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Editorial

Did the Islamic cartoon affair show that religion in this era of globalisation is a political rather than a spiritual matter? This is a question that arises quite naturally in the light of the conflagration that ripped through the Muslim world following the publication of the Danish cartoons. It is by no means a new question. Indeed, to judge from the way it has been exploited by extremists on all sides in order to assuage their thirst for power, it is an extremely commonplace question. However, it poses new challenges for Europe, where reason and the secular tradition largely predominate.

As a sophisticated expert on matters spiritual and their cultural roots, Serge Lafitte provides us with some clues for understanding the religious fracture laid bare by the rage that gripped Muslim opinion when the cartoons appeared on Danish newsstands. He observes the wounds. However, this should not prevent us, realists that we are, from being aware that the virus of fundamentalism is rushing to infect them.

Seekers after meaning rather than polemicists – that is how we see our role at *Development and civilisations*. We try to foresee crises and investigate the causes, with the aim of providing you, wherever you may be, with intellectual decoding tools in the name of our humanist convictions and the spiritual heritage of Father Lebret.

This is why we changed our title with the last issue, as you will have noticed. Not because we are renouncing our faith out of a concern for development. Rather because the latter, even when nourished by a robust faith, is still being put to the test by civilisations.

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The Danish cartoon affair: one of the pitfalls of global unrest

by Serge Lafitte*

What will be the lasting effects of the 'social debate' triggered by the Danish cartoons of Muhammad? A look back at the events of February 2006 that gave rise to a global polemic.

We will undoubtedly not know until the next clash whether this 'debate' has helped us move things along at all. But what debate are we talking about? The right to depict the Prophet? The right to caricature Islam and other religions? Modern democrats against archaic theocrats? Freedom of expression against respect for beliefs? Clash of cultures or even of civilisations?

Even when endowed with a good sense of humour, the victims of cartoons generally tend to see them only as unfaithful representations. Thus even though they have always fought laughter and mockery, hard-line clerics are not the only ones to be stubbornly opposed to cartoons, which by definition are always more or less loaded. However, the best definitions only remain so in the absolute. The problem is often in the context. So let us look back at the context, or rather at its various facets, even though we cannot pretend that the sum of the parts provides an explanation for the whole.

From a strictly chronological point of view, everything started in Denmark with the publication in the conservative daily newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* of twelve cartoons depicting the prophet Muhammad. Why twelve? Was this an unconscious echo of Denmark's Lutheran heritage? However that may be, the cartoons were

the result of a competition the newspaper launched after a writer complained that he could not find an illustrator prepared to illustrate a children's book on Muhammad. In fact, most of the published cartoons are fairly anodyne.

A serious identity crisis

It was the Prophet's turban, shaped like a bomb and with a lighted fuse, that lit the powder keg. Was it deliberate provocation? This is not unlikely, in the Danish context. After all, Denmark is going through a serious identity crisis, of which its immigrant populations, Muslims in particular, are bearing the brunt: racist acts and Islamophobic speeches have become commonplace.

From the Muslims' point of view, it is difficult not to feel hurt by such a depiction of the Prophet. In order to make their denunciations more effective, some sought support in Muslim countries, 'in the same way as Catholics turn to the Vatican', explained a Danish imam. On the face of it, the argument is irrefutable. The problem is that, in a Protestant country, it is unlikely to dispel cultural misunderstandings, to say nothing of the most openly xenophobic prejudices that present Muslim immigrants as some sort of 'fifth column'. This is especially true since publication of the cartoons has turned a local dispute into a

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global affair. The Danish cartoons have given rise to an ill-timed manifestation of 'glocalisation', the neologism coined to denote the entanglement of the global and the local that characterises the modern world.

There is little point in recounting at any length the various episodes in the crisis. It is sufficient to point, on the one hand, to its appropriation by radical Islamists and the worst dictatorships of the 'Muslim world' and, on the other, to the disastrous handling of the affair by the Danish government, which absolutely refused to engage in diplomatic debate on the pretext of defending the freedom of the press.

Western governments, caught between concern for civil peace and preservation of their national interests, reacted by calling for beliefs to be respected. As Olivier Roy (1), the scholar of Islam, has clearly shown, the indignation was above all 'geopolitical' in nature. Basically, the dissemination of the Danish cartoons through the international media did little more than slightly exacerbate the tensions generated by global unrest.

