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A Clash of Cultures or a Debate on Europe's Values?

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The murder of Theo van Gogh, which sent a shock wave through the Netherlands, has been largely interpreted as the proof of an obvious failure of the multiculturalist approach that prevailed in the country at least until the electoral success of Pim Fortuyn in 2002. The crime appeared as the exacerbated expression of an Arab or "Muslim" culture unable to accept Western values. This could have been true, were the murderer and his accomplices traditional Muslims, barely able to speak Dutch and from a tight-knit closed community of immigrants. But Van Gogh's alleged killer, Mohammed B, is a Dutch citizen, although born into a migrant family from Morocco. Two of those arrested — Jason W. and Jermaine W. — are Dutch-American converts to Islam.

Trajectories of Muslim radicalization in Europe

Developments in the Netherlands have been very much in line with developments in the rest of Europe. Since the end of the 1980's, both the Islam-related violence and the identity patterns of radicals, have corresponded to similar trends throughout Europe. The Bradford demonstrations against Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* (January 1988) represented the first open claim by Muslims living in the West that Islam should be protected in Europe against "blasphemy," although the fatwa against Rushdie was launched by Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran for purely political reasons. In the summers of 1994 and 1995 a string of terrorist actions had also been perpetrated by Islamic radicals in France. Many young European Muslims joined different jihads in the world (Afghanistan, Bosnia, Chechnya, Kashmir and, more recently, Iraq), and, although not all of them became terrorists, some did join al-Qaida (Zacarias Moussaoui, Richard Reid). There have been some twenty European Muslims jailed in Guantanamo; even if many of them did not have direct connections with al-Qaida, they nevertheless all went to fight alongside the Taliban in Afghanistan. Many terrorist actions have been perpetrated or planned by young Muslims living in the West: the 9/11 pilots, the "Roubaix gang" (1996), the Jamal Beghal network (2001), the Hamburg cell (accused of having provided logistical support to the 9/11 attack), even the group responsible for the Madrid deadly bombings of 2004, share common patterns.

The process of radicalization among second generation Muslims in Western Europe is therefore nothing new. They fall roughly into three categories: 1) second generation young males whose families usually originated from North-Africa, 2) young men who came from North Africa or the Middle-East and settled in the West either to study or to work, 3) converts who are often outcasts (non-Muslim racial minorities, usually black and/or Caribbean, former delinquents converted in jail, drug-addicts who found in Islam a way to quit addiction, or just "buddies" who joined their Muslim friends when the latter became "born-again"). All of them are fully westernized and usually keep aloof from the mainstream Muslims.¹ The murder of Van Gogh was a consequence of the merging of two trends: the call to fight blasphemy, and the jumping of young westernized Muslims into "international jihadism."

The westernization of these young radicals is obvious from many points: they are fluent in Western languages (and often do not speak

The murder of Theo van Gogh in the Netherlands (2 November 2004) represents a recent example of how westernized Muslims and converts have been implicated in acts associated with Islamic radicalism in Europe. Despite widespread interpretations that Islamic radicalization represents the failure of the multiculturalists approach vis-à-vis Muslim immigrants, radicalism can better be explained as the consequence of de-culturation and globalization. Radicals endeavour to reconstruct a "pure" religion outside traditional or Western cultures, outside the very concept of culture itself.

Arabic), they often have citizenship in a Western country (Moussaoui, Mohammed B.), marry European women (Daoudi, Beghal), have a Western parent (the mother of Abdelkrim Mejjati, the Madrid ring leader, is French), and are born-again. Few if any went to a religious school. The weight of converts in radical groups should never be underestimated: almost all radical and violent networks dismantled in Europe during the last ten years had at least one convert (Reid, Grandvizio, Courtailler, Ganczarski, to name a few). The group responsible for Van Gogh's

murder seems to fit these patterns: Mohammed B. speaks fluent Dutch, is a Dutch citizen, and is obviously a "born again," who had a "normal" life until he became a fanatic; the other Moroccans involved in the case settled in Europe. Finally, we should note the presence of the converts, embodied by the two sons of a US black military officer and a Dutch woman, who went to Pakistan for religious and military training.

