

Abram de Swaan

## THE CLASH OF CIVILISATIONS AND THE BATTLE OF THE SEXES<sup>1</sup>

*for C.K., Muse*

Most people believe in just one book. Some believe in a whole pile of books. And there are others who don't believe in any books at all. But there is still a dominant tendency to seek the answers to the mystery of the world and all the existential questions that come with it in a single book. When some old woman yonder cuts up a young girl's underbelly and a young woman somewhere else wearing a bomb belt around her waist blows herself up in an overcrowded bus, and a young man in the Netherlands shoots a well-known, controversial filmmaker and tries to cut his throat posthumously, and when all those people while ding so cry out something about Allah and the Koran, we think that all these things must be written down somewhere in that holy book and that it's evidently all down to Allah.

But there are all sorts of things in that book, in a language that is fifteen centuries old, and probably not crystal-clear even then. Oracular language. The wisest of wise men have deliberated about it and interpreted it for many centuries. And these enigmatic texts have been explained in every possible way. Every conceivable ethical, theological or political position can be justified within that tradition.

In the same way, a good Christian may in all sincerity believe that the Bible instructs him to expose his very own children to a virus that may well cause fatal poliomyelitis. A deeply devout Jew may decide to shoot down dozens of Palestinians at prayer – all on strict Talmudic grounds. Another fanatic gets it into his head, on pure Koranic grounds, to cause thousands of people to be burnt alive in an inferno. All these fanatics have read these things in their book, and in the many footnotes that tradition has tagged onto them.

So a Western reader takes a look in the Koran, and finds a passage there which strictly forbids the blowing up of office towers, or so he construes it: 'Thou shalt not reduce your towers, nor thy neighbour's towers, nor his office towers, nor the towers of thy enemies, to ashes and rubble'. Or words to that effect. The reader writes a letter to a newspaper stating that such a vile idea would never occur to any healthy Muslim mind, quoting the relevant passage. But he has overlooked the comments of a fourteenth-century mullah who construes the sentences concerned, on the basis of other passages in the Koran,

---

<sup>1</sup> Translated from the Dutch by Beverley Jackson (Amsterdam) with a grant from the Royal Netherlands Academy of Sciences (KNAW); originally presented as the first annual 'Forum lecture' organized by Forum, Institute for multicultural development (Utrecht), together with the WRR, Scientific council for government policy.

as a direct exhortation to blow up the towers and offices of infidels, since the word ‘enemies’ as used here actually means ‘distant friends’, and infidels are therefore excluded from the protection extended by this verse of the Koran.

In short, if you wish to understand something about the motives of the religious, don’t read their books; they are already doing so themselves, with tragic results.<sup>2</sup> ‘Paul, thou art beside thyself; much learning doth make thee mad’ says Festus in Acts 26:24 of the Christians’ Bible.

But if this is so, how should we seek to understand the world around us? With a little feeling, a lot of common sense, and some help from science and the humanities.

To start with, Muslims are not the only ones to have brought forth fanatics and destroyers. In previous ages there have been fascists, communists and National Socialists, whose passion for destruction surely equalled that of today’s zealots. And even zealots are not alone in this respect. There are also pure cynics, such as those standing trial for war crimes, Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic, neither of them true believers I suspect, but no lesser murderers all the same.

Whoever wants to understand the fanatics had best listen to what they have to say. Once the sense of shock has subsided, one will recognise a good deal in the Islamists’ programme as familiar twentieth-century anticolonialism, which, after its failed Marxist and nationalist peregrinations, has now settled around the Koran.<sup>3</sup> Arabic and Muslim territory is still under foreign rule – admittedly

---

<sup>2</sup> In her inaugural address, the anthropology professor Annelies Moors warns against attempts to derive an explanation of Muslim cultural politics directly from an essentialist notion of Islam. Instead, she seeks to relate everyday practices to the views of specific Muslims and to the wider social and material context of their lives: see ‘*Muslim cultural politics*’: *What has Islam got to do with it?* Amsterdam: Vossiuspers UvA (Amsterdam University Press), 2003. Ayaan Hirsi Ali (member of parliament for the centre-right People’s Party for Freedom and Democracy (VVD)) is one of the critics of Islamism who *does* seek political explanations in the primary religious text: ‘Islamic fundamentalism and political Islam have not come out of nowhere. They need a seedbed in which to take root and grow, which has enabled them to mutate into the highly dangerous variants with which we have been confronted since 11 September 2001. This seedbed is provided by Islam as it is passed down in everyday life to Muslims in the Islamic world. So we have to start by looking at the sources of this Islam’. *De zoontjesfabriek; over vrouwen, islam en integratie*. Amsterdam: August 2002, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. also the philosopher Michiel Leezenberg, ‘Moderniteit van de islam: de problemen van het Midden-Oosten zijn niet te herleiden tot de koran’, *Academische Boekengids* 51, July 2005, pp. 8-10: ‘The history of ideas of the Islamic world is still in its infancy. So it is high time we started working on it seriously, instead of focusing narrowly on questions of what the Koran does or does not say, and on fictitious theological dogmas as the putative sources of an equally fictitious stagnation within Islam. ... The ignorance, intolerance and violence that is assailing parts of the present-day Islamic world are the heritage of more general Third World problems, of the Cold War, and of ill-construed nationalism and Marxism, not of pre-modern Islam.’ p. 10.

indirectly, but that does not make it any less repressive. American hegemony in the Middle East uses puppets and despots to pump up oil and keep the people down. A small, totally corrupt clique of rulers wallows in obscene wealth and sells the finite stocks of oil without providing anything in its stead. That same American superpower supports through thick and thin a small Israeli army of occupation that persists in the illegal and violent occupation of a piece of Arab land. Please note, I am still paraphrasing.

