

# Religion and Rationality

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One of the striking features of 2006 was the way in which religion apparently obtruded into the political debate within Europe. The issue had begun to emerge in the previous two years as public discussion over the European Union's constitutional treaty became mired in complexities of definition over Europe's essential nature – as a Christian space or a secular environment of democratic governance and respect for individual rights in a climate of “inclusion within diversity”. The mobilisation of religion as a key cultural identifier of European identity was, however, a new contribution to the debate in which organised religion in Europe took an active part.

The introduction of Christianity into this debate, partly because of Enlargement in 2004, began to polarise other debates as well, especially those concerned with the inclusion of minority communities of other faiths, particularly Islam, underneath the European umbrella. For the littoral states of both the North and the South of the Mediterranean, the debate had particular resonance, given the Mediterranean's role as the “forgotten frontier” between Christianity and Islam. And the majority of Europe's immigrant minority communities are, of course, Muslim.

## **Past Conflict**

This was not the first time that this issue had emerged into the public debate, of course. The Salman Rushdie affair, when the author of the *Satanic Verses* found himself facing death threats from Iran in 1989 because of comments about the Prophet Mohammed contained in the book, had highlighted the growing problems

of minority communities and religious sensitivities in Europe towards the end of the 1980s. In 2002, the flamboyant Dutch politician, Pym Fortuyn, had been assassinated as a result of his attacks on migrants in Holland and his desire to limit immigration because of his intense distrust of Islam. Two years later, the Dutch film-maker, Theo Van Gogh, was killed by a Moroccan after he had made a film with a Somali immigrant politician, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, highlighting discrimination against women allegedly sanctioned in the Qur'an.

Then, at the end of 2005, the “cartoons crisis” erupted in Denmark, after a local newspaper, claiming to support freedom of speech, published cartoons of the Prophet Mohammed deemed offensive by the local Muslim community. As with the Rushdie affair, the “cartoons crisis” soon generated a powerful resonance in the Muslim world, admittedly with some judicious help from Muslim leaders in Europe. The crisis stretched into 2006 with boycotts of Danish products in the Middle East and a growing diplomatic crisis set against European irritation at an issue that seemed to threaten innate European values by setting religious values against those of secular and tolerant European society. The issue was underlined in Britain, already sensitised to these issues by the bombings in London on 7 July 2005, where the prime minister, over a year later, expressed a majority view when he supported multiculturalism, provided that tolerance was also accepted by all those who made up the multicultural society. “Our tolerance,” he said in a major speech in December 2006, “is part of what makes Britain, Britain. So conform to it; or don't come here.” His comments came in the wake of comments by the former foreign secretary, Jack Straw, who had decried the *hijab* as a factor for division, not integration, within Britain's – and by extension, Europe's – complex multicultural society. His arguments recalled the bitter struggle in France over *laïcité* and Islamic dress in

March 2004 and similar concerns in Germany and Italy in the same year.

### The Role of the Pope

Yet the issue was not quite as one-sided as it appeared, as Pope Benedict XVI was to demonstrate in the autumn of 2006. In an address at Regensburg, the university where he had studied before becoming a teacher in Bonn, the pope made a statement that seemed, inter alia, a direct challenge to Islam. Citing a fourteenth-century Byzantine emperor, he highlighted the concept of violence inherent in Islamic revelation. Although he recognised the extremism of such views, he did not dissent from them, as he sought to demonstrate the innate rationality of the Catholic vision, against both the crude rationalism of scientific secularism and the unrestrained commitment of revealed belief.

There was, of course, a storm of protest, both from the secular left and Muslims in Europe and from the Muslim world, particularly the Middle East and North Africa. The Vatican claimed to be “surprised” and the pope himself avowed he was “saddened” by the reaction. Little was done, however, to correct the impression his words had created and a not insignificant number of church leaders – both Catholic and non-Catholic alike, including Lord Carey, a former archbishop of Canterbury – sprung to his defence, thus incidentally confirming the view that, despite decades of interfaith dialogue, Christians really did believe that Islam encouraged, even promoted, violence as well as lacking the rationality of mainstream Christianity.

