

**NEGOTIATING AND MARKETING MUSLIM IDENTITY FOR THE WEST:  
NAVID KERMANI'S *KURZMITTEILUNG*<sup>1</sup>**

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ABSTRACT

This essay analyses Navid Kermani's literary engagement with the interaction between Germans and Islam in *Kurzmitteilung* (2007). The focus is on the novel's treatment of the marketing of Islam for a German audience by its German-Iranian male protagonist, an event manager. Kermani (b. 1967 in Germany of Iranian parentage) is a scholar of Islamic Studies as well as a writer. He offers a differentiated view on Islam as object of Western counter-identification. The novel sceptically examines today's West in which we can no longer be certain of who we are and in which commerce serves as 'new' religion. *Kurzmitteilung* is set after the London suicide bomb attacks on 7 July 2005: here, Kermani's protagonist's Iranian identity, which many non-Muslims do not recognise, but which he contrasts with the identity of Arabs who plant bombs in the West, comes to the fore. My essay examines how the novel reflects on the narrator's struggles between wanting to be truthful to his Muslim roots and using his exotic 'value', both commercially and interpersonally, or dismissing Islam altogether (he turns to Scientology). This reflects Kermani's critical exploration of Western cultural and religious identification in relation to Islam after '9/11' and '7/7'.

*Ich bin Muslim, ja – aber ich bin auch vieles andere.*<sup>2</sup>

– Navid Kermani

The Islamic suicide attacks in New York, Madrid, and London, which occurred between 2001 and 2005, are probably the most significant events that have shaped the current perception and self-awareness of Muslims who live in Western Europe and the United States: not only did these incidents foster an already existing Western image of Islam as a worldwide ‘threat to Western civilization’,<sup>3</sup> but Muslim minorities have, since then, been increasingly forced to re-position, even justify themselves in a ‘new world order’; their Muslim identity has re-emerged as a battleground on which Western cultural and religious positions are re-examined. This feeds into a general discussion of who one is in terms of culture, religion, and nationality, which is inherent in people’s lives at the beginning of the 21st century, and has also generated economic interests in Islam as a marketable object that helps define the West’s position in a post-‘9/11’ world.

Navid Kermani, who was born of Iranian parentage in 1967 in Siegen, deals with the current position and (self-)identification of Muslims in the West, most recently in his essay *Wer ist wir? Deutschland und seine Muslime* (2009). Publications like this have lately turned him into a controversial figure in the debate between ‘the West’ and ‘Islam’. His interest in Islam and religion-related issues has been prominent throughout his work: since the beginning of his academic, journalistic, and writing career, Kermani has engaged with the interaction between Germans and their Muslim neighbours, between Christianity and Islam in Germany (for instance, *Wer ist wir?* also asks what constitutes one’s culture and identity in relation to ‘the Other’); he has written on political issues in the Muslim world, mainly in Iran, as well as on theological topics such as the aesthetic perception of the Qur’an;<sup>4</sup> and he has contributed to public debates on Muslim life in Germany (he has a seat on the Deutsche Islamkonferenz).<sup>5</sup> Kermani gained a PhD in Islamic Studies, and until 2003 he was long-term fellow at the

Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin. It is his scholarly and therefore, academically speaking, more distanced or critical engagement with Islam, but also to some extent his religious upbringing, that have enabled him to offer a differentiated view on Islam as object of Western counter-identification.

Some of the issues that concern the interaction between Muslim(s) and non-Muslim Germans have also entered Kermani's literary work. For instance, the titles of his collections of short stories have religious connotations. *40 Leben* (2004)<sup>6</sup> is a play on the number forty which is highly symbolic in Islam as well as in the Judaic-Christian tradition;<sup>7</sup> the title *Du sollst* (2005) is reminiscent of the beginning of the Ten Commandments – in fact the book is an erotic interpretation of the Ten Commandments.<sup>8</sup>

In his latest publication *Kurzmitteilung* (2007),<sup>9</sup> Kermani is concerned with a wide range of issues that determine contemporary Western life in the early 2000s. They include: loneliness which people try to overcome by virtual communication (text-messaging or e-mailing), but not by face-to-face conversations; migrating and travelling; the media and their influence on our perception of the world; and the desire to have stability (in the form of, for example, personal relationships or religion) in a peripatetic life. However, Kermani also specifically addresses the 'new world order' in the aftermath of the London July bombings in 2005 and the significance of religion within this 'new world order'. He therefore chooses as his subject matter exactly those Western anxieties about Islam that determine the beginning of the 21st century and how they influence people's cultural, religious, and national self-perceptions. This is closely tied to the negotiating and marketing of Muslim identity and Islam for a German market as Islam has been fashioned into the opposite and 'bogeyman' of the West,<sup>10</sup> increasingly so since '9/11'. The issue of the commercialisation of religion has been dealt with in literature before, principally within a German-Jewish context: Maxim Biller in particular engages with the commodification of German-Jewish issues by a mass culture that continually exploits the public's fascination with the Holocaust.<sup>11</sup> The German public seems

to maintain a strange excitement about human suffering (as represented by the label ‘Auschwitz’) and the subsequent opportunity for those who are associated with the perpetrators (the German people) to indulge in their (partly insincere) guilt, and in their willingness to reconcile with the victims and consequently to feel benign. This kind of ‘excitement’ seems to have been used to secure the success of films and literature that deal with the Holocaust and, by extension, with Judaism.<sup>12</sup>

