

## Offence is no criticism

*George Virsik*

The Dutch filmmaker *Theo van Gogh* (a great-grandnephew of the painter Vincent van Gogh) was gunned down and stabbed to death on an Amsterdam street on 2<sup>nd</sup> November. The assailant was a 26-year-old man of dual Dutch and Moroccan nationality. Van Gogh had received anonymous death threats after Dutch television aired his short film *Submission* in August. He called Muslims “goatfuckers” and his film featured four women who claimed to have been abused by their Muslim husbands. They wore see-through robes showing their breasts (and more), with texts from the Koran scrawled on their naked bodies.

Prime Minister *Jan Peter Balkenende* called van Gogh “a champion of the freedom of speech”. Of course, nothing can justify the murder, but was van Gogh really a “champion of free speech”, was he really killed by the fanatic because he “angered Muslims with criticism” (as e.g. *The Washington Post* reported). Just with “criticism”? There is, after all, a difference between criticism and offence!

Of course, there are hundreds of reasons why one should criticise the practice of some Muslims with women, and fight for their rights. And even more reasons to do everything to prevent the aggressive fanatics among them to do harm to Europe (or to any, not only democratic, society). But is offending their religion, ridiculing what is sacred to *all* Muslims, the way to go about it? What else could it have achieved except for what it did: the death of the offender by the hand of a fanatic, and some twenty burned down Dutch mosques, Koran schools and churches?

Yes, churches, because people who mock Islam (actually, they mock any religion), and call it “freedom of speech”, make sure that Muslims see not them but Christians as their real adversaries in Europe, and vice versa. Their mockery is evenhanded: In August next year Cologne will host the Catholic *World Youth Day* that also the Pope intends to attend. Who do you think is more likely to carry slogans offensive to the Pope (and to all Catholics), the Muslims or the post-Christian defenders of this kind of “freedom of speech”?

The Christian domination of Europe belongs to history, the present secularist domination is rather subtle — not all anti-religionists make use of the media the way van Gogh did — and the way islamists want to achieve their domination is anything but subtle; but there is also the demographic situation and trend, which are facts, not just intentions. For instance, in Germany there are now about 3.2 million Muslims, that is 3.9% out of a population of 82 million. According to recent data, only about 6.1 million Germans (7.4% of the population) go regularly to church on Sunday (4.5 million Catholics and 1.6 million Protestants). Every Muslim knows that these numbers were quite different just a few decades ago, and much of their cultural stubbornness — the creation of parallel societies as it is called here — can be attributed to their fear of ending up the same way in just a couple of generations.

Only recently *Renate Künast* (the Green Minister of Consumer Protection, Food and Agriculture) called for the introduction of Islam as a subject in German schools, with the justification that “the teaching of Islam religion offers us a chance to develop an enlightened European Islam that has no problems with adjusting to an open society.” (*DER SPIEGEL*, 3/12/04). Of course, the “us” here refers to secular outsiders. A Muslim when hearing this must feel like the budgie whom the cat invited to a dinner party. What religion will let its deniers develop a version of it with the purpose of making it acceptable to the very same deniers? Enlightenment, used as the excuse for applying psychologically sophisticated methods to make Christianity “adjust to open society”, lead to the decimation of Christians in (Western) Europe. There is not, and cannot be, a Christianity enlightened from outside, but there is a post-Enlightenment Christianity: A Christianity that used Enlightenment, that it gave birth to, as an antithesis to correct itself from inside. This kind of Christianity is the only one that has a chance of survival in a secular society. Along these lines lies also the only hope for Muslims, for their mullahs and imams (and not the outside deniers) to correct Islam from inside, and make it compatible with modernity. Christians who (for the time being?) lost their numbers gained some experience that they can offer. In my opinion, this is the platform on which Christianity and Islam should meet, comparing, if you like, their corrections. However, I must admit, not many of those responsible, on both the Muslim and Christian sides, are yet able to see the encounter in this way.

Because whatever the differences between Islam and Christianity, and there are some, they are not to be confused with differences and conflicts, between the life-style of Muslims, what is important to them, and that of the politically correct but morally permissive post-Christian society that thinks it can live without religion while replacing it with something that in many aspects (human rights, social justice) resembles a plastic replica

of Christian values. What van Gogh did had nothing to do with anything that separates Christians from Muslims. This should be made clear to Muslims in any criticism of their behaviour, practice and prejudices that are incompatible with any modern democratic society. Not only that dominated by secularists, as it often seems to be the case in Western Europe.

Christians should be in a better position to do this than post-Christian secularists, perhaps also for the following reason. Violence, degradation and injustice towards women, rigid conservatism in matters of sex etc., follow neither from Koran nor from the Bible. However, much of that existed in medieval (and not only medieval) Christianity, and even I can remember times when sexual education was only circumspect. A more advanced in history religion, that can remember its own distortions of its own sacred texts, can have a better understanding, and could better encourage a historically younger religion than a non-religious outsider who remembers and understands nothing, and even confuses criticism and freedom of speech with offensive ridicule.

Let me finish with the words of *Peter Scholl Latour*, knower of the Arab and Islamic world par excellence, and a household name in Germany: “We would be more in a position to hold discussions with Islam, they are after all our neighbours, had we kept our own religious convictions. Namely, we could then speak eye to eye. But a person who gave up his religion, who is an atheist, is an animal for a Muslim. And that is the point: we are weaker than the Muslims because we do not believe any more.”

[<http://www.tendenzen.de/interviews/int302.htm>]