The fact remains, nonetheless, that there is a problem with the 'clash of cultures' engendered by the dislocations of globalisation. It finds expression, in particular, in a globalised public space in which everything is (or is capable of being) given media coverage via telecommunications networks. The problem, in this case, is that everybody invests this space with their own prejudices without it being regulated by a common cultural and legal code. This results in considerable abuse of so-called 'free' expression, the worst excesses of which are frequently to be found on the Internet.

However, this 'clash of cultures' is also a result of the global diffusion of the marvellous Western way of life through Hollywood blockbusters, television series and advertising. In the developing South, these manifestations of Western 'culture' lead to a loss of cultural identity as well as to frustration, since the 'benefits' are enjoyed only by a tiny minority; they also act as so many lures for those contemplating emigration. These problems are also affecting the societies of the rich countries of the devel-

oped North as a result of migration and the 'multiculturalism' that ensues.

Even the United States, the archetype of cultural imperialism, is not spared. Inventor of the famous 'clash of civilisations' and firm defender of 'American culture', of which Christianity is said to be the sole basis, Samuel Huntington has devoted himself to demonstrating that 'Latinos', most of whom are Christians of course, cannot be assimilated by the great American 'melting pot'. Make sense of that if you can.

In Denmark, we have seen the emergence under growing pressure from the extreme right of the concept of 'Danishness', similar to the notion of 'ivoirité' ('Ivoirity') that has played a part in the current civil war in Côte d'Ivoire. Here too, the Danish cartoons have revealed how acrimonious the tensions between tradition and modernity and between inherited and emerging identities can become in a 'glocalised' local space.

However, it is the strength, and the weakness, of democracies that they allow these tensions to be expressed publicly. When it comes to cartoons, the legitimacy of any implied or explicit criticism is part of the historical legacy of democracies, provided of course that the law is respected, as it must always be whenever freedom is exercised in a state subject to the rule of law. Not everything is permitted even though everything may be subjected to criticism. Another legacy of democracy is that religions can no longer claim a dominant position in society.

They are just one of the elements of society and as such enjoy no more or fewer rights than the others. As soon as they enter the public space, they are, in law, as open to challenge and caricature as they are entitled to de-

nounce the cartoons of which they see themselves as the victims. These legal rights do not exist in many countries and cultures, not just Muslim ones.

'Jesus does not belong to Christians,' declared the Catholic bishop Jacques Gaillot, taking the opposite view to the French cardinals who had condemned, without having seen it, Martin Scorsese's film about Jesus, *The Last Temptation of Christ*. This film was also violently attacked by Christian fundamentalists, in contrast to Mel Gibson's film, *The Passion of the Christ*, made a few years later, with which they identified much more. The problem is the same for Muslims: when Islam finds itself exposed in a democratic public space, the Prophet no longer belongs solely to Muslims. In a democratic society, even the sacred (whether religious or not) is open to debate. Now it is not always the case in all countries that what was made sacred during a particular period in history can be openly and freely debated. However, is this problem with that which became sacred in the past specific to Muslims alone?

Infantile or adult relationship

The responses to what might be regarded as violent desecration reveal whether the relationship between believers and their religion and its most scared figures (and between non-believers and their founding myths) is an infantile or adult one. In a democratic context, it is not necessarily insincere or dishonest to take the view that the Danish cartoon of the Prophet is not a caricature of Muhammad himself but rather a depiction of the grotesque image that Muslim extremists have of him.

However, as we have seen, there is always the context to be taken into account, and here the problem is further complicated with the prohibition in Islam of any depiction of the

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The Koran and the prohibition of idolatry

The Koran, the 'word of God', is the foundation of a strictly monotheistic religion. It repeatedly condemns those who 'combine' worship of the sole God with that of idols, as in this passage: *'Serve you God and eschew idols!'* (Surah 16, verse 36). This is the basis for the prohibition of any depiction of God or of his creatures, including Muhammad, who is only a man, as the Koran reminds us. The purpose of the prohibition is to prevent Muslims committing the worst of sins according to Islam, that of idolatry. Thus the Muslim conquest of Mecca was followed by the destruction of the idols in the Ka'aba Temple, which became the Sacred Mosque: *'Polytheists are nothing but impure: they shall no longer approach the Sacred Mosque...'* (Koran 11, 28).

Prophet. This prohibition does not feature in the Koran, which condemns only idolatry. And while the prohibition on depicting God or any of his creatures was proclaimed at a very early stage in the history of Islam, it has not always been obeyed (with the exception of God), as can be seen by leafing through a book of Persian miniatures (2). Nevertheless, the prohibition regarding the Prophet is an absolute injunction for the vast majority of Muslims.

