umar from an opponent of Muhammad to his follower. But the beauty of the Quran is not so much exaggerated that all other aspects of his conversion disappear. The beauty of the Quran is witnessed by the courage and the openness of his sister and the fact that he hurts her helps him to be so moved that he takes the Quran seriously. Only because of this sensitivity and attentiveness to the recitation of the Quran is Umar able to be fascinated

by its beauty. Thus, the personal testimony of faith given by his sister is very important for his conversion. But the aesthetical uniqueness of the Quran, which attracts him so much that he does not want to give it up any more is decisive.

Kermani helped many scholars of Islamic studies to see how striking it is how intensely people are attracted through God's beauty through the recitation of the Quran – so much that they accept the terror of God as the shady side of the light, which is the fascination of their life and faith. Moreover, he points out that the comprehensive shift in norms caused that the Quran caused throughout an enormous geographical territory, encompassing in particular the use of language and aesthetic norms, is incomparable. As Bernard Lewis once remarked, that norm shift is the wondrous thing about the Arab expansion (GB, 83). For the Arabs, the Quran is “the linguistic heaven on earth”; it is the realization of the dream of humankind of a perfect language (GB, 171).

One part of this kind of reasoning is not only that “the Quran challenged the status of poetry in the society not only by its ideological orientation but also with regard to questions of stylistic quality. The Meccans initially situated the revelation in the context of poetic works, as the Quran itself repeatedly attests” (GB, 28).

According to Kermani, the Muslim understanding of revelation seems to depend on a personal-dialogic relationship between God and Muhammad and his people. God communicates to this people in an aesthetic way because he hopes that it is exactly this way of revelation, which can be understood by them. God, in this approach, does not want to elicit blind obedience but perceptive appreciation, which is very much the foundation of love. And such a love is awakened by the Beauty of God. Thus – still in Kermani's rewording –, religious perception is aesthetically mediated in Islam: “not only

the language which they perceived as beautiful. . . the intertwining of a specific message . . . with an unusual linguistic form, which the majority of the audience found appealing” (GB, 30) that is, the way of perceiving God’s message in Islam is an aesthetic way of listening.

Muhammad did not get a written textbook from God, but he listened to the revelation through the recitation of the archangel Gabriel (GB, 161). Until today the liturgical recitation of the Quran for Muslims is the direct speech of God and confrontation with His Beauty. “God speaks, when the Quran is being recited, one cannot really read his word, one can only hear it.”¹⁰ Thus, it is hearing, which is at the center of liturgy in Islam, not representing, touching or tasting. The central cult is “hearing or reciting of the divine speech, the *salat*, the three or five times daily that ritual prayer is performed” (GB, 177). Perceiving the proximity of God seems to be mediated through the recitation of his word in Islam. Thus, as Christians we can understand the recitation of the Quran as a kind of sacramental act (GB, 220). And you have to look at such deeds and at this intensity of relationship with God and surrender to him, if you want to understand why Muslims love him in good and in bad days.

It is not unmotivated that there used to be in the Islamic World - different than in Judaism - a mistrust of exclusively written transmissions of revelation. In the final analysis, it is the oral recitation of the Qur’an practiced anew that encapsulates the authenticity of revelation and renders it able to be experienced once more. Even rationalist Muslim theologians admit that God speaks to Man the way he spoke to Moses

¹⁰ GB, 183: “Lamya‘ al-Faruqi quotes an Azhar graduate, that it is impossible to merely recite the Quran. A faithful recitation requires musical improvisation.”

on Mount Sinai and even the opponents of *iğaz* take the Qur'an very seriously as a literary monument – as Jesus is also admired by non-Christians for his humanitarianism. The speech of *iğaz* itself is an apologetic theory, born in the chambers of theologians, but it was produced by the reciters of the Qur'an and their listeners, and accordingly, we may question it in historical- critical terms.

