MIGRATION AND THE EUROPEAN LEFT 31.07.2017 | Ahmad Mansour

Racists can be left-wing too

Like to think of yourself as liberal? Don't congratulate yourself too quickly – your attitude might actually be hampering Muslims

A few days after I'd run a training session at a comprehensive school in Berlin, a participant sent me an e-mail wanting advice. Her school's senior management team were in a quandary over a request for a prayer room by a group of Muslim pupils. Berlin is subject to a law of neutrality, which forbids the display of religious symbols in public institutions. Yet when it comes to setting up a room for Muslim prayers, the school authorities find decision-making difficult. They don't want to be seen as racists: "What right do we have to impose our values on these people?"

In another school, a different teacher has a similar problem. Parents complained to the education authorities about a primary school teacher showing contempt for their religion. That is, the teacher had encouraged his young pupils, who were completely exhausted from fasting during a 30°C+ heat wave, to drink a little water. The school management reprimanded the teacher, who was told to show more respect.

These two teachers' stories are not uncommon. Youth Services staff and social workers are advised not intervene in families with "immigrant backgrounds" unless it is legally necessary – so as to avoid being guilty of "cultural imperialism".

Most of these head teachers and managers want to stand up against racism and prejudice. However, their goodwill is easily misinterpreted and their behaviour completely misses the point.

My left-wing and progressive contemporaries in Germany are particularly compassionate towards people with "immigrant backgrounds" and feel a strong sense of solidarity with Muslims. They wish to shelter a group frequently confronted with xenophobia, which is of course a fundamentally good and noble desire, especially when animosity seems to

be directed at "foreign" religions.

This protective instinct can be partly explained by a deeply-felt need to resist and reject nationalistic behaviour. The thought process goes something like this: "During the Nazi era, racists persecuted Jews. We can't allow Muslims to be persecuted by racists today!" These Germans want to be the living evidence that one can learn from the past.

Many of the Muslims arriving in the West in recent months are seeking asylum from persecution or have fled politically and economically stagnating countries that offer them no future. Newcomers may perceive the laws and liberal practices of their new home as alien or even threatening. Many have not had access to high-level education and are used to traditional, patriarchal social structures. Some individuals may be suffering from trans-generational traumas, triggered by private or political circumstances. Far too often these factors are simply ignored.

It doesn't help anybody, including the newcomers, to overlook the profound need for democratisation just because liberals wish to distance themselves from Germany's Nazi past

The new arrivals are caught between tradition and modernity, "Us" and "Them". In their search for stability, they fixate on religious or nationalist ideologies from home. While that might seem to boost their self-esteem, they actually remain fragile and insecure. By wilfully excluding themselves from the German mainstream, they feel excluded – and seek to blame that on the very society that had accepted them. For their part, right-wing German groups are indiscriminately racist towards all newcomers. In light of this reality, the desire to protect immigrants is a noble one.

Nevertheless, any progressive, democratic response to the new immigrants' acute problems must acknowledge complex, dangerous facts. It doesn't help anybody, including the newcomers, to overlook the profound need for democratisation just because liberals wish to distance themselves from Germany's Nazi past. Underestimating the anti-democratic efforts of the fundamentalists among them is reckless. Refusing to call a spade a spade is extremely unhelpful.

The uncritical – sometimes sentimental – attitudes often adopted by the Left and Greens are counterproductive. Playing down anti-Semitic and fundamentalist tendencies and declaring that all Muslim immigrants are suffering from discrimination is anything but "anti-fascist".

I have to wonder what is "progressive" about such behaviour. Are you in

your right mind? Are we nothing but your soft toys?

Marx called religion the "opiate of the people". Hegel, Kant and Weber criticised religion. Freud regarded the invention of a strict Father-God as stemming from an immature need to submit to "responsible" authorities. The French Revolution criticised religion as an instrument of control and influence.

Since both believers and non-believers on the left typically criticise religion as a tool for domination, it's even more ludicrous that the Greens, the Left and even Social Democrats distrust Muslims who criticise their own religion. Why shouldn't we? Anyone who allows a Muslim girl – who is not allowed to swim "because of her faith" – to learn less in school than her non-Muslim classmate is playing with the girl's future. Anyone who avoids addressing the Muslim community's patriarchal structures for fear that might "hurt" Muslims doesn't believe they deserve equality. People who denounce inhumane and misogynist messages from the church and the far-right but consider they are being "tolerant" by overlooking the same behaviour among Muslims are leaving liberal Muslims in the lurch.

Anyone who avoids addressing the Muslim community's patriarchal structures for fear that might "hurt" Muslims doesn't believe they deserve equality

Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism have managed to achieve a great deal of positive change through internal and external criticism – why should such reforms not be possible in Islam as well? Why don't we critical Muslims find any solidarity for our efforts from German progressives?

Defending laws that apply to everyone independent of religion, origin, skin colour or mother tongue is not cultural imperialism. Didn't the Enlightenment make huge contributions to the division of authority and democratisation, as well as to the notion that the law makes no distinction? For many teachers, youth-service and social workers, police officers and judges this means that children may not miss school on Fridays just because that's prayer day in the mosque, that swimming lessons are mandatory and that parents may not force 20-year-old daughters to marry. We need different policies, co-operation with schools and a new type of social work to help new immigrants in the long term. This is an enormous task.

Generalisations such as "That has nothing to do with Islam" or "It's all the fault of Islam" do not help. They only polarise. Families who use violence to socialise, separate the genders and make sexuality taboo –

whether because of religion or other traditions – actually help engineer events like those on New Year's Eve by Cologne Cathedral. The state must be capable of defending itself in all situations, whether threatened by the radical right or Islamists.

In Germany, official Muslim associations and members of left-wing parties and the Greens are smothering any critical discussion of religion. Both camps refuse to clearly identify and address the burning issues in Muslim society. This astonishing situation should give us pause for thought.

Generalisations such as "That has nothing to do with Islam" or "It's all the fault of Islam" do not help. They only polarise.

The greatest risks include the rapid proliferation of a dangerous type of Islamic fundamentalism, women being socially excluded and treated as second-class citizens, sexuality being made taboo and hyper-sexualised, and the Koran being taken literally, independent of its historic and local context. Such interpretations create inhibitions and prevent personal fulfilment.

As long as Muslim associations – along with Green and Left Party members – continue to deny that a traditional patriarchal interpretation of Islam plays into the hands of fundamentalist Muslims, right wing groups such as the AfD and Pegida will be able to call the shots. The New Right believes it can appropriate Islam by naming it the problem and stirring up racist hatred, rather than offering politically enlightened, sociologically lucid analysis.

A debate about Islam must be initiated and brought into the mainstream. Traditional Islam promotes sexual taboos and sexual violence. It has an enormous influence on how men and women interact. This is not a racist statement. It is fact. We Muslims have a problem. The critics in our ranks who have identified it need support from the democrats in this country. The AfD and Pegida cannot help us.

A clever, no-holds-barred debate could lead to serious deliberation, solutions and prevention – while also weakening the radical German right-wingers and Islamists. Everyone must understand that Muslims do not want to be viewed as victims. We want to be equal citizens. We want to share your rights and duties.



Ahmad Mansour

Berlin

Ahmad Mansour is psychologist and programme director at the European Foundation for Democracy in Brussels. Furthermore and chairs the *Muslimisches Forum Deutschland e.V.* He lives in Germany and participates in various projects aiming to tackle extremism and radicalisation.