Thus much in the Islamists' programme is recognisable as straightforward and entirely understandable indignation about the oil regimes that are tied to the Americans' apron-strings, that sell off their countries' raw materials to foreigners and squander the proceeds on fornication and ostentation. The much-praised *Arab Human Development Report* – from which I shall quote liberally – essentially writes exactly the same thing, though in slightly more polite terms.

Up to this point, the Islamist zealots are not so hard to understand. Nor is their ferocious urge to attack as new as memory-impaired Westerners might like to think: to name just two examples, was not the 'Bersiap' period of the Indonesian rebellion against the Dutch colonists a time of murder, rape, robbery and pillage, and did not the Mau Mau behave like real savages, exactly according to the racial stereotype, in the eyes of the British?<sup>4</sup>

The Islamists also draw on a different vein of rhetoric. They consider Western culture utterly repulsive: people there are leaving the churches and flocking to brothels and casinos, women walk around the streets naked, the children are rude, and the men are effeminate weaklings too lazy to move a finger except out of greed or lechery – my own words, but that is the gist of their accusations.<sup>5</sup> A great many Westerners tend to agree: too much nudity on the television, rising numbers of divorces, the commercialisation of everything under the sun, and all that stuff ... Yes, they have a point.

The Islamists think that the solution to the countless abuses and problems can be found – again – in a single book, in particular in the appendix to that book, the Sharia. If Sharia law were introduced everywhere, all these abuses would vanish overnight. Well, they have a point there too. Our criminal law, and more especially our criminal justice system, is fairly ineffective. Perhaps it would be a good idea to chop off a thief's hand immediately after the offence (Dutch-style, as a kind of community service for the axe-wielder, and under

---

<sup>4</sup> Visitors to the Royal Museum for Central Africa in Tervuren are immediately confronted – in the entrance hall – by a bronze sculpture of a black man whose throat is being cut by a black fighter (wearing a ridiculous cotton hood with tiger print), while nothing there reminds the visitor of the millionfold massacre perpetrated by Belgians in the Congo Free State.

<sup>5</sup> Those who do not read Arabic can visit the website [www.memri.org](http://www.memri.org), which posts a daily digest with English translations of controversial comments and TV programmes from the Islamic world.

sedation, followed by the fitting of a technologically advanced prosthesis) or to stone adulterers to death (this could count on one enthusiastic supporter, in any case; the duped partner, whose victimisation should be taken seriously into account in this matter).

The idea that there is one book that contains everything is also, as already noted, not unique to Islam, or even to religious faiths in general. Not so long ago there were masses of people who believed that if you looked it up in Marx, preferably in German, the small Gothic letters would tell you whether a toddler should be allowed to stay up to watch Match of the Day. And ten years before that, there were people who believed that Hitler's *Mein Kampf* would tell them which peoples should be exterminated and in what order. No, when it comes to lunacy and malevolence, we nations of the world are pretty well matched – just as we are in kindness and good sense.

There is a third dominant theme in the writings and statements of the radical Islamists: men should protect women, and the best way of doing so is by barring women from all education, shutting them up in their homes, swaddling them from top to toe when they leave the house, preferably in a black dust cover with an eye slit, denying them any right to independent action, excluding them from any say in political decisions, keeping them out of most occupations, and forbidding them to hold religious office.

This latter prohibition too is far from being exclusive to Islamism: Catholics, Orthodox Jews, Hindus, born-again Christians and many, many other sects and idolatries likewise bar women from religious office.<sup>6</sup> And the women themselves, however modern and emancipated they may be, accept it and continue with their obedient but second-class attendance at religious services. Wherever religion rises in orthodoxy, it starts by humiliating women.

The Israeli colonists who claim other people's land for themselves in God's name (something else learned from a book) adopt at the same time the idea that devout women should be subservient to their devout husbands. And any visitor to a born-again Christian website will find countless exhortations to women to be meek and submissive.<sup>7</sup> Still, something has changed in this world after all: while these Jewish or Christian women are ostentatiously playing the part of their husbands' inferiors, there are unmistakable signs that these men can carry on playing their superior role only as long as the ladies are happy to play along.

---

<sup>6</sup> A woman recently led an Islamic service in New York. See Mona Eltahawy, 'Making history at Friday prayer', *International Herald Tribune*, 29 March 2005, p. 7; for the very mixed reactions to this event, see the website [www.memri.org](http://www.memri.org), digest for 21 June 2005.

<sup>7</sup> Anyone who idly googles 'docile' or 'obedient wives' will be directed to dozens of Evangelical sites and a number of SM sites.