In this context, we need to consider that the special aesthetic circumstances of revelation in Islam would make it nearly impossible to translate the Quran. Just as Christianity is bound to Judaism and cannot be understood divorced from it, we cannot understand the Quran without the Arabic language. We might expand on this hermeneutics of aesthetic perspectivism and following Enes Karić, we might read the beauty of classical Muslim culture as a commentary on the quranic idea of Beauty.¹¹ We might interpret the fulfilment of sharia as an aesthetic stylization of the Muslim way of life. And we might even read the Muslim abstention from reflection on the being of God as a “gesture of separation” along Foucauldian lines founded in aesthetic considerations, which exemplifies the believer's own submission to God's love in the Qur'an. We cannot go deeper into these possibilities, because Kermani does not expand on them. Nonetheless, they show in how many ways Kermani may be received by theologians. For Kermani faith is no blind leap, but is grounded in perceptions. And all these perceptions are grounded in the beauty and majesty of God, which can be perceived through the recitation of the Qur'an. Kermani does not want to claim that reason cannot be a way to

¹¹ Cf. Enes Karić, *Essays (on behalf) of Bosnia* (Sarajevo: El- Kalem,1999), 199; Khaled Abou el Fadl, *Confrence of the Books. The Search for Beauty in Islam* (Oneworld Press: Oxford, 2001).

believe in God. There are signs and hints for believers in the whole creation and in all of history. But if you want to perceive God and if you want to receive his love, you have to use your heart and all aspects of *aisthesis*. This *aisthesis* can encompass the all-changing beauty of God, which fascinates people so much that they dedicate their life to God. But you can never perceive the beauty of God without its majesty and terror. Thus, there is no easy way to God and the affirmation of his beauty has to resist the disasters of this world always and at the same time.

3. Rebellion and Love

Kermani does not want to invite us to blind obedience or to an irrational leap into faith. But he wants us to ground our faith in religious experiences. Those experiences are highly ambivalent; the sensitivity for reality which is promoted through religion makes it difficult to appreciate its beauty without seeing its terror. That is why, for Kermani, the beauty and the terror of God cannot be separated from each other. To surrender your life to God in complete awareness of all this ambiguity is only possible through love. Only love for and surrender to God, only fascination and mystical interweavement with his secret, can motivate people to believe and to dedicate their life to God. Love can help to stay aware of the high ambiguity of reality without losing confidence in God. The peculiar aspect of Attar's attacks against God consists of the fact that he is somebody who is in love with the person he is attacking: "Only someone who believes in the Highest can throw stones up to heaven." (TG 134) "Those whose love exceeds the conventional degree dare to demand the kind of God He Himself revealed to them." (TG

167) Thus, it is precisely through the rebellion of people that their most intimate moment of belief becomes visible (cf. TG 165); and it becomes visible as something, which is inseparably linked to love.

If we want to gain a deeper understanding of Kermani's notion of love, we have to take a look at his novels and other literary writings. Many of his novels, short stories and dramas deal with love between God and Man. Kermani insists on the fact that there is no purely spiritual love and that even mystical love has to be conceived with all aspects of erotic love. He refers to a long tradition in Sufism and in Christian and Jewish mysticism which understands the relationship between God and man as a relationship of lovers.

What is more than striking in his description of this relationship is how much he focuses on the aspect of erotic love within it. Whereas the modern Christian tradition always speaks of a loving God without thinking of sexual implications, Kermani quotes many traditional texts using very explicit erotic language to describe the relationship between God and his people. Especially the language of sexualized violence, which is so important in the Bible and which at the same time is so much neglected and even ignored in modern theology is important to him. He shows that violence and terror are not the absence and opposite of love – as liberal theology seems to imply – but that they are an implication, an aspect of love itself. Kermani shows God as a disappointed lover who is affected by the failure of courting people to love him. Sometimes he focuses so much on the aspects of violence, jealousy and affection of God that it becomes unbearable. To me, his book *Du sollst*, which tells 10 short stories all explaining the ten commandments by telling stories of love and violence between a man and a woman, is the most difficult to

bear.¹² In this text, God's jealousy becomes revolting and the terror of his highly erotic love is not acceptable any more.

All those aspects become even more challenging in Kermani's productions of dramas. Sometimes you feel violated by his language and the penetrating way of God's approach to humans. The dramas do not leave the possibility of not being involved. They show how much God does to invite people to accept his love. And they show the dark sides of this love and its ambivalence, which is always grounded in the unconditionality of divine love and in the unconditionality which it demands from humans. The completeness of surrender, the uniqueness of confidence is shown in all his ambiguity.¹³

Kermani takes the Christian speech of God's essence as pure love seriously and he shows its dark side. He investigates the power of endurance of the talk of God as love and he always goes to its breaking point by interpreting its hidden and silenced aspects. He does not show a solution for the problem of theodicy, a separation of the good God from evil, or simply peace in our thinking. But he struggles, he wants to debate, he shows desire – in a word: he is confronting theology with life.