The de-culturalization of religion

The uproar generated in the Netherlands by the murder concentrates on the issue of "multiculturalism," which is now expressed in terms of a clash of cultures, although nobody can explain why no "traditional Muslim," but only westernized Muslims and converts, were involved in the act. The answer is that what has been seen as an exception (a fanatical westernized Muslim) is precisely the norm: the more radical the terrorists, the more they do not embody a traditional culture or a culture at all. Islamic radicalization is a consequence of deculturation and not the expression of a pristine culture. It is an endeavour to reconstruct a "pure" religion outside traditional or Western cultures, outside the very concept of culture itself.

All the present forms of Islamic religious radicalization (which I call "neo-fundamentalism," and which do not necessarily entail violence or political radicalization), are both a product and an agent of deculturation and globalization. The Taliban in Afghanistan did not fight to defend a traditional culture against Western encroachments: on the contrary, they were initially on good terms with the US government and fought first of all against the traditional Afghan culture (I take the term culture here both in the sense of arts and literature, and in the anthropological sense of socially transmitted behaviour patterns, beliefs, institutions). In the Muslim world, Salafis and Tablighis, whatever their differences, are all fighting against traditional Muslim cultures, accused of having distorted the pure Islam of its origins. Such a predication is very successful among segments of deculturated second generation Muslims, who find in it an apology and a vindication of their own uprootedness: they prefer halal fast-food to traditional Muslim cuisines. The generation gap, coupled with a sense of disenfranchising, became suddenly of some value: the more they ignored their grandfather's Islam, the more they had an opportunity to become "true Muslims." Individualization of faith, self-teaching, generational gap, rejection of authority (including that of established religious leaders), loosening of family ties, lack of socialization with a broader community (including the ethnic community of their parents), and withdrawal towards a small inward-looking group, akin to

a cult: all these factors show the extent of the process of deculturation of the radicals.

The quest for authenticity is no longer a quest to maintain a pristine identity, but to go back to and beyond this pristine identity through a non-historical, abstract, and imagined model of Islam. It is not an issue of nostalgia for a given country, for one's youth or for family roots. In this sense, "westernization" means something other than becoming Western, hence the ambivalent attitude towards it. But such behaviours do not necessarily lead to violence, although they provide a fertile ground. There are two elements that could explain the violence. The first issue is that such radicals are not linked to any real community. Their community is not rooted in a given society or culture, and hence has to be reconstructed and experienced as an act of faith. They refer to a virtual ummah (community of believers) whose existence relies on their behaviour and deeds. The obsession about blasphemy and apostasy goes along with the vanishing of the social authority of Islam. The "dreamed" community becomes a "nightmared" one. The issue of "boundary" comes to the fore. By slaughtering a "blasphemer" Mohammed B. literally inscribed the boundary on his victim's throat. Do not trespass.

If we examine patterns of other terrorists we can observe a different and more political approach: their targets are the same as the traditional targets of the Western ultra-left of the seventies (US imperialism), and not Christianity as such. Even if they achieved a level of mass murder unknown to their predecessors, they still followed the path opened by Baader Meinhof, the Red Brigades, and Carlos. The proponents of the "clash of civilizations" should look at the footages of the hostage takings in Iraq: the "trial" of a blind-folded hostage under the banner of a radical organization, the "confession" of the hostage, followed by his execution, are literally borrowed from the staging technique of the Italian Red Brigades when they captured and killed the former Prime minister Aldo Moro in 1978.