Now, I believe that part of Islamic radicalism is a perfectly ordinary freedom struggle against the authoritarian or tyrannical puppet regimes that hold onto power so tenaciously in the Arab world and enrich themselves with the support of the United States and their vassals. In that liberation struggle we also hear the voices of groups that have been humiliated and aggrieved, in the first place by their own rulers, and secondly by Westerners, who are their technological, military and economic superiors and who have spread their near-irresistible mass culture everywhere, including in the Arab world.<sup>8</sup>

But that Western world, which is seen as possessing the upper hand in material terms, is at the same time rejected and despised for its other side: its lack of religious faith, its egotism and its immorality. For people who feel that their dignity has been assailed and their honour affronted, who believe that they are seen as weak and incompetent and who often experience themselves and their peers as such, purity and determination, honour and courage, are the saving graces.<sup>9</sup>

A third theme resounds within radical Islamism: the struggle against women, or in any case against women's rights.<sup>10</sup> Women can only be accepted, protected and cherished if they consent to a role in which they are weaker in every respect. But as I have already noted, while this is a guiding principle for virtually all Islamists, it is also a primary theme for all sorts of other religious revival movements in the world.<sup>11</sup> In the following pages I should like to look at this phenomenon in a little more detail.

---

<sup>8</sup> The more accessible texts of the Islamists display a remarkable lack of concern about the inequality and poverty in the world. This is remarkable, since there is a huge gap between rich and poor in many Islamic countries. The 'social question' has probably been incorporated in its entirety into the debate on Sharia law, which imposes a number of harsh restrictions on economic transactions, and prescribes charity as one of the primary religious duties. Here too we can point to similarities to Christian and Jewish fundamentalism, both of which have become detached from the commitment to social justice that was still alive fifty years ago.

<sup>9</sup> Professor Nilufer Göl, an eminent Turkish political scientist who lectures in Paris, told me in February 2004 that she caught herself thinking for a split second, hearing of the attack on the Twin Towers: 'stunning job we did there'. And this was the 'we' of a Turkish modernist and feminist! That is how deep these feelings lie.

<sup>10</sup> 'Women's rights have been curtailed most radically in countries where fundamentalists of one kind or another have acquired influence or even formed the government, such as in Iran and especially in Afghanistan. As already noted, the emancipation of women, by rulers who had initiated a process of modernisation, was one of the fundamentalists' primary grievances, and reversing this trend is at the top of their agenda.' Bernard Lewis, *What went wrong: Western impact and Middle Eastern response*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002 [Dutch ed. p. 80, check engl ed.//]

In the present age, much religious-inspired radicalism is motivated first and foremost by men's fears of losing their position of superiority to women. Again, the Islamists are certainly not alone in this respect, but among their extremists it is often even more extreme than among the extremists of other religions. This extreme hostility to women obviously ties in with prevailing traditions in the Arab world – or rather, the customs and beliefs in virtually all predominantly agricultural, pre-industrial societies.

In *La domination masculine*,<sup>12</sup> the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu presents a concise review of his early study of the Kabyle culture of the Moroccan Rif, in particular its syndrome of male domination and female subjection. Bourdieu scarcely refers to Islam or religious teachings of any kind. On the contrary, he construes the relations between the sexes among the Kabyle as an extreme variant of relations between the sexes throughout the Mediterranean region, and shows that male superiority endures to this day in these parts, in spite of all the real and putative successes of feminism. The entire thrust of the book is towards showing how deeply entrenched this sexual inequality still is, even today, even here.

Over the past few decades, feminist authors have produced a mountain of studies on the tenacity – and obfuscation – of these male feelings of superiority, as well as the complementary female feelings of subservience. It is scarcely necessary to add to it. Anyone who doubts the validity of these assumptions will not suddenly see the light now. I will also assume that readers are more or less familiar with the manifestations of frenzied oppression of women in places where Islamist rule has been unrestrained.<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup> It has been estimated that the Indian population currently includes 50 million fewer women than men. Swami Agnivesh et al. attribute the gap to abortions of female foetuses, which are a direct consequence of the country's omnipresent discrimination against women. 'The treatment of women as second-class citizens is deeply embedded in the Indian mindset, whether Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, Jain or Parsee.' *International Herald Tribune*, 25 November 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Paris: Seuil, collection Liber, 1998.

<sup>13</sup> Another example: 'Since mid-1994, the status of women shifted dramatically in areas under Taliban control. Soon after the Taliban took control of Kabul in September 1996, the Supreme Council issued edicts forbidding women to work outside the home, attend school, or to leave their homes unless accompanied by a *mahram* (husband, father, brother, or son). In public, women must be covered from head to toe in a "*burqua*", with only a mesh opening to see and breathe through. They are not permitted to wear white (the color of the Taliban flag) socks or white shoes, or shoes that make noise as they walk. Houses and buildings in public view must have their windows painted over if females are present. They are not permitted to be examined by a male health worker in the absence of a male chaperone. And they are largely prohibited from working, resulting in the brutal impoverishment of their families, especially the enormous number of families who have lost a male breadwinner as a casualty

Even so, just one extraordinarily macabre quotation, as a reference for an extreme form of male chauvinism. It comes from an Al-Jazeera TV documentary about Hanadi Jaradat, a young woman killed in a suicide bombing:<sup>14</sup>

Amjad Al-'Ubeidi, commander of the Islamic Jihad in Jenin: 'They [her family] deserve to be consoled, but words are not enough. They lost [a son before Hanadi]. Nothing is more precious than a son. They lost a son. Losing a son affects the soul many times more than losing a daughter in our society. Losing even ten daughters is not as bad as losing one son. That's how it is in our society. A son is more dear to the parents than a daughter. Since his role in life is greater the pain is heavier.'