Although the historical and cultural context is a different one for Kermani’s work, Islam is currently going through a similar commodification, and this has two interlinking reasons: on the one hand, the intellectual West craves ‘authentic’ Muslim voices in order to understand Islam in a more profound way, to (allegedly) learn about this religion, and to deal with radical Islamism. Westerners can in turn position themselves in relation to Islam, the ultimate ‘Other’ of the 21st century. This is partly the reason why the German literary market is currently flooded by books on Islam and by literary works as well as ‘documentary’ fiction written by authors with a Muslim background,<sup>13</sup> and why German-Turkish writers and intellectuals such as Feridun Zaimoğlu appear in the media much more often than ever before.<sup>14</sup> This phenomenon goes hand in hand with a generally increasing interest in and return of religion in Europe.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, there is something what one might call ‘Muslim self-justification’ which started to emerge after ‘9/11’ primarily in Western countries with Muslim minorities: this is the concern of some Muslims to show that Islam is a diverse religion and not as violent as a few extremist Islamists might enable us to believe. For instance, an increasing number of mosques have organised open days or are consciously involved in communal work.

*Kurzmitteilung* immediately draws the reader’s attention to its thematic connection with Islam and the ‘new world order’, as the novel is set in July 2005. Its first-person narrator is the highly successful German-Iranian event manager Dariusch. His life is determined by constant travel: he owns a house in Cadaqués in northern Catalonia, and a business as well as

an elegant flat in Cologne. At the beginning of the novel, he is in the planning phase of a project on 'the Orient'. The novel opens with a text message that he receives from the woman he is working with on another project, Korinna, informing him of the death of her colleague, Maike Anfang, whom Dariusch only met a few times before. This message catapults Dariusch out of his normal lifestyle in Spain, a place influenced by Moorish culture. However, Dariusch's chosen place of abode, Cadaqués, experienced a limited Muslim influence only. This fact hints at the equally limited impact of Dariusch's Iranian background on his lifestyle. Nonetheless, Dariusch's Muslim heritage will turn out to be more influential in his personal life and in his work than the reader might initially believe. Korinna's message triggers in Dariusch a strange fascination with death, but ultimately a desire for genuine human contact, which brings him back to Cologne. The novel is set in Cologne where Dariusch meets various people who knew Maike Anfang; it is also full of flashbacks and reflections on his previous life, upbringing, love life, and work.

Maike Anfang's name is of significance for the development of the plot. Her name has religious connotations: Maike is the Frisian diminutive of Maria (Mary), and Anfang (beginning) can be taken to allude to the beginning of the Genesis in the Bible: 'Am Anfang war das Wort' ('In the beginning was the word'). Her name also points to the significance of religion in the novel, yet, at the same time, draws attention to 'old' religions, the 'religions of the book' (Judaism, Christianity, Islam) and their changing position at the beginning of the 21st century. That position seems contradictory: there is both an incessant move towards secularisation and a noticeable rediscovery of religiosity, which is often encountered in fundamentalism,<sup>16</sup> but also in the search for alternative forms of belief such as Scientology. Maike Anfang's telling name and her death prepares the reader for the end of something old and the beginning of something new, which is only disclosed at the end of the novel: Dariusch, a representative of a busy, Western, postmodern lifestyle, draws consequences from his experiences with death as something sudden (a young woman's passing away and the

bombings in a Western metropolis), namely the rejection of an old religion (Islam) and the embrace of a new one (the Church of Scientology). The question to be asked is what this might say about a West that has a new desire for belonging, for instance to a religious community, and how this relates to the marketing of religion.

### ISLAM AND THE POST-9/11 MARKET

Kermani's protagonist is of Iranian origin. This defines him in his personal life (as a hypermasculine man) and in his job (as an independent event manager). Dariusch is against anything which he refers to as 'scheiß deutsch' (*e.g.* p. 80). Furthermore, he plays with what Germans regard as his 'exotic' features that determine his relationship to women and sex. Dariusch regards German men as 'bleiche Konkurrenz' (p. 126) in various senses: it is not simply the colour of their skin he refers to but also the blandness of their personality and their lack of emotion and passion, both with regard to their relationship with women and in their jobs. We could think that by showing off Dariusch's 'Oriental' origins as a means to an end, namely to be successful with women and in his job, Kermani underlines the stereotype of the hypermasculine 'foreigner'. However, Kermani initiates a subversion process here against the traditional role of 'the Oriental' as a 'weak partner for the West'.<sup>17</sup> This is at least in part a reaction to the disempowerment of 'the Oriental', which echoes the historical feminisation of Jewish men.<sup>18</sup> Dariusch explains:

Als Orientale ist mein Schwanz nicht so groß – das einzige Klischee über uns, das stimmt. [...] Dabei ist Größe im allgemeinen nun wirklich nicht mein Manko. Geschätzt zwei Dritteln der deutschen Männer schaue ich auf den Scheitel. Über die paar Zentimeter, die in der Unterhose fehlen, hat sich noch keine Frau beschwert. (p. 79)

Dariusch's main 'Oriental', that is, outstanding, feature is his – in comparison to 'theirs' (the Germans') – shorter penis (incidentally, he does not mention it being circumcised). This is the only detail that appears negatively 'Oriental' about him; still, Dariusch knows how to seduce and satisfy women successfully, despite the size of his penis. It is noticeable that the term 'Oriental' is the adjective that Kermani puts into Dariusch's mouth: he lets his protagonist employ an Orientalist or exoticist word to describe himself. The reason for that could be that Dariusch is shown to attempt to undermine the West's perception of him and his fellow Middle Easterners (which he clearly sees himself as) by reclaiming the word 'Orientale' and thereby detaching it from its Orientalist meaning, or that he simply does not give any thought to his use of terminology (Kermani does not portray Dariusch as an overly reflective man). Dariusch is not shown as a Muslim in religious terms, and he is, if at all, Muslim in cultural terms. This description of his protagonist coincides with Kermani's criticism of a widespread German perception of Muslims. As he said in an interview:

Es ist die deutsche Öffentlichkeit, die die Menschen seit einigen Jahren zu Muslimen 'macht'. Tatsächlich sehen sich die Iraner, Türken oder Libanesen gar nicht so sehr als zugehörig zu einer Gruppe, sondern sind eben Iraner, Türken oder Libanesen, zumal die sozialen Verhältnisse und der Bildungsgrad unter den muslimischen Einwanderern ganz unterschiedlich ist. Die Menschen sind Muslime, aber ihr erster Bezugspunkt ist nicht der Islam, sondern ihre kulturelle Herkunft und die deutsche Gegenwart. Sie sind auch Muslime, so wie Christen auch Christen, aber gleichzeitig auch so vieles andere. Die Reduzierung der Muslime oder gar der gesamten Integrationsdebatte auf den Islam ist mehr als nur gedankenfaul; sie ist im Kern selbst fundamentalistisch.<sup>19</sup>

In *Kurzmitteilung*, Kermani initiates an interesting debate with regard to the marketing of 'the Orient', which is connected with the fact that German audiences expect writers and artists with a Muslim background to *be* Muslim, or even Islamic, and to comment on Islam-related issues in their work. Dariusch's distance to his Middle Eastern, more specifically Muslim,

background enables him to use, indeed exploit, his roots for his job, the event management. Nonetheless, Dariusch is shown to express concerns about the undifferentiated ‘hyperinformation’<sup>20</sup> on the Middle East and Islam in the Western media, which ultimately is his advantage as an event manager. Dariusch says:

Außerdem gab es seit 9/11 derart viel Islam, daß es sich finanziell nur lohnen konnte, mich auf dem Feld zu profilieren. Allerdings wehrte ich mich gegen das Wort selbst. *Islam* waren meine Großeltern, nette, warmherzige Leute. Die Künstler, die ich für das Festival vorschlagen wollte, hatten mit Islam so viel oder so wenig zu tun wie Gerhard Richter mit dem Christentum; keiner unter ihnen war ein *islamischer* Dichter, Musiker, Maler.<sup>21</sup> Das hatte ich schon zu Beginn meiner Recherche begriffen. Es hatte mich viel Energie gekostet, das Attribut *islamisch* aus dem Titel des Festivals zu streichen. Wollt ihr einen Dialog mit dem Islam, oder wollt ihr Kunst, Literatur, Musik? hatte ich den Beamten im Kulturministerium [*sic*] gefragt. Wenn ihr Dialog haben wollt, ladet ein paar Mullahs ein und setzt sie neben einen Pfarrer. Wenn ihr aber Kultur haben wollt, nennt sie bitte nicht *islamisch*. Das machen schon die Fundamentalisten, hatte ich gesagt. Das Argument hatte ich aus einem Aufsatz in *Le Monde diplomatique*. (p. 34; italics in original)

