Cartoons, movies: New genres building up conflict over religion in Europe

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Dutch MP Geert Wilders has declared that he will soon release a 15 minutes movie called “Fitna” to make his criticism of the Quran more trenchant. "Fitna" is likely to meet harsh reactions. Both because the modus operandi of Wilders falls nicely into what have become a specific genre of political activism: to provoke religious taboos in order to insist on the right to provoke religious taboos. And because an equally recognizable genre of responses to this sort of provocations is being formed: Riots, mass demonstrations, boycotts, and in its extreme version physical threats and violent action targeted at the provocateur. It seems like there is a pattern in these self-reinforcing cycles of conflict that needs responsible reconsideration: Staunch defence of principles come in the way of dialogue and diplomacy.

During the last years we have witnessed cases similar to the Wilders case in Holland. They have all centred on a critique against – or some would say insult, mockery and ridicule of – central elements of Islam in a way that has been considered offensive by many Muslims. Experience from these cases point to which kinds of reactions to expect and what conflict dynamics this upcoming film may feed into.

In 2004, a 10-minute film "Submission" shown on the Dutch public TV highlighted selected verses of the Quran that according to the filmmakers authorize mistreatment of women. In November 2004, director Theo van Gogh was assassinated in public by a Muslim of Dutch-Moroccan descent. In many parts of the world the film caused protests over its portrayal of the abused women as a criticism of Islam and the Quran rather than a criticism of specific social or interpretational practices among Muslims. In public debates all over Europe this case was portrayed as a battle between Islam and freedom of Speech or between religion and enlightenment.

In 2005, the major Danish daily Jyllands-Posten published 12 cartoons of the prophet Muhammad. The international spill-over effects has come to be known as the worst foreign policy crisis that Denmark has faced since the WWII. More than a hundred people died and estimated eight hundred were injured in violent demonstrations in Asia and the Middle East. Muslim countries boycotted Danish products and several Muslims ambassadors were withdrawn from Denmark. During the crisis many European politicians urged ‘the West’ to stand united in what was again framed as a fight for freedom of speech. Domestically Denmark did not experience any violence. Recently, however, the Danish Intelligence Service (PET) claims that three Muslim men have been planning to kill the cartoonist who submitted the drawing held to be the most offensive, portraying an angry, bearded man with a bomb in his turban. Reacting on the information from PET several of the other major Danish newspapers reprinted the cartoons. The reprint spurred demonstrations in five Muslim countries and was quickly added to the list of grievances legitimizing suburban riots in Denmark.

As is the case with "Fitna" neither "Submission" nor the 12 cartoons evolved out of a vacuum. Both Holland and Denmark have been internationally noticed as countries experiencing a considerable shift in their policies towards immigrants from liberal to harsh, afflicting Muslims in particular. Further Holland and Denmark are extreme cases in relation to the weight with which the argument of ‘being able to criticize religion’ has been placed centre stage in the national public debates. The argument is however in stark contrast to the fact that religion has been one of the most intensively discussed themes in the public debates in countries like Holland and Denmark for the last 10-15 years. The paradox is that the almost mythic character of this justification given to provoke debate on central elements of Islam has been elevated to a holy place, making it stand out as an uncontested truth.
The Danish cartoons were able to cause rage internationally because they played into exiting conflict structures, both national and international. On one side staunch proponents argue that freedom of speech as a central ‘Western value’ is threatened by religious fundamentalists. On the other side we see Muslim groups laying out narratives of Western conspiracies against the Muslim world. Each of the two sides claims to be threatened by the other. “Fitna” must be expected to contribute to this self-sustaining dynamics. The tragic irony of this situation is that radical Islamists and radical secularists agree on the incompatibility of Islam and West. As these extremists engage in a spiral of escalation, it becomes increasingly difficult to occupy the moderate middle ground.

Recent research on radicalization shows that the perception of being under attack is among the most significant features of fundamentalism, legitimizing the use of violence. If “Fitna” is successfully related – by proponents or by opponents - to the broader conflict dynamics and represented as an additional attack on Islam/defence of the freedom of speech against religious fundamentalists there is potentiality for radical actors recourse to violence.

For both responsible authorities and each of us as co-creators of World history it is important to avoid being caught in the centrifugal mechanism reinforced by radical positions on both sides. We should insist on the possibility of a moderate middle ground for non-radical Muslims and non-fundamentalist Secularists. In public debates it has become commonplace to forward dichotomous representations of a world political conflict between Islam and “Western” freedom of speech. Being attentive to the grievances of those who are presented as the other part of the conflict, we might discover that the world is not as simple. Facing extremist positions it is important to transform the way such issues are represented. Discourses of defending ‘absolute’ principles - whether religious or not - elevate the issues to the domain of security politics thus reinforcing the dynamics of the conflict. As a countermeasure we should all contribute to talk the issue down from the elevated terrain of security politics, where everything is about existential threats and extraordinary action, to the terrain of normal politics where negotiation, dialogue and diplomacy remain useful options.

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