Yet even this archaising fanatic has imbibed a few drams of cultural relativism: 'in our society', he specifies – twice. At the end, we hear from the mother of the female martyr and the dead son:

'If I had known, would I have let my daughter die? I had already sacrificed one child. Would I sacrifice another? Would anyone say this to his parents. There is nothing more precious than a child. Even if they offered you all of Palestine, you would rather give it all up, than lose your son. If you have a child nothing is more precious. That is how Allah wanted it. Allah be praised.'

The mother speaks of her dead *children*.

Although people in the West like telling each other how morals are on the decline and basic decency has been thrown on the dungheap of history, such tales are wide off the mark. In some ways, morals have been growing steadily stricter for more than fifty years. There may be more rowdiness in the streets and rudeness in the shops than in the past, but violent action has been condemned in ever stronger terms, at home and at school. More importantly in this connection, people are increasingly intolerant of those who openly elevate themselves above their fellow human beings.

'[Today] people try to control not only their violent tendencies but other urges too. All tendencies to place oneself above others are now suppressed more vigorously: derision of disabled, ugly or poor people, palpable disdain for one's subordinates or for minorities, smug displays of superior knowledge or wealth,

---

of war.' *The Taliban war on women: A health and human rights crisis in Afghanistan. A report by physicians for human rights*. Boston/Washington DC, 1998, p. 30-31.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted by www.memri.org, special dispatch 22 August 2005, text of an Al-Jazeera TV programme on the suicide terrorist Hanadi Jaradat.

higher birth or rank, the urge to surpass others ... Not that people no longer seek to rise above others, but they are frowned upon for doing so and try harder to conceal it from others and even from themselves ....’

That is how it is, though I said it myself, in my inaugural address back in 1979,<sup>15</sup> and the condemnation of self-exaltation has grown all the stronger since then. Yet there is one element in this enumeration that is conspicuous by its absence, (and I am not referring to complacent quotations from one’s own work). No, in that address, which was largely about relations between the sexes, I forgot to mention the tendency of men to feel superior to women. It was a hazardous sentiment, even then: the male sense of superiority has become one of the most proscribed feelings in this society. If there is one tendency that has been eroded and pushed into the margins of acceptable behaviour in the West, it is masculine vainglory. Not only are men forbidden to feel superior to women, they are not even permitted to reflect on how comforting, how magnificent it must have been to believe yourself superior to no less than half of humanity. The most loutish, lumpish loser could always bask in his superiority to women – any woman, however wealthy, beautiful or noble she might be. In fact, the greater a woman’s wealth, beauty or nobility, the more it demonstrated how, in spite of all her assets, she was still inferior to men.

The last remnants of these male delusions of superiority are cherished in religions. Religions invoke ancient texts and age-old traditions, in which the germs of male superiority have constantly proved infectious to this day. I have hammered home this point at such length to show that Western men have lost a great deal in the battle between the sexes. They are not permitted to rue this loss; on the contrary, they must visibly delight in the new, ‘liberating’, relations between the sexes. These shifts in relations between men and women are still in progress, although it may sometimes appear as if these inequalities were banished long ago (since they are considered so embarrassing today).

But how are relations of power and authority between the sexes changing in other parts of the world?

Male domination and the male superiority complex have been swiftly dismantled and eroded throughout the non-Western world over the past thirty or forty years. This is largely attributable to a global revolution that has taken place rather quietly over the past half-century – the global spread of education.<sup>16</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup>‘The Politics of Agoraphobia: On changes in emotional and relational management’ repr. a.o. in: Abram de Swaan, *The Management of Normality; Critical essays in health and welfare*. London: Routledge, 1990, pp.139-167, p. 154, quoted in a new translation.

<sup>16</sup> See also my ‘De school in de wereld en de wereld in de school’ in *Redevoeringen gehouden tijdens de viering van het 75-jarig jubileum van het Ministerie van Onderwijs (Kunsten) en Wetenschappen*. Zoetermeer: Ministry of Education and Science, 1993, pp. 25-41.

This process has been going on for centuries in the West. But in the ‘Third World’ it has been effected in a single generation.

‘By 1825, about two-thirds of children in the Netherlands attended primary school’, writes the social geographer Hans Knippenberg.<sup>17</sup> By 1893 this proportion (again for the Netherlands) had reached ninety per cent. After this, the introduction of compulsory schooling put the finishing touches to this education campaign in 1901. At the beginning of this period, girls clearly lagged behind boys, by fifteen percentage points, but by the end of the century they had almost completely caught up.<sup>18</sup>

‘The expansion of education swept through the countries of northwest Europe in roughly the same period and at the same pace; in the US, Canada and Australia it took place even earlier; southern and eastern Europe were later. The middle groups include Latin America (with the Caribbean in the vanguard), while Africa and most of Asia remained behind; Japan moved at the same pace as the countries in the periphery of Europe.’<sup>19</sup>

It was not until the mid-twentieth century that education started to spread in Third World countries at a dizzying pace. A human lifetime has passed since then; my own lifetime, for instance. That is a very brief span for coming to terms with so revolutionary a change. Even in the West, where this change took place in a period of two – in many cases even three or four – centuries, at a far more even pace, the *domination masculine* was not tempered without endless wrangling, and it has not disappeared to this day.