On the one hand, Dariusch appears as if he wanted to educate the non-Muslim German public by ensuring that they recognise the difference between the terms ‘Islamic’ (the religion of Islam) and ‘Muslim’ or rather ‘Middle Eastern’ (the culture that comes from this region); yet, on the other hand, he sees the financial benefits of marketing Islam on a commercial level. He might therefore be uncomfortable with the way non-Muslims unreflectively use the term ‘Islamic’ without knowing what they are referring to, but he also indulges their voyeuristic desire to get to know ‘Islam’ by staging a festival on ‘the Orient’ (despite his attempts to eradicate the attribute ‘Islamic’: people partly expect a display of Islam at a festival on ‘the Orient’). The novel thus also addresses issues of labelling and attempts to grasp the unknown,



even feared, yet simultaneously fascinating object. The commercialisation of this object is, then, a way of subsuming it, of coming to terms with it, as an 'Other'. This also reminds us of what Frederic Jameson has referred to as the 'spatialization of culture under the pressure of capitalism' in a globalised world:<sup>22</sup> 'the Orient', its cultural values and important social meanings (which include Islam) are fixed in place in order to ensure its recognisability and, as a result, to warrant economic profit. (However, these values and meanings also change over time.) Dariusch is angry about how stereotyped images of the Muslim world, even myths that might not be recognised as such, are used in both the media and the culture industry in order to attract readers and visitors (and ultimately to gain profit);<sup>23</sup> he is also angry about the fact that the media lump together Arabs who plant bombs and non-Arabs like himself (p. 35) – this shatters his vanity as an Iranian, as a Shiite, and as an Aryan, indeed non-Semite – and removes him far from the 'Muslim self-justification' discussed earlier: Dariusch is not shown to apologise for anything to anyone, to take on any responsibility for the London bombings, or to try to convey that Islam has many positive aspects as well. However, he is part of the system of marketing 'the Orient' as an undifferentiated object which is reduced to clearly recognisable images, as he profits from the representation of Muslims as headscarved women or young, bearded suicide bombers that he rages against – even by means of meekly attempting to undermine expectations –, both on an economic and a personal level.

The reader might, however, ask whether Dariusch is the right person to organise such a festival as we get the impression that he is greatly distanced from his heritage; here, Kermani confronts us with the case of someone who is asked to undertake such a task as he happens to have parents who come from a Muslim country. Dariusch is shown to admit that his experience of Islam is limited, but non-Muslim Germans perceive him as an expert: the simple fact that one has a Muslim background is enough to justify this person's contribution to debates on Islam in Germany. Dariusch comments:

Klar, ich war einige Male in Iran, zuletzt 2001. Als Kind war das Land eine Selbstverständlichkeit für mich, die Menschen, die Sprache, das Essen, Teheran. Dann konnte ich lange Zeit nicht mehr dorthin reisen, weil ich wehrpflichtig geworden war. Während des Studiums fing ich an, mich nebenher für die iranische Kultur zu interessieren, für das Kino vor allem, Musik, Mystik, Literatur. Ich habe auch Persisch-Kurse belegt, um lesen und schreiben zu lernen. Allerdings fehlt es mir bis heute an Übung. [...] Der Islam hat mich immer genervt. Für mich war das alles bigott. Wäre es freier gewesen, hätte ich mir vorstellen können, in Iran zu leben. (p. 32)

The Iran of his childhood is something Dariusch has always taken for granted, but he had to *learn* this country's language. Iran and its culture will always remain distanced for Dariusch who is not able to speak Farsi. Dariusch is shown to have totally immersed himself in Western culture over time, without approving of it: as mentioned earlier, the adjective 'deutsch' usually goes with the attribute 'scheiß'. His Iranian side has been degraded to an accessory as well as to a commercial asset. The main reason for this development, so the novel suggests, is that Dariusch can no longer identify with the meaning of Islam. Dariusch mentions mysticism as something he became interested in as a student: mysticism is presented as the major component of Islam here, a religious expression with esoteric elements that (like Buddhism or New Age religions in the 1960s and 1970s) attracts Westerners who have lost their faith in Christianity. 'New' believers, who emphasise the mystic element of Islam, create a particular kind of Islam which – to borrow Jean Baudrillard's words – 'masks', even 'perverts' the reality of Islam<sup>24</sup> – and this perverted form of Islam can be commercialised for the culture industry, and also for the media. Dariusch has recognised that: 'Finanziell hätte der Sufismus in Deutschland Potential auch außerhalb der Esoterik, nicht zuletzt als Onanie für linkssozialisierte Rassisten, die nichts gegen Muslime haben wollen, sondern nur etwas gegen den Fundamentalismus.' (p. 100) This image of Islam, which here solely relates to Sufism, is based on a fashion for change and novelty which is an extension of the consumer-oriented,

image-saturated, channel-surfing society that, according to Jameson, late capitalism has created.<sup>25</sup> In this society, ‘all that is solid *has* melted into air’,<sup>26</sup> and this includes the capacity for critiquing this deliquescent world. Dariusch ‘goes with the flow’, and he recognises commerce as his ‘religion’; in fact he admits that religion, or rather people’s fears of Islamic fundamentalism (whereas in fact it is ‘the Other’, the unknown, they fear and want to subsume) can be commercialised. Dariusch bases his ability to do so on his own previous fascination with mysticism and on his distance to his Islamic roots. He says:

Mich selbst widert die Hetze der Medien gegen den Islam so an, daß ich mir immer wieder ins Gedächtnis rufen muß, gar nicht besonders islamisch zu fühlen [*sic*]. Am ehesten zieht mich die Mystik an [...]. Als Kind war ich oft dabeigewesen, wie die Erwachsenen nach dem Abendessen die persischen Klassiker vortrugen, Hafis, Rumi und so weiter. Als ich sie später zu verstehen begann, staunte ich über die Rätsel. Weiter bin ich nicht vorgestoßen. Mir fehlte der Ehrgeiz meiner iranischen oder türkischen Altersgenossen, Islamwissenschaft zu studieren, um die eigene Kultur, meine Identität! kennenzulernen. [...] Der Persischkurs an der Volkshochschule genügte als Ausrede, um mich weiterhin mit etwas anderem als Deutschland zu identifizieren. (p. 47)

Dariusch is shown to be as disillusioned by Islam as Westerners who turn away from their religious traditions but who want to believe as a way of gaining stability: towards the end of the novel, Dariusch, as a self-declared Shiite, reflects on the possibility of faith to provide support (p. 138). Yet he is sceptical of any form of Muslim belief: he says ‘am ehesten’, so if anything at all, mysticism is the Islamic element that attracts him – and this is the point where his effort with his Iranian and Muslim heritage terminates. He can therefore also mock people who try to find their own ‘identity’ by reading Islamic Studies or other Area Studies at university. Here, Kermani shows Dariusch as someone who is not far removed from Westerners who have selective, often romanticised ideas of non-Western or non-Christian

religions and cultures, which are also, according to Philippa Berry, ‘more expressive of a postmodern sensibility’:<sup>27</sup> Iran differentiates Dariusch from what he does not like, namely Germans, and does not serve any other purpose beyond his use of this country in his job (as a commodity) and private life (as exotic asset). It seems that, for him, religion is not much more than a ritual that has lost its meaning: ‘Ich griff zur Fatiah [the first Sura of the Qur’an, F.M.] wie zu einem Stück Holz, das zu klein ist, um mich über Wasser zu halten.’ (p. 24). Yet there seems to be an element of regret that Islam can no longer carry Dariusch; the act of prayer has become convenient in situations when one does not know what else to do (p. 18). The novel suggests that this kind of ritualising devoid of meaning is the main reason for Dariusch’s ability to occupy what we can call the ‘postmodern position’ of exploiting and manipulating a commodity, namely Islam. This disposition also prepares us for the rather surprising ending of the novel.

### **ENDINGS AND BEGINNINGS**

Kermani lets his protagonist draw consequences from the events that happened in July 2005: that is, the London bombings, his commercial activities, and, above all, Maïke Anfang’s death. The latter incident predicts, through the dead person’s name, one religion’s ending and another religion’s beginning. The last but one chapter shows Dariusch leaving Cologne. On his way back to Spain he receives a text message from Korinna asking him to meet with her boss to arrange an event; he writes back that he cannot come. The last chapter is an e-mail Dariusch composes for Patrick Boger, Korinna’s boss, in the spring of 2006, saying that the chapters the reader has just read are a book Dariusch finished writing a moment ago. In this e-mail we learn that Dariusch has started a new life altogether: he has turned to the Church of Scientology (although this is not said specifically) and Patrick Boger is a proselytising

member of Scientology, who helped Dariusch convert. This step has encouraged Dariusch to learn about himself and to reflect on his past behaviour. He thinks that he ‘has found’ (‘Ich habe gefunden.’ [p. 156] he says): namely inner stability and what he calls ‘purity’, that is, peace with himself and with other people. Whether he has really come to the end of his quest for stability or an identity, the reader is not told. It seems that the ongoing search for one’s cultural, religious, and national identity, which Kermani is also concerned with in his essay *Wer ist wir?*, is a major determinant of people’s lives today. In any case, Dariusch has found a way to come to terms with Islam, namely to dismiss it altogether and to sound like one of the commentators who appeared on television programmes in the aftermath of ‘7/7’ and whom he did not approve of back then. These are his words:

Der Islam ist eine grausame, blutige Religion. Er bringt keinen Frieden, er erzeugt keinen Respekt, sondern immer nur neuen Terror. [...] Da ist nur Haß. Ich wundere mich nicht mehr über die Zustände in Iran und sonstwo. Wo so viel Intoleranz und Aggression ist, kann sich die Gesellschaft nicht positiv entwickeln. Erst wenn die Menschen dort zu einer wahrhaften, zu einer angstfreien Spritualität gelangen, werden sie Frieden und Wohlstand finden. Der Islam muß verschwinden. So wie ich das verstanden habe, werden es noch viele Muslime verstehen. Sie müssen sich nur vergleichen mit anderen Menschen, dann werden sie den Grund ihrer Zurückgebliebenheit erkennen. (p. 150)

At this point Dariusch’s new world view comes to the fore: namely the death of one religion (Islam) and the birth of another one (Scientology). Dariusch shows this extreme longing for religion in a Western world that presents itself largely as secular, and where religion often does not represent more than a cultural element in people’s lives. However, Kermani has Dariusch choose a religious movement which is associated with profit and perceived as a business by critics,<sup>28</sup> including governments.<sup>29</sup> This point is also significant for Dariusch: his belief in Scientology ensures him success (he is a business man, after all) because he has

learnt about more effective ways of dealing with people and getting them to work for him, and being successful is something which Scientology puts great emphasis on;<sup>30</sup> in that respect Scientology suits Dariusch, who has not changed with regard to his business mentality. Scientology is a religion firmly rooted in the West, which represents success, and Dariusch is shown to disregard 'Eastern backwardness', which is associated with failure. Furthermore, Scientology does not allow any cultural or doctrinal influence from outside,<sup>31</sup> which is another reason why Dariusch can now completely dismiss his Islamic roots and capitalise on them even further.

