

A MONOLOGUE UNVEILED

Saturday, December 29, 2007

Leyla Cakir: "We shouldn't keep talking just about criminality and unemployment."

Passport

1978 - Born in Born (September 2) as fourth child of Turkish parents; education level havo, meao (bank and insurance work), and HBO (social pedagogical assistance)

2001-2003 – Social / education worker in youth detention home 'The Turning Point' in [the town of] Cadier en Keer

2003 - Began work as intercultural support / trainer at PUNT Wellbeing in Weert

2005 - Member of the Muslim and Christian Platform in the Western Mijnstreek region

1999-2003 - Secretary of the Turkish Ihlas Mosque in Geleen

2003-2007 - Chair of the Turkish Ihlas Mosque in Geleen

2007 - Chair of the national Muslim women's organization Al Nisa since December 8

Introduction by *Claire van Dyck*:

"For years, Leyla Cakir was the only Dutch chairwoman of a mosque board. Starting this month, Cakir, from Geleen will become the chair of the Muslim women's organization Al-Nisa. She speaks today about Islam, identity and integration, emancipation and ambition."

Identity? Identity is, more than anything, personality, your own perception and way that the world looks at you. It is a dynamic whole. But before you realize it, identity denotes nationality, citizenship, integration and then more religion. All these terms often and inappropriately are spoken in one breath. But okay, I am a multi-dimensional, open and optimistic woman - an idealist and an activist. And yes, a Muslim.

***Allochtoon* [Greek word meaning "foreign-born"]**

Religion is very important for me and is part of my personality. More than anything, I love multi-dimensionality and I love not being captured in a single word - Dutch of Turkish descent, daughter of immigrants, Limburger, Muslim woman. I am all of these. *Allochtoon* with Islamic background is also often said. So, it's out. *Allochtoon*. I have a problem with this word. The word *allochtoon* is loaded, negative, and is used inappropriately. It implies that someone has no value as a Dutch citizen. *Allochtoon* literally means "originating from elsewhere." But now the word is used everywhere in the Netherlands so you internalize it. I feel totally Dutch. And I am Dutch.

Parochialism

I am often asked if I think about going back. Go back where? This is my country! I was born and bred here. I am a hybrid Limburger, with Turkish roots. My parents are *allochtoon*. My father came to the Netherlands as a guest worker. But why make such a distinction? I can't stand parochialism. It confines your viewpoint instead of broadening it. September 11, 2001 was certainly a turning point. After the attack on New York there

was tremendous pressure on the Muslim community. I wanted to say: People, you really don't have to be afraid of Muslims. And at the same time, I asked myself: Do I really need to justify myself? Still, you want to make a statement, especially as a mosque board member. All of a sudden it was about "the Muslims," all piled together and seen as a threat. So suddenly it was about me too.

Open Debate

There is talk about negative image-forming. Islam is portrayed as a violent religion, and Muslims as people that can't integrate. I gladly enter into this conversation as a debate. I have always said, "Don't talk in generalities, be specific, and check your facts. And don't make assumptions beforehand. Have an open discussion." A climate exists in which Muslims are looked at suspiciously. It is as if they make no contribution to society. In reaction, many Muslims take on the victim's role. But Muslims have a responsibility too. You can't just be defensive or fatalistic. You have to take things into your own hands.

Words

We underestimate the power of words. Words can make segregation happen. Is it possible to explain in America the difference between *allochtoon* and *autochtoon* (Greek word meaning "native-born")? They don't get that at all. You don't have Muslim-Americans. That's logical, because someone's religion has nothing to do with their nationality. You are *African-American* or *Latin-American*. That means that you can be proud of your heritage. But you're just as good an American. I am just back from a trip to the U.S. on an exchange project about integration of minorities. It was an eye-opener for me. My most important conclusion was that Muslims in the Netherlands and in the US have nothing in common, except their religion. Muslims in the Netherlands are here as guest workers, much less educated, and newcomers. Muslims in the U.S. went there to settle. They are usually highly educated, work as doctors, lawyers, or judges, and have above-average salaries and feel that they are Americans. The status of Muslims in the Netherlands, however, is comparable, to some extent, to that of Latinos in the U.S. A majority of Latinos, like Muslims here, have low-incomes and tend to be somewhat less integrated into American society. Like Muslims in Netherlands, they have a stronger connection with their homeland and tend to stick together within their communities.