Dutch feminist historians have collected numerous examples of resistance by men – generally but not always devoutly religious men – to the process whereby women have gained equal rights.<sup>20</sup> When the Anti-Revolutionary and Christian

<sup>17</sup> Hans Knippenberg, *Deelname aan het lager onderwijs in Nederland gedurende de negentiende eeuw: een analyse van de landelijke ontwikkeling en van de regionale verschillen*. Doctoral dissertation, University of Amsterdam, 1986.

<sup>18</sup> Catholic regions of the Netherlands and Ireland, for instance had higher school attendance among girls – at special schools where they were shielded from the pernicious influences of the outside world and taught needlework and other domestic skills (Knippenberg op. cit. pp. 234-235). Girls’ education is organised along similar lines today in certain highly conservative Arab countries, cf. Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, *Arab Human Development Report 2003: Building a knowledge society*. New York: UNDP, 2003.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. Aaron Benavot and Phyllis Riddle, ‘The expansion of primary education, 1870-1940: trends and issues’ *Sociology of education* 1, July 1988, pp. 191-210.

<sup>20</sup> For a wonderful portrait of the small town of Oss in the 1950s, see Tjitske Akkerman and Siep Stuurman (ed.) in *De zondige Riviera van het katholicisme: Een lokale studie over feminisme en ontzuiling*. Amsterdam: SUA, 1985. The ‘hot issues’ of that time among Catholics seem remarkably topical in the current Islamic context: was it right for married women, even mothers perhaps, to work outside the home? Will families that move from the

Historical Union political parties set out to mobilise mass support in the Netherlands for their conservative programmes in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, how much of this drive stemmed from a desire to prevent women being granted equal rights? What is the motivation behind the unflinching determination of the leaders of the Catholic Church to deny women their autonomy in sexuality and reproduction? How is it possible that the Vatican cannot somehow manage to protect its own parishes from cassock-clad pederasts, and at the same time wilfully sends men and women in Asia and Africa to their wretched deaths, orphaning children *en masse*, by forbidding them all protection from AIDS? Protestant fundamentalists in the United States are just as set on destroying the lives of people in developing countries. Without any doubt, clitoridectomy is a great evil, but how should this mass Christian cruelty to millions be weighed up?

Men and women in the West are far from having resolved all their differences, even though they have had hundreds of years to learn to live with evolving gender relations. In the societies that are now rapidly making the transition from an agricultural economy to an industrial and post-industrial mode of production, from a predominantly rural existence to a life lived largely in metropolises, the relations of power between the sexes are now also starting to crumble, not in the last place because of the growing numbers of educated women. But the whole process is taking place at a far more rapid pace there. And everywhere it sets off a reaction, a harking back to the rock-solid principles of the past – at least, to principles that are now presented as such. There is nothing Islamic about throwing hydrochloric acid in a girl's face because she may have made eyes at the neighbour's son. But it is part of the customary behaviour of men and boys in communities where their supremacy is under threat from the more casual social etiquette of more highly educated and therefore more assertive women. In short, men have a problem, which means

---

countryside to the city inevitably be precipitated into a 'crisis of the family' and 'increasing antagonism between parents and children and the disruption of the group dynamics'? Should girls be allowed to attend mixed schools and take part in mixed swimming lessons? There was the oppressive question of the 'young masses' who were prey to 'social degeneration', and the alarm about the 'dancing rage' (see pp. 22-25 of the preface).

For decades, Catholics were seen by the rest of the Netherlands as people whom doctrinal authority had rendered incapable of thinking for themselves, people whose lower standard of education and larger families kept the Netherlands too 'damned dumb', whose loyalty was questionable because of their ties of faith to a foreign power – 'the Vatican' – and the support of hundreds of millions of co-religionists throughout the world. The Catholic bastion turned out to be a balloon that, having been pumped up furiously until the mid-1950s, suddenly sprang a leak and shrivelled with a long sigh and some shaking of heads.

Even the headscarf that now makes so many people shake their heads was then part of the customary attire of women from rural areas and the lower classes in general (who were also called 'Miss' instead of 'Madam' until the mid-20th century, even if they were married).

that women do too, and for some men and women this problem is quite new and therefore makes itself felt all the more intensely.

Let the figures speak for themselves – or rather, let them do their demagogical work, since nothing commands more authority than numbers. That opportunities for both girls and boys to educate themselves are proliferating incredibly fast in both Asia and Africa is common knowledge.<sup>21</sup> But what are the consequences?

In 1960, boys living in the Arab world had attended school for an average of six months, and school attendance among girls was virtually non-existent. By 2000, boys had an average of five or six years' education under their belt, and girls three or four. That is how quickly things have changed, in two generations at most, in that part of the world.<sup>22</sup> It basically means that in the 1990s, women living in the largest part of the Muslim world had about the same amount of schooling as Dutch women in 1830. But the figures also show a breath-taking narrowing of the gap with the West – the halving of illiteracy levels in less than forty years. Such swift and wide-ranging social change will inevitably provoke considerable social tension.

There are no statistics for men's bragging or women's self-awareness; for that sort of nitty-gritty one still has to fall back on one's sociological imagination. Still, we do possess figures that give an inkling of what may be happening between men and women in those countries – even in their intimate relations. Nothing is more intimate in the world of human beings than than reproduction. And here of all places we find some very informative statistics, since these intimacies produce a highly measurable result, in the form of the birth rate.