*Kurzmitteilung* offers much more than a sceptical look at how we live at the beginning of the 21st century with our uncertainty of who we are and our inescapable exposure to commerce. Kermani critically explores a Western Europe where religion is replaced by a collective fear and threat of, but also voyeuristic view on 'the Other' (namely Islam) after '9/11' and '7/7', and the profitable exploitation of this fear and this curiosity by the culture industry and the media. The collective fear of Islam also enables the West to identify in cultural and religious terms in opposition to the Muslim world. This goes hand in hand with an increasing desire in the West to believe as one way to find mental and emotional stability because we live in a world where constant movement, sudden changes (such as those caused by death), and instant availability are the norm. Religious revivalism, sometimes expressed as fundamentalism, is also noticeable in the Muslim world, possibly as a counter-reaction, or even act of defiance, to the constant hostilities against Islam. As Kermani points out: 'Fundamentalistische Lebensentwürfe sind attraktiv, weil sie die Menschen mit dem versorgen, was ihnen in der modernen, globalisierten Welt am meisten fehlt: Eindeutigkeit, verbindliche Regeln, feste Zugehörigkeiten – eine Identität.'<sup>32</sup> Although, in the novel, Dariusch pretends no longer to be looking for who he is and professes to 'have found', the need for identity, homogeneity, and something which is one's own such as values is greater than ever,<sup>33</sup> in order to locate ourselves in an increasingly complex, manipulated, and

commercialised world, and to resist its powers by knowing where we stand in relation to them. Dariusch's refusal to invite Islam to add meaningfully to his cultural and religious self is a literary example for the fact that, in the West, Islam is largely omitted from a 'post-secular' or 'quasi-religious *bricolage*'.<sup>34</sup> *Kurzmitteilung* presents its readers with a version of post-secularity that is based on two factors: firstly, the commercial and personal exploitation, and, consequently, the complete rejection of a religion that currently has a difficult rank in the Western world as a genuine religious alternative, but, as we have seen, not as a marketable object; and secondly, the embrace of a religion that seems to suit a postmodern, busy, and partly superficial lifestyle,<sup>35</sup> and that, in its practice to draw on a number of religious facets and other sources, is adaptable to the many challenges that await people in this day and age.<sup>36</sup> The novel critically examines the West's craving for information on Islam that the media and culture industry have successfully taken up. Islam is often rejected as a religion that is not suitable for a Western, progressive lifestyle; indeed, it is not needed as a 'post-secular' religion in Western Europe, but as an 'Other' only.

We should consider in this context Kermani's assertion that people are much more than simply 'a Muslim' or 'a German', that people do not have a singular identity in this way, and that clear-cut identities are no longer possible, indeed have never existed. These are ideas that he explores in *Kurzmitteilung* as well as in his essay *Wer ist wir?:* 'Daß Menschen gleichzeitig mit und in verschiedenen Kulturen, Loyalitäten, Identitäten und Sprachen leben können, scheint in Deutschland immer noch Staunen hervorzurufen – dabei ist es kulturgeschichtlich eher die Regel als die Ausnahme.'<sup>37</sup> He thereby criticises the West's, or more specifically Germany's, widespread attitude towards its 'Others': fellow citizens who have a diverse background and therefore cannot be labelled easily are suspicious. This reminds us of how the Orient was perceived as a 'closed system' in the 19th century; it was 'fixed in time and place for the West',<sup>38</sup> and consequently easily consumable. Islam can similarly serve as a useful instrument for both the Western self to mirror itself in 'the Other'

Islam and the Western market. This practice appears as the backdrop of a postmodern post-‘9/11’ world.