The pope’s comments were not, however, quite as coincidental as the hurt reaction from the Vatican implied. Pope Benedict XVI seems to be far more sceptical about the utility of interfaith dialogue, as it has been practiced in the past, than was his predecessor. He has downgraded the department and the officials in the Vatican responsible for it and has argued that any dialogue can only operate on the basis of “reciprocity”. In other words, Islam as a corpus of belief and articulated doctrine should mirror the values and principles that have come to characterise Christianity in the contemporary era of secular society and politics.

The offending citation, buried inside a complex argument about the role of rationality in religion, when seen in that context, served a coded political purpose,

too. It highlighted where reciprocity appeared to be lacking – in an explicit and overt condemnation of religious extremism, similar to that implied by Mr Blair some months later. It also implied that the outrage over the cartoons crisis was misplaced within the context of European tolerance and that radical Islamist projects within Europe and beyond required systemic and sustained condemnation from within Islam itself. Not least, it implied the need for a far more overt disavowal of the kind of violence seen in Holland from the Muslim hierarchy inside Europe.

### The Political Implications

Taken alone, no doubt, these strictures are unexceptional and, for most European moderates, self-evident. Tolerance and freedom of speech are at the core of the European experience and are, in themselves, essential guarantors of minority rights within a secular, multicultural society. The idea of violence as a means of resolving political and cultural differences is something which the past fifty years of the construction of the European project has explicitly outlawed. If, indeed, Islam is a religion dedicated to peaceful co-existence, Muslims should have no problem in endorsing such objectives.

### Muslim sensitivity over issues linked to religion may reflect something very different from simply the extremist exclusivism that Europeans usually perceive

Yet it appears that they do, not simply because they are adherents of extremist creeds that demand cathartic violence as the mechanism of resolving difference, which cannot therefore be tolerated within the sphere of European tolerance. Defining and then resolving the contradiction that this represents is clearly of crucial importance if Europe is to achieve the ideal of “inclusion within diversity” and fulfil Jacques Derrida’s concept of “hospitality” – the need to recognise communalities not differences within a set of shared values in seeking to integrate European society. Ironically enough, that can only occur when “difference” is recognised and accepted!

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## HOW THE MOHAMMED CARTOON CONTROVERSY WAS PERCEIVED IN THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE MEDITERRANEAN

EuroMeSCo conducted a survey on the cartoon crisis in eighteen countries that form part of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership in September 2006. These countries were France, Germany, Belgium, Denmark, Italy, Spain, Estonia, Lithuania, Hungary, Turkey, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, the Palestinian Authority, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Israel. The European Institute of the Mediterranean was asked to prepare a report summarising the different reactions in different countries according to ten areas, described below.

### 1. Official Reactions

Denmark took a radical position concerning freedom of speech (influenced by the Danish People's Party, which has a xenophobic undercurrent). The other countries in the European Union also defended the right to freedom of speech but with more undertones. France, for example, highlighted the need for responsibility and caution (due to the large Muslim community in France), Germany, Estonia and Hungary gave equal importance to the freedom of religion and the freedom of speech, and Italy and Spain, for political reasons, called for moderation and dialogue.

All the countries in the south of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership area condemned the cartoons and stressed the need for respect and moderation, claiming that freedom of speech had its limits.

### 2. Political Debate

The political debate was dominated by the same priorities as those that dominated the official reactions. In the European Union, unlike in the southern countries, all the political parties defended the right to the freedom of speech, but each country added individual priorities such as respect for religions in France and Estonia, responsibility and tolerance in Italy and Lithuania. Different priorities also existed within individual countries for political or religious reasons. The cartoon controversy had no impact on political programmes or debates following the crisis.

### 3. Religious Debate

The cartoons were condemned by Muslim authorities in all countries, without exception. Even in countries with a Muslim majority, the condemnation was in most cases accompanied by an attitude of moderation and rejection of violence by the religious authorities, although there were certain groups that wished to limit relations with Denmark. Other religious communities (Catholic, Protestant, Jewish) in all the countries, including Israel, coincided with the Muslim position by calling for respect.