The sociologist Teresa Castro Martín has published an excellent article correlating women's fertility rates with their level of education in twenty-six countries. Broadly speaking, it shows that the more years' education a woman has enjoyed, the fewer children she has. Ten years' schooling means two or

---

<sup>21</sup> Education statistics are kept reasonably up-to-date, nationally and by bodies such as UNESCO. See e.g. *Education for all: The quality imperative*. Paris: UNESCO, 2004; *Global education digest: Comparing education statistics across the world*; Montreal: UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2005; also available (along with a great deal of other material) from the highly informative website [www.uis.unesco.org](http://www.uis.unesco.org). See also Robert J. Barro and Jong-Wha Lee, 'International Data on Educational Attainment: Updates and Implications' (CID Working Paper No. 42, April 2000), available from the at least equally instructive website of the Centre for International Development of Harvard University: [www.cid.harvard.edu/cidwp](http://www.cid.harvard.edu/cidwp).

<sup>22</sup> *Arab Human Development Report 2003*; Barro and Lee give time series for separate countries since 1955. In many Islamic countries, 80% to 90% of girls aged under 15 were completely illiterate at that time and had received no education at all. Around the turn of the century, the percentage of girls under 15 who had received no education ranged between 40% and 50%. Among women under 25, these percentages are still very high.

three fewer children. This schooling also means that women have roughly the number of children they wish, and that they opt for fewer children. Furthermore, these well-educated women take a less fatalistic view of reproduction. They are less compliant.<sup>23</sup> And yes, that has been researched too: educated women use contraceptives far more frequently. They know where to obtain them and how to use them. Furthermore, women with fewer children find it easier to obtain employment, and the prospect of a better job strengthens their resolve to stay at school longer.

This dry-as-dust statistical connection between education and family size is one of the most poignant insights known to me in social science. Because what does it mean? These women have not necessarily been taught at their Islamic, Evangelical or Catholic school that it is permissible – let alone advisable – to use contraceptives. And they have certainly not been taught that they do not have to give in to their husbands' wishes. On the contrary. Yet even in a country like Tunisia, where the educational programme is extremely conservative, even there, well-educated women want smaller families than uneducated women, and use over fifty per cent more contraceptives. I do not think they learnt that at school.

And yet they did. That is what is so touching. Women who have learnt to read and write acquire, as part of this literacy – whatever their teachers may have to say – a new self-awareness. It occurs to them that they are people, perhaps not yet men's equals, but nonetheless not mere creatures for breeding and toiling. Particularly among the peoples of the Book, reading and writing are the skills that make someone a complete human being. Those girls have attended school, like boys; they were evidently considered important enough to warrant such care and attention, their results in class were clearly not inferior to those of the boys. Don't laugh too loud, this may have happened two or three centuries ago in our part of the world, but it is still about becoming human, or about achieving one's potential and equality, for girls and women.

But how does it affect men and boys? For the first time in history, boys have to compete with girls on equal terms, in the classroom. And this competition is no children's game, it is about real opportunities in society, on the job market and in terms of power and status. On the marriage market too, school-leaving certificates are becoming ever more important assets. Boys are scarcely prepared for this. Not so long ago, from the moment they were born they were self-evidently higher than all women – except their mother – without having to lift a finger. To prove themselves and to hold their own they had to be tough, strong and courageous. Manly assertiveness of this kind will still earn

---

<sup>23</sup> Teresa Castro Martín, 'Women's education and fertility: Results from 26 demographic and health surveys', *Studies in Family Planning* 26.4, July/August 1995, pp. 187-202: 'By enhancing women's position within the family authority structure, education also improves women's control over reproductive choices.' p. 194.

them honour. But it will not help them acquire good jobs – on the contrary, it will tend to disqualify them. For many boys growing up in a patriarchal tradition, it must be an intolerable humiliation to have to work hard and tow the line at school to keep up with the girls. The sense of male superiority, like all traditional feelings of superiority, was explicitly based on nothing, if not physical force. If superiority must be proven it already totters. At school, the boys, just like the girls, are given marks for each test. When applying for a job, they have to hand over the same certificates as the girls.

In the West, boys and men have had two or three centuries to learn to live with these more and more highly educated girls and women. And they have had the greatest difficulty doing so. Even today, they have not yet entirely succeeded. In many non-Western societies, the same process is now taking place far more abruptly, within the space of a few decades. This may explain the rank hostility to women that is seen in so many of these countries. The patriarchal ostentation is couched in religious texts and expressed as a religious revival, but it appears to be inspired largely by fear and resentment of young women who have now acquired stronger positions in society, to begin with at school. That is why fanatics such as the Taliban wanted the Afghan women, especially educated women, literally destroyed. The Taliban may be the most extreme in this respect, but they are not unique. In almost all developing countries, men are trying to push women back into subjection under cover of religious orthodoxy.