¹² Navid Kermani, *Du sollst*. (Zürich: Ammann, 2005); cf. as a typical Muslim reaction Hamideh Mohagheghi, "Der 'Islam' in Navid Kermanis literarischen Schriften," in *Islam in der deutschen und türkischen Literatur*, eds., Michael Hofmann/ Klaus von Stosch, (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2012), 259-266.

¹³ Cf. Friedrich Nietzsche, "Jenseits von Gut und Böse," in *Kritische Studienausgabe*, ed., Friedrich Nietzsche, trans. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari. (Münche: dtv, 1993), 9-243, here 86: 'Die Liebe zu Einem ist eine Barbarei: denn sie wird auf Unkosten aller Übrigen ausgeübt. Auch die Liebe zu Gott.' [The love of One is a barbarous act: for it is practiced at the expense of all others.]

Although Kermani's theology is very much rooted in life and in experiences, he is not simply affirming all aspects of religious experience. One of his critiques which has been highly debated in the German speaking academic world was his critique of a mysticism of suffering in Shi'i Islam and Christianity which was understood by many Christians as an insulting criticism of the theology of the cross. This critique is a very important clarification of some ideas of his habilitation which could be read as a mystical transfiguration of suffering without these explanations. Thus, the last text of Kermani I want to discuss is his short essay *Why have you forsaken us?*, first published in the most important Swiss newspaper in 2009.

In contrast to the common understanding of the Qur'an Kermani does not doubt the historical fact of the crucifixion, but he criticizes the excessive glorification of suffering in some branches of Christianity which becomes visible in movies like Mel Gibson's on the Passion of Christ. Inspired by Guido Reni's altar-piece "crucifixion" from 1637/38 in San Lorenzo in Lucina in Rome, he confronts this glorification of suffering with the following interpretation of the cross: "And now I was sitting before the altar-piece of Guido Reni in the church San Lorenzo in Lucina and I was so much moved by this view – it was so much full of blessings – that I did not want to get up again. It was the first time that I thought: I – not only you – I could believe in the cross. ... Jesus is not suffering in order to release God as Christian ideology wants it, but Jesus is blaming God: Not, why have you forsaken me, but why have you forsaken us?"¹⁴ Jesus is not portrayed as the greatest victim and "supreme sufferer" but his humanity and vulnerability invite

¹⁴ Navid Kermani, "Bildansichten: Warum hast du uns verlassen?", *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, 14.03.09.

Kermani to feel solidarity with him. His deputy role is not understood as a replacement of humans,¹⁵ but as empowerment to take part in the relationship of God and humans with all its ambiguity and to call for justice and recompense for the oppressed and marginalized. Facing Jesus, Kermani becomes aware of the fact that he is not alone in his history of suffering and that the cry of Golgotha is the cry of agony, rebellion and complaint, not of victory and hope. That's why he understands how Jesus fits into the tradition of practical-authentic theodicy he defends.

It is more than obvious that Kermani's point of view does not welcome the Christian implications, which can be derived from the cross. Kermani is and remains staunchly Muslim and this is why his attempt to appreciate the cross is so important. His ideas are a remarkable form of acknowledgement of basic Christian intuitions and they are combined with a critique which is highly acceptable for Christians as well. That's why it is really a shame that most Christian theologians did not welcome Kermani's invitation to dialogue but even rejected it as an unacceptable misstep.¹⁶ For his critics, the most disturbing

¹⁵ In German the distinction between *Stellvertretung* and *Ersetzung* is decisive here, cf. Karl-Heinz Menke, *Stellvertretung. Schlüsselbegriff christlichen Lebens und theologische Grundkategorie*. (Freiburg: Johannes, 1991), 20.