Finally, it is interesting to note that there was a debate within the Muslim community in Denmark itself, where the controversy originated. Numerous Muslims considered that the debate was monopolised by the Imams and, feeling that their position was not represented, created a new organisation called Democratic Muslims.

### 4. Attitudes Among the General Population

The general population in certain European Union countries (such as France) disapproved, almost unanimously, of the cartoons, finding them aggressive. The public opinion, however, in several countries (such as Denmark, Estonia, Lithuania and Spain) was relatively moderate and even divided in some cases (especially among Catholics), with one side against the discrediting of religion and another in favour of the freedom of speech. These feelings were at times more mixed and were accompanied by a poor image of Islam throughout the different levels of society. The demonstrations organised by the Muslim communities were peaceful and did not draw large crowds.

In the southern countries, there was a widespread feeling of religious offence, reflected by mass demonstrations, some of which included scenes of violence against the Danish and Norwegian embassies.

### 5. Foreign Communities

There was unanimous condemnation of the cartoons and of the lack of respect for Islam in European Union countries with Muslim communities. This condemnation was even stronger in certain countries where these communities already felt that they were victims of social discrimination and prejudice. In Belgium, in contrast, the positions taken during the controversy were more moderate, which is possibly a reflection of the integration of Muslims into the country's structures. Finally, in the majority of cases, the cartoon controversy did not give rise to political measures with respect to foreign communities, except in Italy where the Council for Italian Islam was created during the crisis.

### 6. The Debate in the Media

While newspapers in certain countries (Denmark, France, Germany, Spain, Italy, Hungary, etc.) decided to publish the cartoons, or at least some of them, to defend the right to freedom of speech and information, other newspapers (in Estonia, Turkey, Morocco, Tunisia, etc.) explicitly refused to do so. There were also countries in which several newspapers published the cartoons despite this having been banned by their government. This was the case of Jordan and Algeria, in particular.

In several countries (including France, Germany, Denmark and Spain), the controversy was given different coverage by television/radio and the written press. While the former tended to be more sensationalist, the latter took a more analytical approach.

### 7. Cultural Debate

There was only a debate among artists and writers in certain countries such as France (about freedom of speech and blasphemy), Germany (about freedom of speech), Morocco (about inappropriate violent reactions), Turkey, Egypt and Jordan (about the limits of freedom of speech and respect for religious sensitivities). Other subjects debated were the theory of the clash of civilisations, the conflicts in the Middle East, Islamophobia, and the political instrumentalisation of religion. Writers in Denmark were also active and issued a manifesto reminding people that ethnic minorities had been discriminated against for years. In several countries (Italy, Spain, Lithuania, Algeria, the Palestinian Authority, etc.), however, there was no debate in artistic circles, or at least the members of these were not invited to participate in the media debate (as they were in Tunisia).

### 8. Academic Debate

Debates in academic circles only had an influence on public opinion in very few countries (Germany, Spain and Egypt).

### 9. Role of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership and the European Union

Hardly any countries in the European Union or the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership made reference to this partnership. The European Union was perceived by all the countries as weak, divided, and absent from the controversy.

### 10. Implications and Solutions for the Future

Of the different suggestions proposed by those interviewed, particularly worth mentioning are: the need for greater unity and efficiency within the European Union in matters of foreign policy; reflection on the concept of freedom of speech and its possible limits; interreligious dialogue between the 'west' and countries with a Muslim majority; combatting of stereotypes and racism and the design of relevant school and television programmes; and the media's ethical duty.

Alain Blomart

perceive. The outrage that greeted both the Rushdie affair and the cartoons issue was undoubtedly partially stoked up for sectarian reasons – a struggle for influence between Saudi Arabia and Iran in the Rushdie case and a desire by local imams for active support from the Middle East in the cartoons crisis. However, the consequent degree of anger said much more about the sense of isolation and humiliation that Muslims as a group – whatever their adherence to Islamic religious practice – felt in and towards Europe than it did about the manipulation of the issues by militants and extremists.