A similar process can be witnessed within immigrant communities in Western countries. Children in families originating from remote rural villages are growing up in metropolitan cities where life revolves around school. Boys are required to follow exactly the same regime as girls. Father still preaches the patriarchal difference. Mother never went to school. But outside the home the children face an army of women in positions of authority. Most of their teachers are women. The school councillors, vocational advisors and remedial teachers, the social workers and community workers, the district nurses, family doctors and therapists, the juvenile police officers, lawyers, children's judges, probation officers – the large majority in all these positions are now women – women who, during their professional training almost as a matter of course acquired a feminist outlook.

In this radically feminised welfare state, boys and men from immigrant milieus have to hold their own vis-à-vis girls and women who are increasingly demanding and attaining equal opportunities. And it's all down to school. If the men manage to exercise enough self-control not to lash out, they reach – in the absence of any other weapon – for the Koran. Apart from that, Islam has nothing to do with it. The clash of civilisations is in reality a struggle between the sexes.

How can these tensions be defused, if only in the narrow context of Dutch society? What can be done about it? It is not so much about absolute religious precepts, but about the changing relations between the sexes in a transitional phase from one kind of society to another. This down-to-earth conclusion alone may achieve a certain demystification. We are dealing with temporary, earthly matters after all, not with the eternal or the sacred. That means we can start looking at earthly adjustments, earthly measures, and earthly disappointments.<sup>24</sup>

Through their education, young Muslim women are adopting a different perspective to their relations with young Muslim men.<sup>25</sup> Increasingly they are deliberating about whether to study or to marry young, choosing between work and family. Even so, they often opt for a traditional mode of life, if only to avoid alienating their parents.<sup>26</sup>

But nothing is at it seems. What happens between men and women, behind the lace curtains and beneath the veil, is inaccessible to cultural philosophers and migration sociologists. The lively, self-confident young women who air their views in *Liefde op maat*,<sup>27</sup> a book about the choice of partners in the Dutch

---

<sup>24</sup> Gabriël van den Brink argues, in his *Tekst, traditie of terreur? Naar een moderne visie op de islam in Nederland*. Utrecht: FORUM, 2004, p. 58, that Islam articulates three principles that are ‘neglected in modernity’. The first is the suppression of pride and the encouragement of gratitude (58). But the arrogant self-exaltation of men over women is far more deeply entrenched and more widespread in the world of Islam than in Western ‘modernity’. Van den Brink’s second example is his claim that ‘we in the Netherlands’ are becoming more and more indifferent to one another. Really? ‘In this respect, all those Muslims who care for their relatives so faithfully hold up a mirror to modern people.’ But those same Muslims have particular trouble building up relations of trust outside the circle of their own families and clans. The third example cited by Van den Brink is ‘the divine’, in which he emphasises the elements of reconciliation and union. But few people are less inclined to indulge in such things than Islamist literalists.

<sup>25</sup> See also Mérove Gijsberts and Jaco Dagevos, ‘De positie van allochtone vrouwen’ in *Jaarrapport integratie 2005*. The Hague: SCP/WODC/CBS, 2005, pp. 166-185.

<sup>26</sup> ‘Meer in het algemeen, kan de toenemende islamisering onder de allochtone Amsterdamse jeugd gezien worden als een manier om de binding met het ouderlijk huis, en daarmee met de eigen herkomst, in stand te houden. ... Juist als de sociaal-economische verschillen tussen groepen kleiner worden, zal deze manier om een onderscheid te maken tussen “wij” en “zij” meer betekenis krijgen.’ (More in general, the increasing Islamisation among ethnic minorities in Amsterdam can be seen as a way of preserving ties with one’s parental home, and hence with one’s roots ... Precisely as the socioeconomic difference between groups become smaller, this way of distinguishing between “us” and “them” will acquire more significance.’ Leen Sterckx, Henk de Feijter and Kitty Roukens, *Jong Amsterdam; Wonen, werken, leven in een multiculturele metropool*. Amsterdam: SISWO, 2003, p. 126.

Turkish and Dutch Moroccan communities, are not likely to accept servitude, certainly not in a society that places great value on equality between the sexes and in which their efforts to achieve equality are supported by officialdom and the prevailing public opinion.

But women, even feminist women, still have to find some common ground with their fathers, brothers, husbands and sons, as well as their friends and colleagues. They often love them dearly, and in many cases they may need them. So they try, whether or not consciously, to find a *modus vivendi* with the men in their lives. Something similar is also happening among the Muslim women in and outside Europe. They are searching for ways of cooperating with men in new relations of power, legal status, and property. They often avoid confrontation, at least in public. Perhaps life is already threatening enough for these men; perhaps there is already too much that demeans and aggrieves them here and now. Are the Muslim girls and women perhaps secretly showing their Muslim men a little consideration? If so, it may be very wise. Is it not entirely understandable that if you feel insulted as a religious group and belittled as a community, you first close ranks as religious or ethnic group before doing battle with the overbearing attitudes of the men in your own circle?

The native Dutch and the immigrants owe each other nothing beyond the demands of the law and common courtesy. Marital abuse must therefore be opposed with the use of the criminal law and welfare services. Common courtesy dictates that people should moderate their actions and words, certainly when they are speaking on behalf of one section of the population about another, and hence generalising. Mockery and insult from outsiders, make it impossible to break the ties of loyalty with one's own people. Anyone who hopes, as I do, that others will shake off the grip of their group, must allow them the space to liberate themselves from these constraints with honour and self-respect.