Yet Kermani criticises the distinctions between the West and Islam that people have created and, over time, internalised. For he himself is not a clear-cut European or German, Middle Easterner or Iranian, and therefore asks:

Gehören wir, die wir hier aufgewachsen sind und uns als Europäer verstehen, dem Westen an oder dem Islam? Diese Konzepte schaffen Identifikationen, die in der Realität sehr kompliziert sind. Indem wir diese Konzepte annehmen, verfestigen wir sie. Das heißt, Leute wie wir fühlen sich dann plötzlich primär als Muslime, denn zum Westen gehören wir ja scheinbar nicht.<sup>39</sup>

Kermani aims to dissolve such clearly identifiable characterisations;<sup>40</sup> he sees himself as a Muslim and – as he has pointed out – as ‘many other things as well’.<sup>41</sup> In the literary text *Kurzmitteilung*, he has his protagonist Dariusch explore these ‘other things’ that constitute his, a presumed Muslim’s, identity; Dariusch thereby realises that only a fixed image of Islam that the Western audience is used to is marketable. The question remains whether images can easily be changed and whether the clear designation of identities as, for instance, a Muslim with certain characteristics and attitudes has not moved on from 19th-century Orientalist practices of capturing ‘the Orient’. Attempts to hold on to a crutch of stability in order to cope with the uncertainties of contemporary life, which has a clear effect on commerce that counts on such fixed images as they are easily recognisable, seem to prove this point and counteract the postmodern state of flux and instability: they are the Western desire for the durability of images and the unwillingness of most Westerners to review those fixed images of a society’s ‘Others’ such as Islam. However, with the help of his protagonist Dariusch in *Kurzmitteilung*, Kermani makes clear that durability (of images, of identity) is a fallacy, thereby criticising the commercialisation of a fixed Islam: a hypermasculine event manager with an Iranian background uses Islam and his ‘exotic’ features for both his professional and personal life,



and then seemingly seamlessly converts to the profit-oriented Church of Scientology; his life is completely determined by commerce. Yet this mingling of cultures, traditions, and attitudes towards life is not without friction: Dariusch is certainly looking for ‘something’; he is no longer different from his clients with their desires to create crutches in order to cope with ‘the Other’ (Islam) that has entered Western society and that, by its sheer presence in the West, continually displays the encounter of cultures and religions as the essence of people’s unsteady existences. Dariusch’s is a stand that Kermani criticises by implying that his protagonist’s search cannot find an end for the simple reason that not having this ‘something’ – a firm identity, culture, or faith – is not a lack. On the contrary, Kermani makes one point clear: ‘Ich hätte [...] eine Identitätskrise, wenn ich wirklich nur eine Identität hätte.’<sup>42</sup> ‘Islam’ and ‘Muslim identity’ as such only exist for the market.

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<sup>2</sup> Navid Kermani, *Wer ist wir? Deutschland und seine Muslime*, Munich 2009; preprint in *Rheinischer Merkur*, 9 (2009), 22, [http://www.merkur.de/2009\\_09\\_geistesgegenwart-kerma.32814.0.html?&no\\_cache=1](http://www.merkur.de/2009_09_geistesgegenwart-kerma.32814.0.html?&no_cache=1) (accessed 9 June 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Edward W. Said, *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*, London 1997 [1981], p. 144.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Navid Kermani, *Iran: Die Revolution der Kinder*, Munich 2000; *Gott ist schön: Das ästhetische Erleben des Koran*, Munich 1999.

<sup>5</sup> Kermani has published a number of newspaper articles and given several interviews. They can be found on his website at [www.navidkermani.de](http://www.navidkermani.de).

<sup>6</sup> Navid Kermani, *40 Leben*, Zurich 2004.

<sup>7</sup> For instance, in Islamic belief, Muhammad was forty years old when he first received the revelation delivered by an angel; the universe is supported by 40 pillars. Many incidents in the Bible such as Noah’s flood last forty days, and the Jews spent forty years in the wilderness; the number forty symbolises trial or testing, thus many rituals such as fasting during lent cover a forty-day period or are to be repeated every forty days.

<sup>8</sup> Navid Kermani, *Du sollst*, Zurich 2005.

<sup>9</sup> Navid Kermani, *Kurzmitteilung*, Zurich 2007; references appear in the text.

<sup>10</sup> Navid Kermani in an interview with Thomas Wolkingner, ‘Der Verräter der Aufklärung’, *Falter*, 38 (2008), <http://www.falter.at/web/shop/detail.php?id=27576&SESSID=dc6330df5b2e85cb74e85ab1f46ce9f> (accessed 11 June 2009).

<sup>11</sup> See Jefferson Chase, ‘Shoah Business: Maxim Biller and the Problem of Contemporary German-Jewish Literature’, *German Quarterly*, 74/2 (2001), 111-31 (especially 115).

<sup>12</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> For instance, Emine Sevgi Özdamar's novels have been republished as *Sonne auf halbem Weg: Die Istanbul-Berlin-Trilogie*, Cologne 2006, which suggests that the popular demand for German-Turkish writing is growing. Furthermore, less 'serious' literature such as so-called 'autobiographies' written by formerly suffering women are continuously published: for example, Ayşe, *Mich hat keiner gefragt: Zur Ehe gezwungen – eine Türkin in Deutschland erzählt*, ed. Renate Eder, Munich 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Feridun Zaimoğlu was a member of the Deutsche Islamkonferenz before he gave up his seat for a young German Muslima; he is a regular contributor to *Die Zeit* and a popular guest at book fairs and broadcasts (see for example, <http://www.3sat.de/dynamic/sitegen/bin/sitegen.php?tab=2&source=/kulturzeit/specials/119723/index.html> (accessed 11 June 2009)).

