

Bonner Querschnitte

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What is ‘Islamic fundamentalism’?

An Interview with Christine Schirmmacher

(Bonn, 12.01.2011) She is considered one of the highest profile German Islamic scholars, teaches at the Evangelical Theological Faculty in Leuven, Belgium, and the State University in Bonn, Germany, is director of the upcoming International Institute for Islamic Studies (Bonn, Seoul, Cairo, San Francisco) of the World Evangelical Alliance, counsels the German government, and is active in human rights issues in Muslim countries. Prof. Dr. Christine Schirmmacher explains in a discussion with BQ the differences between ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ and ‘Islam.’

BQ: You have written books that contain ‘Islam’ in the title. How is Islamic fundamentalism different from Islam?

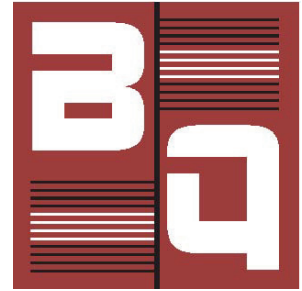
Christine Schirmmacher: What is understood by ‘Islamic fundamentalism’ is politics in the name of Islam, with the goal of the creation of a state under the rule of a caliph. After allowing for a certain period of transition, Islamic fundamentalists call for all areas of society, such as marriage law or criminal law, to be aligned with Islam’s religious law – the Sharia. Also, the way of life to be imitated as precisely as possible is Mohammed’s lifestyle in the 7th century. Needless to say, in such a state there is no place for democratic freedoms, equality between Muslims and non-Muslims, or between men and women.

BQ: Can the difference between Islamic fundamentalism and violent Islamic fundamentalism be put in a nutshell?

Christine Schirmmacher: Islamic fundamentalists do not necessarily use force. Rather, they employ strategy, exercise influence, use the elective process, financial resources, educational institutions, and assistance for the needy in order to advertise their views and to implement their basic approach. Admittedly, the border to violent Jihadism is a fluid one, above all due to the fact that the early Islamic fundamentalist architects and leaders in the first half of the 20th century did not exclude the use of violence in certain cases.

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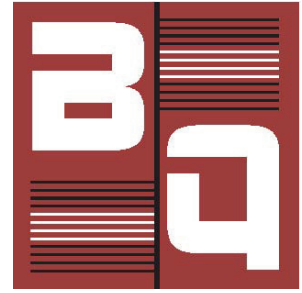
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BQ: You knowledgeably describe the antecedents and history of Islamic fundamentalism. But is it actually important for us to know today what the thoughts of Islamic theologians were and what they wrote in Arabic 50 to 100 years ago?

Christine Schirmmacher: It is of great importance for all of us. This is due to the fact that representatives and movements of Islamic fundamentalism have already been homegrown in Europe for a long time. The most important works of the religio-political leaders have been translated into European languages and exercise influence on the Muslim community present among us. Islamic fundamentalism is by no means a topic restricted to the Middle East. This is because the conflict of worldviews has long since been taking place in the middle of Europe. Whoever wants to defend the freedoms and achievements of our democracy, such as religious freedom, cannot get around the need to be informed and to occupy himself or herself with the architects of Islamic fundamentalism.

BQ: How has it come about that the public has only developed an interest for this since September 11, 2001?

Christine Schirmmacher: A large portion of the public really only became aware of Islam after September 11, 2001. Unfortunately, when it comes to dealing with Islam, the picture is still frequently defined either by panic or by downplaying the situation. A matter-of-fact, informed, and sophisticated debate is, however, also urgently needed with the intellectual construct of Islamic fundamentalism. This is needed in order to understand which goals several Islamic organizations are pursuing in Europe. The integration debate also urgently has to acknowledge what fatal role is being played by local Islamist groups that set boundaries and refuse to integrate. This is the only way that Muslims can be distinguished from Islamic fundamentalists.

BQ: How do you view the future of Islamic fundamentalism?

Christine Schirmmacher: Islamic fundamentalism has grown enormously in strength over the last 25 years, in Europe as well as in the Islamic home countries, and developments in the European Muslim community cannot be unhitched from them. One reason for this is deep disappointment. This is due to the fact that when it comes to prosperity, progress, civil rights and liberties, and political clout, countries marked by Islam have been experiencing an increasingly strong fall in comparison to the western world. Since Islam is simultaneously preached as the religion and societal order that is superior to all others – after misguided experiments with socialism, nationalism or Pan-Arabism – from a Muslim point of view the solution can only lie in Islam itself and in a return to its comprehensive practice.

BQ: What would you recommend to politicians in Germany?

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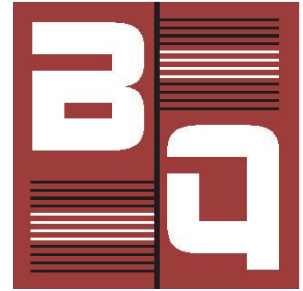
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Christine Schirmmacher: The question of whether this or that Muslim group, or individual Muslims, want to integrate in Germany should not hinge on the question of whether they are very religious or not, and it should not be required of Muslims that they give up their religiosity. Religious Muslims are not per se holdouts against integration and promoters of violence. It is also important for politics to not suppress the question of the validity of the Sharia in political and societal spheres but to bring it to light and to confront it. Generally, Islamic fundamentalists will only be able to temporarily accept the German Constitution, since their point of reference remains the Sharia. There really is no place in Germany for political Sharia law.

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- Photo of Christine Schirmmacher

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