Aside from the law and common courtesy, there is perhaps a third prerequisite in relations between the native and non-native Dutch: a sense of humour. 'Put your own house in order'. Under cover of religious literalism, Muslim men try to keep their women down, with their strict doctrines and a heavy hand. It is true. But are the marital lives of the native Dutch that much better? Or do the natives simply have different ways of doing things equally badly?

Women and men are well matched, in all parts of the world. But the rules that determine their mutual relations are all too often unequal and unfair, generally to the detriment of women. In recent history, power relations between men and women have become less unbalanced, gradually in the West, and

---

<sup>27</sup> Leen Sterckx and Carolien Bouw, *Liefde op maat: Partnerkeuze van Turkse en Marokkaanse jongeren*. Amsterdam: Het Spinhuis, 2005. See also Carolien Bouw et al., *Een ander success: de keuzes van Marokkaanse meisjes*. Amsterdam: SISWO/SCP, 2003.

abruptly in other parts of the world. Women are acquiring better opportunities, in employment and in their private lives, largely thanks to their education. The balance of power within marriage is shifting to their advantage. This provokes reactionary forces, partly in the form of religious zealotry and patriarchal fanaticism.

When all is said and done, the battle between the sexes is only half of a metaphor, since men and women do not only battle, they also love one another. Perhaps their mutual desire and shared love can help them in due course to derive greater pleasure from the equal value of men and women. As everyone who reads these words will know from experience, that will be no mean feat.

[the following paragraphs are a translation of a slightly edited version of Abram de Swaan's own blurb accompanying the Dutch edition]

The terrorist attacks in Europe and the US have sent shock waves through the population. Islamic societies in the Middle East and Asia are undergoing processes of turbulent change.

The sociologist Abram de Swaan sets out to explain the clash of civilisations within and outside the West – not in religious terms, however, but in terms of relations between the sexes.

De Swaan singles out education as the crucial factor. More and more girls are attending school, and staying on longer, and they are acquiring stronger positions in society as a result. This is eroding the once unquestionable superiority of men. The balance of power is shifting towards women both in private life and in employment, where men have to compete with women on equal terms. While in the West this has been a gradual process going on for several centuries, in many parts of the world it has been a much more abrupt change, condensed into just a few decades.

De Swaan argues that this change in the relative opportunities of men and women in society is a major factor in the religious radicalisation of boys and men. In a nutshell: fears of the evaporation of male supremacy are being cultivated in religion.

In non-Western societies, he places Islamic radicalism in the context of a transition from patriarchal relations to new modes of social interaction between men and women. And where Islamic minorities in Europe are concerned, men 'reach – in the absence of any other weapon – for the Koran. Apart from that, it has nothing to do with Islam. The clash of civilisations is in reality a struggle between the sexes.'

**[brief notes on the author]**

Abram de Swaan (1942) is chairman of the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research and since 1 September 2001 he has held the title of 'Distinguished Research Professor of social science' at the University of Amsterdam. De Swaan's first book, *America in instalments, a breathless report from the USA*, was published in 1968; he was awarded a doctorate in 1973 (cum laude) on the strength of the dissertation *Coalition theories and cabinet formations* (Amsterdam/San Francisco). From 1969 to 1991 he was one of the editors of the general cultural monthly magazine *De Gids* (since 1835). He produced a series of TV documentaries together with Paul van den Bos. In 1971 his TV film was broadcast and a book published, entitled: *Een boterham met tevredenheid: Gesprekken met arbeiders*. (And a pat on the back to boot: Conversations with factory workers). He and others wrote a study on (I) The rise of the psychotherapy trade and (II) The initial interview as a task (Dutch; 1979). The publication of a study of coping with fear in a hospital for cancer patients was forbidden (1979). In 1982 a series of essays was published in Dutch entitled *De mens is de mens een zorg* (Man is a worry unto man). In 1989 the book *In Care of the State: Health care, education and welfare in Europe and the USA in the Modern Era* was published in Dutch and translated into four languages.

De Swaan wrote short columns for the daily newspaper *NRC/Handelsblad* for several years; these were later collected and published in three volumes. In 1991 a new series of essays appeared, entitled *Perron Nederland*. In 1996 *Human societies: an Introduction* was published in Dutch; it was subsequently translated into English, Danish and Swedish. A selection of essays was published in 1999 as *De draagbare De Swaan* (The portable De Swaan; ed. J. Heilbron and G. de Vries). De Swaan's most recent book is *The world language system: A political sociology and political economy of language* (2002), which was subsequently translated into Dutch and Hungarian (Polish edition forthcoming).

De Swaan has been a visiting professor at the New School for Social Research, Cornell University and at Columbia University, as well as at Paris I-Sorbonne and the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales. He has been European Union professor in Budapest, and held the European Chair at the Collège de France in Paris in 1998. He is a member of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences and the Academia Europaea (London), and he is the director of the Academia Europea de Yuste in Spain.

#### **[much briefer notes on the author]**

Abram de Swaan (1942) is Distinguished University Professor of social science of the University of Amsterdam. He is chairman of the Amsterdam School for Social Science Research and director of the Academia Europea de Yuste, Spain. De Swaan has published hundreds of articles and numerous books, the latter

including *In Care of the State* (1988), *Human Societies* (2001), and *The world language system* (2002), all of which have appeared in several languages.

**[briefest possible note on the author]**

Abram de Swaan is.

Translation Beverley Jackson