Beyond multiculturalism

Nevertheless, the reaction of the Dutch society overwhelmingly interpreted the murder of Van Gogh in terms of the failure of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism has suddenly been seen as negative. But going from positive to negative means that the intellectual paradigm of multiculturalism is still at work. Multiculturalism has obviously failed, but for a different reason: the culture one is referring to is disappearing and this is the real cause of violence. At a time when the territorial borders between the great civilizations are fading away, mental borders are being reinvented to give a second life to the ghost of lost civilizations: multiculturalism, minority groups, clash or dialogue of civilizations, communitarisation and so on. Ethnicity and religion are called to draw new borders between groups whose identity relies on a performative definition: we are what we say we are, or what others say we are. These new ethnic and religious borders do not correspond to any geographical territory or area. They work in minds, attitudes, and discourses. They are more vocal than territorial, but also so much more eagerly endorsed and defended because they have to be invented, and because they remain fragile and transitory. De-territorialization of Islam leads to a quest for definition, because Islam is no longer embedded in territorial cultures, whatever their diversity, which is, by the way, always experienced from outside.

The crisis of the concept of culture is also obvious in the West. It is interesting to see how the way Islam is perceived as a threat is different from one European country to the other. In France the "headscarf affair" amounted to a debate on French national identity, while the idea that veiled schoolgirls are a problem is just seen as silly in Great Britain. This does not mean that Great Britain is more tolerant than France: in the UK it is strictly forbidden to slaughter animals the "halal" way, while in France it has never been a problem. The issue of animal protection in Northern Europe is almost a civilizational one (nobody seems to have given thought to the fact that Pim Fortuyn was killed by an animal rights activist). The language issue is also complex. In France and Great Britain, Muslims do speak the language of their host European country, and often before their arrival to Europe. In Holland many do not, although if they plan to stay in the country they must follow "enculturation courses" which include intensive language instruction. The

issue, then, is not so much integration into Europe, but the status of the different European languages. Islam arrives in Europe at a time when European integration is weakening the political dimension of national identities. The traditional nation-states are fading away. At the same time, at the grass roots level, national cohesion seems also to vanish due to the consequences of immigration. European identities are in a process of recasting and new terms such as "Englishness," "Dutchness," "Frenchness" are emerging.

Europe historically used two models to deal with immigration: assimilationism (France) and multiculturalism (Northern Europe). Both failed for the same reason: they ignored the de-linking of culture and religion. France rightly considered that imported cultures would fade away, but wrongly asserted that this would lead to individual assimilation. Northern Europe considered that pristine cultures would be steady enough to maintain a cohesive community, which could keep the new generation under some sort of social control. It also failed in favour of a purely religious identity. In both cases, what emerges is a call to be recognized as "Muslims" and no more as "immigrants," or as a "cultural minority." This means that, although the initial approaches were very different, Europe is now facing the same challenge: how to deal with Islam as a "mere" religion. But the emergence of Islam as a mere religion does not create a divide between "East" and "West" but a realignment between conservative and religious values on one hand, versus progressive and liberal ideas on the other hand. But values are not the expression of a given culture.

When Pim Fortuyn entered politics in the Netherlands on an anti-Islamic agenda, it was not to defend traditional European values, but to protect the homosexual rights that had been won in the 1970s against a conservative Christian tradition. Interestingly enough, the Moroccan Imam el-Moumni, who triggered Fortuyn's anger by saying in a radio broadcast that homosexuality is a disease and has to do with bestiality, was not in line with traditional ulama, for whom homosexuality is a sin and thus should be punished by death. By calling it a disease, he took the same line as the Catholic church in modern times: exonerating the homosexual of sin as long as he does not practise it, but refusing to give him any legal rights as a homosexual, which, in the eyes of the church, is a modern and benevolent position.

The debate with Islam is in fact a European search for a European soul.

Note

1. See my *Globalised Islam* (London: Hurst & Co., 2004), Chap. 7; see also Marc Sageman, *Understanding Terrorist Networks* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania University press, 2004).

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**Portions of
letter left
on Theo van
Gogh's body by
the killer**

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