



Isolde Charim

Culture as battlefield

The Danish cartoon controversy and the changing public sphere

Both secularist and liberal attitudes towards religion's place in society have fuelled the controversy over the Danish cartoons, argues Isolde Charim. They overlook a sea change in the public sphere, where individuals increasingly "go public" with their private identities. The result is a "language of ethical demands", which, in its ability to draw supporters and opponents alike, takes on a totalitarian aspect, writes Charim.

In the course of the controversy over the Danish caricatures, the grand imam of the influential Al-Azhar-University in Cairo suggested a worldwide ban on the injury of religious sensibilities. This was to be based on a law drafted by leading representatives of the religions of the world, including himself and Pope Benedict XVI. This bizarre suggestion acts like a concentrate of the contemporary situation.

Alone the idea that religious leaders could draft a legal text is like an echo from long-gone theocracies. Also interesting is the ecumenical approach, which clearly does not anticipate inter-religious offence, but only that caused by secularized individuals. However, most bizarre is the way the imam's seemingly anachronistic suggestion, in its complete misconception of the Western world, unintentionally reveals a truth about our present — a truth that, paradoxically, also feeds the fundamental misunderstandings of the current debate.

In order to approach this complex state of affairs, we should first of all bear in mind the incredible revival the concept of religious sensibility has undergone since the start of the cartoon controversy. All of a sudden it's back. Unnoticed, it has taken centre stage in the public sphere. The reception it has enjoyed there is all the more remarkable for the fact that this public has constituted itself precisely through the elimination of all subjectivities. The Italian philosopher Paolo Flores d'Arcais has dealt with this development in a recent text. In it, he shows religious sensibility in its role as opponent of freedom: my freedom should not end where your sensibility begins, he writes. However, the latter manages to gain entry — through the back door as it were — as a caveat that infiltrates the individual, whose ethics of responsibility it mobilizes, thereby developing its effect as self-censor, as a kind of super-ego, that forbids itself any action that could be interpreted as provocation. D'Arcais clearly rejects the aspirations of religious sensibility to a position in the public sphere. According to him, this is because faith is not an absolute in the public sphere, since in democracy the latter is "inviolably pluralistic".

As much as d'Arcais is to be agreed with in an ethical sense, it must be said that this attitude — which could be called the *Western attitude #1* — is insufficient. The complexity of the contemporary situation consists among

other things in it not being enough simply to adopt a stance. In doing so, d'Arcais's analysis overlooks an essential political change. The delimitation that underlies his argumentation between the public sphere and privacy within a civil society underwent a major alteration a long time ago. As opposed to the former premise, according to which one had to get rid of one's particularities in order to enter the public sphere, this step is now taken precisely in the name of private identity. One receives public attention precisely on account of one's singularity, as such becoming part of the social whole: as woman, as homosexual, and now as someone with religious sensibilities. As the French theorist of democracy Marcel Gauchet concludes, civil society is "going public", while the state is "going private". The imam unintentionally illustrated this change.

This has major effects upon the public discourse of our societies. In this way specific demands are no longer hedged in a political language — for example, they are no longer formulated into a programme. It is rather a matter of influencing the political by means of an unequivocally apolitical language, a "language of ethical demands" (Gauchet). Thus the public sphere becomes increasingly substantialized: it is confronted with values supposed to govern it.

As if under a magnifying glass, it is exactly this development that can be observed in the cartoon controversy. The person with religious sensibilities has not formulated his demand for recognition in a political language, calling for example for an improvement in the situation for migrants. It is much more that he or she has "gone public" in their religious feelings and sought confirmation as such.¹ One must therefore see that this discourse, which d'Arcais so decisively opposes, could only "take hold" because it met with a disposition of our changed public space, one that promotes such positions. The cartoon controversy fell on fertile ground. Its discourse was to a certain extent "anticipated".

For the Western attitude #1, then, it becomes apparent that it is no longer sufficient to combat this discourse with the long—since invalid concept of a public sphere. However now there is another *Western attitude #2*, one of understanding for the Islamic world. Here, however, the attitude is based on mistaken recognition. Its understanding is based on a fundamental misunderstanding. This becomes obvious when one asks oneself whether or not these phenomena, which occupy the public worldwide, is now a "clash of civilizations".

This question is all the more difficult to answer, when even talking about such a clash can be anti—Islamic. However that would only be the case if one understood by "civilizations" what the originator of this slogan, Samuel Huntington, has — quite rightly — been accused of: the idea that these are fixed cultural units, monolithic blocs, that "naturally" come into conflict with one another. And the related conviction that the division of the world according to cultural characteristics (however these may be defined) necessarily means a hierarchization — in this case, the bolstering of a Western, American dominance, one that is to be defended. In this sense, the term "clash of civilizations" would in fact be a declaration of war, not an analysis.

