

For four years German journalist Charlotte Wiedemann lived in Malaysia and learned the Muslim life. But a real "culture shock" came upon her, when she returned to Germany, where she experienced unexpected hostility to Islam. A personal report

Islam-experts, ten-a-penny

How strange: everyone here is wearing shoes, and there are no mobs of people hanging precariously on to the buses. Autumn: season of mists and mellow fruitfulness... ah, how the tropical rain used to whip into those palm trees! So this is what it feels like to come home.

Four years away from Germany, four years of South-East Asia. It's not an eternity - and it's certainly no reason to put on airs and graces!

No indeed: but four years is long enough for a small but decisive change to have taken place: the centre of the world has shifted, the purely personal centre that all of us - without admitting it - take to be the true hub of the world we live in. Because this is the point from which we view that world, and explain it; from here, we interpret its signs and symbols; from here, we observe the colours and the prayers - and the terrorist attacks.

I've been on the other side. Malaysia, my place of residence until three weeks ago, is mainly Muslim, and is therefore located on the far side of the abyss that currently divides the world in two. Now I'm back in the West, a shiver runs down my spine: I wouldn't like to be a Muslim in Germany.

Listen to the language spoken by the images we're shown, beginning with Der Spiegel, but certainly not ending there. Muslims are people without faces, a mass of anonymous backs, millions prostrated in the posture of prayer. On the rare occasions when we do see a face, it's contorted by fanaticism - or masked.

And otherwise? Baying mobs, flying fists, blood-soaked self-flagellators, and child soldiers.

Even pity, it seems, has to come in the guise of horror: to help us understand that Muslims suffer from oppression and ignorance, we're given a close-up view of a toothless mouth, seen from below.

Muslims are "Gotteskrieger", Holy Warriors: this can't be written too often. And when they're shown to us (yet again) as a mass bent-backed in prayer, they embody (yet again) "die Macht des Propheten" - the Power of the Prophet, whatever that might be. Sounds dangerous, doesn't it? No cuddly little Lamb of God for them.

Some might object that the texts are more differentiated than the pictures and the headlines. Well, if that's the case, why choose those pictures? What needs are they there to satisfy? Is there actually a need to see Islam this way? As a repulsive, ugly, violent, frightening religion?

A discussion at an Islamic Institute in Malaysia: Are the Western media anti-Islamic? For the Muslim audience, made up of people from several countries, the answer is clear. The event develops into a tribunal passing judgment on us, the invited journalists – with me defending the German media in particular. This event took place two years ago, before 9/11. What would I say today? Purely by chance, I happened to be visiting Germany just after the attacks took place; in the days after 9/11, Germany seemed like a country in high fever. Back in Malaysia, everyone – Muslims, Christians and Hindus alike – had been glued to their televisions, watching CNN; and, without exception, they were shocked, appalled, and profoundly disturbed. In Germany, the highly-charged anti-Muslim atmosphere took my breath away; I was relieved to be able to fly back to Malaysia. Yes, really; in an Asian country with limited civil rights and restrictions on the freedom of the press, I could breathe more easily for a while – because I was spared the obsessions of the West.

Now I'm back in the sovereign territory of the mighty German state feuilleton: "Epochenwechsel"! A new epoch! Four thousand lines! It's already the second anniversary of the dawning of this new epoch, and I've missed all the previous episodes while dawdling on the other side of the abyss.

In fact, it is possible that a new epoch has really begun here. Perhaps the West has indeed lost a feeling of existential security that has never existed anywhere else – a feeling never enjoyed in any of those countries in which life can collapse any day of the week, for any one of a thousand reasons, through massacre, drought or flood. But this is just too crudely platitudinous, isn't it? Like a leading article in one of those right-on Third World magazines of the early Eighties...

Our clever colleague Jörg Lau writes in DIE ZEIT: "Since September 11th, those who believed – and who still want to believe – in multiculturalism, in dialogue amongst civilisations, and in the peaceful nature of Islam, have been struggling to explain themselves." Faced with such sentiments, I read them like sentences in a foreign language: whispering the words, and following each line with my finger on the page.

My dear Herr Lau, I'm afraid I have to inflict another platitude on you. Imagine a port, somewhere in Indonesia; a warship is docking there, packed with thousands of refugees. They're fleeing from Borneo, where their tormentors (who were their neighbours until recently) have been hunting them down with machetes. Head-hunters, quite literally; and here comes a woman, trotting down the gangway, carrying her husband's head in a plastic bag. We're talking, of course, about "an ethnic conflict"; or (to be more exact) about a struggle for land and resources, which sought (and found) a way to conduct itself along ethnic lines. In this case, the victims were Muslims and the perpetrators Christians. Perhaps, as I spoke to these refugees, I should have lost my faith in dialogue amongst civilisations, should have given up believing in the peaceful nature of Christianity? Such empty words. I have never visited the scene of any major war or crisis, so I can't talk about such things. I

have only witnessed relatively banal conflicts, everyday cruelties: I have encountered girls who have told me, in three sentences, the story of how they were raped. Naturally, this isn't the stuff of which articles on the dawning of a new epoch are made. But every single day, there are a thousand reasons to lose hope in the possibility of inter-ethnic and inter-religious peace. Or not to.

Day in, day out, people in miserable shanty towns demonstrate their ability to endure conflict with an admirable capacity for tolerance, even if they'll never be capable of spelling the words "dialogue amongst civilisations". But we rarely waste our valuable time writing about such things.

Recently, on an express train to Munich, two pillars of society in their late fifties almost came to blows; one of these gentlemen had had the temerity to "adopt" an apparently abandoned newspaper while its owner was in the toilet. Long after the shared object of their desire had been restored to its rightful owner, this grey-haired duo was still indulging in a high-decibel war of words. I prefer not to imagine how they would have coped with their village well running dry.

The sheer bumptiousness of it all! Since the New Epoch dawned, "Islam-experts" have been ten-a-penny. If you can't be an authority on the German Pension Crisis, you can always announce The Truth About Mohammedanism. These are stories with a big future. At editorial meetings, the reporters are apparently better informed about the evidence against Indonesian sect-leaders than the judges in the Jakarta courts; and so they feel free to pontificate about Good and Evil on that distant archipelago. After all, we're only talking about 220 million people on about 3,000 islands – there's not much you can get wrong about that, is there?. Enlightenment in two easy stages. Firstly: Islamic terrorism is getting worse and worse. Secondly: angry Muslims are easily recruited to the ranks of the terrorists. Conclusion: see "firstly" (above). Strangely enough, though: of all the angry people I've met in my lifetime, not one of them has ever grabbed a gun...

My sarcasm is unintentional, but maybe I need it; because it's hard to talk about things that are more important to me. For example: why do we feel such uneasy antipathy when other people assign religion a predominant role in their lives?

It's now evening. I think of the Tandoori Commandos, my private name for a quartet of Indian Muslim men whose hunger regularly drove them, and me, to the same snack-bar close to the mosque. There, I used to order red, marinated Tandoori chicken; and as a free side-order, they always served me their interpretations of the Koran. Defenceless, with my mouth full, I nodded in agreement, whatever they said. It used to please them; someone was listening! Someone from the other side of the abyss.

Translated by Patrick Lanagan