The same seems to have been true in the case of the pope's comments, except that there, no external militantism was necessary to make an issue of them. The citation he used was explicit enough in itself when it argued that all novelty that the Prophet Muhammad brought in Islam was "evil and inhuman". In fact, the insult was all the greater since the pope's core point – that Catholicism is unique for its rationality, achieved through the marriage of Hellenistic philosophy with divine revelation – also applies to Islam! The Mutazilite tradition and that of the later *falsafa* movement reflect precisely the same happy marriage and St Thomas Aquinas appears to have been profoundly influenced by both!

In short, it is very difficult to see the pope's apparently unintended intervention into the European debate as unintended or even as theological in intent. It was really a profoundly political intervention in a political debate, to do with both the issue of political extremism couched in doctrinal terms and the issue of socio-cultural cohabitation within the context of multiculturalism. Yet, if this is the case, it is, perhaps, necessary to recall that there are two sides to the debate implied by such confrontations!

### **The European Problem**

One of the main Muslim complaints in all three incidents – the Rushdie affair, the cartoons crisis and the pope's comments – has been the apparent European indifference to, ignorance of and even dislike towards Islam. With greater sensitivity, they argue, the offence and antagonism that all three incidents generated could have been avoided. The standard European response has been that Muslims have demonstrated an intolerance towards criticism and satire that is in essence a challenge to freedom of speech. Moreover, such intolerance has bordered on violence, with the

death threat against Salman Rushdie, which still stands, and the murder of Theo Van Gogh for a cultural statement that was seen as a desecration, not to speak of those who died in protest demonstrations in the Middle East and Pakistan as a result of Muslim inability to tolerate criticism, however it was voiced.

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What seems to be shared between these two stands is that neither really has much to do with religion. Instead both are statements about cultural interaction and about the political process of reconciling points of view that appear to be diametrically opposed. And, in that process of reconciliation, there is a need to consider, not only the position of the Other, but also one's own. It seems to be no accident that the two countries in which the most acute confrontations have occurred in the past five years have been Denmark and Holland, two countries that prize themselves on their traditions of tolerance and liberalism; yet two countries which have the most stringent immigration policies of any country in the European Union. Similarly, it is hardly fortuitous that it is a pope who was previously in charge of the Holy Office who is least indulgent of Islam as he tries to find accommodations with secular Europe.

Perhaps part of the problem manifested by the intensity of the sense of hurt anger manifested by Muslims of all kinds in Europe over issues that strike most Europeans as too innately insignificant to justify such reactions has to do with the nature of the European reaction as well. We tend to forget that we also have our cultural sensitivities as well – Holocaust denial, for example, which in some European countries is a criminal offence, a constraint that is, arguably, an interference in the freedom of speech over an issue which we may also find morally offensive, quite apart from being historically inaccurate. Similarly, Europeans cannot understand why Muslims are loath to recognise Holocaust Day. Yet they did not participate in the European construction of the Holocaust and tend to feel that one of its consequences has been unfairly visited upon them.

Beyond that, however, is the problem of tolerance itself. In its most dogmatic form, it becomes a kind of intolerance for it insists on the acceptance of matters

that others may also find morally offensive. As such, it then becomes a conscious act of imposition that serves to alienate, not reconcile, the components of contemporary European complexity. In so doing, it amplifies cultural difference and political confrontation, worsening the alienation and humiliation that Muslims frequently feel, denying them the possibility of entering into the European experience upon their own terms. As Sami Zubaida has pointed out, there was a time when that process was eased by indifference, rather than by tolerance, by the inclusive sense that such distinctions were irrelevant and thus not differences. Tolerance, as practiced in our most liberal societies is, in reality, exclusive and has thereby led those who do not share its values to be excluded and thus vulnerable to attacks on their own values by its exclusiveness. Hence the violence of their reactions, which if they cannot be excused should at least be understood. That is, after all, surely the responsibility that tolerance implies.

And responsibility does indeed appear to be part of the answer for, even if the principle of freedom of speech cannot be undermined in contemporary Europe, the way in which it is articulated can be adapted; adapted not just to spare Muslim sensitivities but to demonstrate their inclusion within European complexity. That may well be a greater challenge for Europeans as the aggressive assertion of individual freedoms becomes an end in itself. Yet, unless it is done, the confrontations and mutual distrust will worsen and will feed the extremism that tolerance is supposed to resolve.

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