Nevertheless, one shouldn't lay aside this formulation quite so soon if one wants to understand what is going on at the moment. Thomas Asshauer has written in *Die Zeit* — in a polemic against Huntington — that religion is "often only a mask [...] behind which are hidden brutal conflicts of recognition

and defence". However that seems to be exactly where a fundamental misunderstanding arises.

The idea that religion is merely an irrational mask for an underlying rationality means not to take religion seriously. It recalls the characterization of religion as a "superstructural phenomenon" that must lead back to its real basis. In reducing Islam like this, one passes up the chance of understanding the specific function that it has today. This is no mask behind which to hide other truths such as poverty, exploitation, or lack of opportunities: rather — and precisely because of these problems — it is far more the field in which identity is generated. An identity that no longer restricts itself to national borders, but that answers to a transnational, pan-Islamic call, that Muslims from Turkey to Pakistan can follow.

The importance of this function of religious belief becomes clear if one bears in mind the following: of course all these conflicts really exist — however, despite their overbearing reality, they are not carried over into social or economic conflicts. The field in which they are played out and "fought over" is religion or culture. Not only is that something different than a mask, it is its opposite.

Religion can take on this function only when its meaning is fundamentally altered. Here, it is not religion in the sense of piety or holy experience that is being contemporized. The appeal to religion becomes something polemic, something that is set against others, in order to challenge an equally imaginary Other — the West. Therefore, the oft-discussed question of how far Muslims are united in their faith, or which schisms, as indices of a rational distance, might exist, is ultimately irrelevant. Because here religion no longer functions primarily as a reference to a transcendence, but as the generation of community, an identity in other words, that is directed *against* something. It becomes a field on which the losers of globalization can unite. It is precisely this shift that is overlooked by the Western attitude #2 that believes it recognizes its liberal, privatist understanding of religion in the cartoon controversy. But the conflict, with its understandable but also with its disproportionate reactions, has shown that the demand for respect for religious conviction turns into its opposite, and that religion — which is precisely not privatized — can become a means to challenge the liberal West. The sacred becomes a banner under which Muslims worldwide can unite against the West. In this sense, one is obliged to say that Huntington is right, religion is *the* ideological form in which conflicts with the West are fought. So Huntington is then right if one understands "clash of civilizations" as the "clash of cultural ideologies".

Of course, culturizing the conflict in this way is playing with fire. But those who warn of this fail to recognize that such a process has already occurred. The character of the conflict has long since shifted from a secular, social-economic level to a religious, fundamentalist one. This shift is synonymous with the change from rational conflicts, which ultimately appear to be quantifiable, and therefore divisible and solvable, to cultural-loading, which turns these into identitarian conflicts. What we are witnessing is not an irrational masking of rational problems, but far more that the conflict itself has become irrational.

The reason for this is what could be called "terrorist totalitarianism". Not only has terrorism dissociated the terrain of battle from every rational and negotiable level. It has also brought about an unbelievable extension of the

conflict, whereby it not only involves in the cultural–religious conflict those who want such a thing, but also draws in those who do not. It compels moderates to identify themselves as Muslims, and thus — whether intentionally or not — to join its ranks. That is what is totalitarian about it. The differentiation between radicals and moderates thus becomes increasingly loose. More and more sectors of the population are brought in — as the cartoon conflict has been exemplary in showing. Where exactly do the boundaries between Islam and Islamism, which all liberals evoke, run? They are becoming visibly more and more blurred.

Terrorist totalitarianism also explains why the much invoked "dialogue" of cultures does not help, since this sets liberalism as a prerequisite not only for the interlocutor, but for the field in which such a dialogue may occur in the first place. With religious identity, however, Islamism has from the start placed itself on another terrain: it has not only made religion the stake of the conflict, it has also made it the medium through which that conflict is waged. However here lies the crux of the Western attitude #1, which, when answering the central question in this conflict of which is more important to us, the values of the Enlightenment or those of religion, opts unequivocally for the former. Because it fails to recognize that this question rests on false grounds: it allows in answer only a declaration of faith — regardless of which of the two alternatives one opts for. However, the moment the so-called "West" treats democracy — which is in fact a specific form of a faithless faith — like a faith, when it begins to defend its order as if it were an article of faith, it has followed its opponent onto his own side of the net: into the irrationality of a battle of faith. This totalitarian game can't be won — it can only be rejected.

This article is adapted from a paper given at the podium discussion "Bilderstreit 2006. Pressefreiheit? Blasphemie? Globale Politik?" in the Wiener Rathaus on 1 March 2006.

¹ The imam's demand for a legal stipulation — which is indeed indebted to the rubric "theocracy" — would catch up with him, however: the legal protection of the individual believer in his or her subjective feelings would result in his flock breaking up into individuals.

Published 2006–04–13
Original in German
Translation by Simon Garnett
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