Oppressive

For me, this is proof that integration doesn't have anything to do with religion. Let's keep the integration discussion clean. We shouldn't continue to talk only about crime and unemployment figures. Integration means feeling a connection with the Netherlands - participating in society, not living in your own little world. You don't have to deny your own heritage or give up your religion. Integration is not assimilation.

That's what I found was so nice about America. There is literally and figuratively more room to be different. Take the head scarf discussion. We asked the question there: If you're a Muslim woman who wears a head scarf, can you become a judge in the US? They didn't get the question. The answer was: A head scarf doesn't influence your intelligence and your professional abilities; it just says something about your religion,

period. What a relief! I avoid the headscarf discussion for the same reasons as my predecessor at Al-Nisa, Ceylan Pektas-Weber. She wears a head scarf and I don't. I found it demeaning and I didn't want to go along with this political game. I didn't want to be the subject of this discussion. That is really oppressive. I have a lot more to offer than just a picture - a Muslim woman without a head scarf. You are judged on your appearances, not on what you have to say.

People form an image very quickly, and project this on others, without knowing what is behind that. The discussion is dominated by stereotypes. A Muslim woman without a head scarf is seen right away as a model Dutch Muslim, as a tough, liberated, intelligent, emancipated, and independent woman. If you're covered, you're subordinate, pious, pure, traditional and modest. Why don't I wear it? I get asked that so frequently. This is very boring and a little irritating too. It implies that I have to defend the fact that I don't wear a head scarf. Do I have to respond? Wearing a head scarf is not a private matter? I'm not going to respond to that publicly. I have a direct relationship with God, with no one in between. Why couldn't a police officer wear a headscarf? If you had asked me before I went to America, I might still have had doubts. Separation of Church and State and neutrality seem strong arguments. But rationalizing this is too simple. A head scarf doesn't get in the way of a woman performing her work. It says even less about your professionalism, knowledge, or authority - only about your religion. Can people then be prohibited from wearing a cross on a chain? Turban, cross, yarmulke, head scarf, these belong to the realm of freedom of religion.

Acceptance

Muslims feel that Geert Wilders' Freedom Party wants to deprive them of their civil rights. How ironic that the Party *for* freedom is busy limiting freedoms, specifically of Muslims. If you limit the freedoms of others, you'll see that one day your own freedom will be limited. I see few in Doekle Terpstra's movement against the so-called "Verwildering." I'd rather be *for* something than *against* something. Every time, attention is aimed at Wilders and his ideas. It is not a strategy that I would choose. I'd rather be involved in a pro-acceptance movement; accepting another as he is. *Allochtoon, autochtoon*, believer, unbeliever, we are all citizens of this country, with the same rights and duties. Recognize the diversity that there is. This gives the society color.

Knowledge

I have the ambition to make a modest contribution to society – the Dutch society. My college professor said, "Leyla, you can't change the world." How depressing. He meant, "Give it up girl, it makes no sense." Why do we live then? Though my contribution may be small, I want to work towards a better, more tolerant world in my work as an inter-cultural mediator/trainer and in my volunteer work. In both jobs I see that knowledge is power. Education is important. It not only counters radicalization but also furthers emancipation. By gaining knowledge you learn to think independently and critically. Lack of knowledge creates fear, and fear is a fodder for polarization and radicalization. Islam does not stand in the way of emancipation even though it is often mentioned in the same breath as women's oppression. Islam does not oppress; people do, fearful of losing their privileges. The Qu'ran, the Holy Book, begins with the word '*Read.*' That means,

“Go seek knowledge!” This is the most important path to emancipation. Immoral things that are ascribed to Islam come out of ignorance – that women may not go to school or that some are forced by their husbands to wear the head scarf.

Challenge

That’s what’s so nice about the organization Al Nisa. It is established for Dutch-Muslim women and for improving knowledge about Islam. I’ve never been so focused on the theme of women’s emancipation. I’m used to working in a man’s world - whether in a youth detention center or on a mosque’s board of directors, so this is unknown territory. But that is why I, after much thinking and discussing, I decided to seek the position of Al Nisa chair. I have taken on this new challenge gladly.