¹⁶ Cf. Jan Heiner Tück, "Religionskulturelle Grenzüberschreitung. Navid Kermani und das Kreuz. Nachtrag zu einer Kontroverse." in *Internationale katholische Zeitschrift Communio* 38, 2009, 220-233. In German he speaks of a 'religionskulturelle Entgleisung' (a misstep in the religious cultural realm).

aspect of Kermani's intervention seems to be that he as a Muslim takes part in the discussion of the interpretation of the cross.¹⁷

4. The principle of Tauhid behind Kermani's concept

I think that there are a lot of lessons to learn from Kermani. First of all, Kermani shows us that it makes no sense to separate practical from theoretical theodicy. Whereas in Christian discussion there are somehow two groups of theologians – those who defend an argumentative approach to the problem of evil like the free will defense and those who defend a practical-authentic theodicy in the tradition of Kant – Kermani seems to provide arguments from both sides of the discussion. On the one hand he seems to understand all theological statements in the mode of postulates and he invites us to join a practical-authentic theodicy in the tradition of Job in the dialogue-part of the book of Job. On the other hand he still refers to aesthetical religious experiences as foundation for a theology of revelation. Thus, he takes the most important part of the free will defense which is the focus on the value of love, and he combines it with his practical theodicy. This is possible because he stresses very much the majesty and ambiguity of God who is always *tremendum et fascinans*. Through this operation love itself becomes an ambiguous phenomenon. God, in this perspective, is not purely good and innocent, but we are confronted with some dark sides of his very essence, which seem to be a result of his love. From discussions with Kermani I know that he very much defends a mystical

¹⁷ Cf. Tück, *Religionskulturelle Grenzüberschreitung*, 225.

approach at this time. He wants to combine Muslim thought with a mysticism in the tradition of Ibn Arabi, which allows us to overcome all duality. From this perspective, we may understand the tenet of Tauhid as the basic encoding of all his creation. Through it, the terror and the beauty of God are brought together, and in it the different strands of his thought find their coherence.

I am not quite sure whether I can accept this kind of approach to the problem of evil. Nonetheless, I have to admit that God's mercy with criminals like Hitler remains a scandal for me. Thus, I have to admit that there is something like ambiguity in the love of God, exactly because of its pureness and unconditionality. How can one defend unconditional love if one faces its consequences on the battlefields of this world? And I have to admit that Kermani's idea of an ambiguous God goes well with a kind of reading of the Bible which I sometimes try to avoid. It is true that the Biblical God is jealous and that his love is sometimes disturbing. Thus, Kermani forces me to a closer reading of the Bible and he invites me to a different connection of practical and argumentative theodicy. In this connection the terror of this world is also a part of the terror and of the secret of God. Again, this is an idea which I already know from my own tradition, especially from Karl Rahner.¹⁸ So what is so interesting in Kermani's case and what makes it so difficult to reject his approach is his aesthetical way of expressing his thoughts? To me it is very compelling that important aspects of Kermani's theology are expressed in his novels, poems and dramas. Literature seems to be a very clear expression of his thought to him. And it is true that the aesthetical approach to revelation and to the problem of evil which

¹⁸ Cf. Karl Rahner, "Warum läßt Gott uns leiden?"; in *Schriften zur Theologie XIV*, (Zürich, Einsiedeln, Köln: Benziger, 1980), 450-466, here 462.

is defended by Kermani is difficult to be done in academic theology. It is much more convincing if it is done through literature.

The encounter with God as a solution of the problem of evil in the end of the book of Job (42:5) is so convincing because it is told in a novel. When I had to explain the book of Job in a sermon, I myself used the means of a drama to perform the explanation. In a dramatic context it is so much easier to see that the solution of the problem of evil is the presence of God himself and not a theological theory. This makes understandable why especially in the context of the problem of evil Muslim tradition insists in repeating the sentences of the Quran so much. As the recitation of Quran is nothing else than the presence of God in all his love and beauty and ambiguity, it is this kind of response to the problem of evil which Kermani is trying to witness in his writings. In his novels and dramas he stresses the ambiguity of God, which is sometimes forgotten in theology, and through this he tries to reintroduce the terror and the beauty of God into theological discourse. Although I cannot follow the mystical thrust of this approach, I still struggle with its implications and I have to admit that there probably is at present no other Muslim intellectual premise which challenges Christian theology as compellingly and offers rich rewards for new developments in Islamic theology as Kermani's own. We may hope that Kermani will still devote his own book-length study to working out how the notion of Tauhid allows us to think both the Terror and the Beauty of God at the same time. Even as it stands now, the direction of his thought is apparent and is stimulating for readers of all backgrounds, not only Muslims.

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