<sup>15</sup> See Kermani, *Wer ist wir?*, p. 15.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, London 1995 [1978], p. 208.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Richie Robertson, *The 'Jewish Question' in German Literature, 1749-1939: Emancipation and Its Discontent*, Oxford 1999.

<sup>19</sup> Navid Kermani in an interview with *Reset DOC*, 4 June 2007, <http://www.resetdoc.org/de/Kermani-interview.php> (accessed 2 June 2009).

<sup>20</sup> Jean Baudrillard, 'The Masses: The Implosion of the Social in the Media', in Jean Baudrillard, *Selected Writings*, 2nd edn, ed. and introd. Mark Poster, Cambridge 2001 [1998], pp. 210-22 (p. 214).

<sup>21</sup> See also Kermani on this aspect in an interview with *Der Standard*, 'Das Paradies ist kein klinisch reiner Ort', *Der Standard*, 11 March 2005, [http://derstandard.at/?url=/?id=1979657%26sap=2%26\\_pid=2624842](http://derstandard.at/?url=/?id=1979657%26sap=2%26_pid=2624842) (accessed 2 June 2009).

<sup>22</sup> Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism: The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, London and New York 1991, pp. 48-9 and elsewhere.

<sup>23</sup> For further discussion of this point, see Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, tr. Annette Lavers, London 1993.

<sup>24</sup> Baudrillard, 'The Masses', p. 217.

<sup>25</sup> See Jameson, *Postmodernism*, pp. 70-2 and pp. 276-8.

<sup>26</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, tr. Samuel Moore, Harmondsworth 1989, p. 85 (italics mine).

<sup>27</sup> Philippa Berry, 'Postmodernism and Post-Religion', in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Steven Connor, Cambridge 2004, pp. 169-79 (p. 171).

<sup>28</sup> See Douglas R. Cowan, 'Researching Scientology: Perceptions, Premises, Promises, and Problematics', in *Scientology*, ed. James R. Lewis, Oxford 2009, pp. 53-79 (p. 57). Bernadette Rigal-Cellard specifically mentions 'the belief of the Church that one should not depend on societal aid but triumph through one's hard labor' in relation to Scientology's missionary activities ('Scientology Missions International (SMI): An Immutable Model of Technological Missionary Activity', in *ibid.*, pp. 325-34 (p. 332)).

<sup>29</sup> For instance, in Germany, Scientology was charged several times in relation to its tax-exempt status. See James T. Richardson, 'Scientology in Court: A Look at some Major Cases from Various Nations', in *Scientology*, ed. James R. Lewis, Oxford 2009, pp. 283-94 (p. 289).

<sup>30</sup> In the *Scientology Handbook* (based on the works of L. Ron Hubbard, Los Angeles 1994), much space is devoted to issues related to work, organisation, public relations, success, and setting targets and reaching goals. See for example, Chapter 15 'Tools for the Workplace' (pp. 539-73), especially the section 'Reach and Withdraw' (pp. 549-53), which puts emphasis on the notion of control in business situations, and 'The Importance of Work' (pp. 567-73). Here, the success rate of Scientologists at work is quoted of being at 91% as opposed to 66% for the

general US population. This statistics is accompanied by the statement: ‘Those who use Scientology in their careers have the tools to prosper and achieve their goals’ (p. 571).

<sup>31</sup> See Rigal-Cellard, ‘Scientology Missions International (SMI)’, pp. 330-1.

<sup>32</sup> Kermani, *Wer ist wir?*, p. 15.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Berry, ‘Postmodernism and Post-Religion’, p. 174; italics in original.

<sup>35</sup> See Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 16. See also Rigal-Cellard, ‘Scientology Missions International (SMI)’, p. 331: ‘[Scientology] may not be so much a universal system as the global imposition of a marked Western model, or, better still, an American model.’ Dorthe Refslund Chirstensen points out the self-narrativity and reflectiveness associated with Scientology in ‘Scientology and Self-Narrativity: Theology and Soteriology as Resource and Strategy’, in *Scientology*, ed. James R. Lewis, Oxford 2009, pp. 103-16 (pp. 104-7).

<sup>36</sup> See Andreas Grünschloß, ‘Scientology, a “New Age” Religion?’, in *ibid.*, pp. 225-42 (p. 326-7).

<sup>37</sup> Kermani, *Wer ist wir?*, pp. 12-3.

<sup>38</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, p. 70 and p. 108.

<sup>39</sup> Navid Kermani in an interview with Ali Fathollah-Nejad, “‘Den Onkel Tom, den spiele ich nicht!’ Ein Gespräch mit dem deutsch-iranischen Schriftsteller und Orientalisten Navid Kermani’, *Eurozine*, 27 July 2007, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2007-07-27-kermani-de.html> (accessed 11 June 2009).

<sup>40</sup> Kermani in *eurozine*.

<sup>41</sup> Kermani, *Wer ist wir?*; preprint in *Rheinischer Merkur*, 9 (2009), 22.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*