To move from this point to enshrining this article of faith in law is a step that is virtually impossible in societies in which the law no longer stems from a divine injunction but from a deliberative process that can always be challenged, but not for strictly religious reasons. And the Muslim groups that are trying to have a religious prohibition enshrined in law by calling for legislation forbidding Islamophobia are deluding themselves, since they risk fostering the very Islamophobia they are denouncing (3). It should be noted that, in the French context, in which legislation forbidding blasphemy was repealed during the Revolution, respect for religious beliefs, which is guaranteed by law, actually means respect for believers, that is for their freedom to believe. However, this in no way prevents the content of beliefs from being subjected to critical reasoning.

If this affair of the cartoons could at least help people on both sides realise that in this 'glocalised' world it is no longer possible to ignore certain things, particularly when they concern issues that have become as sensitive as those related to identity, then some progress would have been made. Rachid Benzine, a Muslim intellectual, put it perfectly when he coined the phrase 'clash of ignorances' (4) to denote what happens each time 'cultural thoughts unthought' collide with each other. Ignorance of one's own culture as well as of that of the other is generally what our ragbags of prejudices are woven from. There is also ignorance of the West which, as the philosopher Marcel Gauchet (5) has noted, '*is blind to the effects of the globalisation of economies and behaviour*' and fails to recognise '*how destructive the permeation of its ways*

of living and thinking is for social relations, particularly in Islam, which is as much a way of life as a faith'.

Thus from the beginning to the end of the 'cartoon affair', in Europe and elsewhere, most of the Muslim reactions, and not just the most virulent among them, expressed a refusal to tolerate 'the humiliation of Muslims', which is synonymous with 'the arrogance of the West'. There is certainly scope for debating the objectivity of the reasons advanced in justification of this resentment, but ignoring them will not get us any further.

Fortress Europe

Confining ourselves to Europe, it has to be said that there is nothing very specific about the Danish context. Most European countries are taking a tougher line on immigration, tightening the right of asylum and the right to join family members, toughening the conditions for naturalisation and trying to identify the 'right' candidates for immigration. However, whether it is openly acknowledged or not, Muslims constitute the most problematic group of immigrants, with an image that has deteriorated considerably since the attacks on the World Trade Center and the bombs in Madrid and London.

In France, as in other countries, the debates on Turkey's possible accession to the European Union have shown that, for many, this aspect is still the fundamental problem, whether the perceived challenge is to Europe's 'Christian' or its 'democratic' identity. Furthermore, this image of Islam regarded as incapable, 'in its very essence', of adapting to modernity has become a convenient argument that conceals a rejection based on racist prejudices that cannot be accepted or admitted to, since they sit uneasily with the humanist heritage that is claimed as an inspiration in other respects (6).

This caricature of Islam is fraught with consequences. This is particularly so in a context in which the stigmatisation-victimisation combination is the driving force behind most of the identity claims and affirmations now being made, as was shown by the urban

The arrogance of the West

A somewhat fervent European Catholic will readily understand the impotent suffering and anger of Muslims on hearing of an unacceptable depiction of their prophet because Catholics too are subjected to the same treatment in the media. Their faith, their Church community and their Christ are mocked and treated with derision day in, day out. It so happens that on this occasion the insult to Islam and the violent reaction to it were transmitted throughout the world and ran up against economic and diplomatic interests that made them into a serious matter.

This can be reduced to a conflict between Jewish, Christian and Muslims extremists, as Huntington prophesied. The argument is easily made: the universalist religions have allowed themselves to be taken over by 'nationalist' ideologies and hardened their message in order to assert themselves instead of being the agents for peace and harmony desired by their founders.

However, Serge Lafitte is right. It's about more than that. He rightly emphasises the arrogance of the West, with its money, technology and military might, which is perceived as Christian despite itself. In the end, this arrogance is unbearable for the people living in poverty whom it insults by smugly displaying its wealth, while they fall victim to injustice and their cultures and wisdom are scorned and belittled to the point of intolerability.

One wonders why people take pleasure in undermining the position of religion in our societies and in the world. Do the media that indulge so jubilantly in such practices have an alternative message to offer people to help them live, and if so what is it?

Serge's article raises the question of what to do about this. Should the universalist religions not be re-establishing their credibility by going back to their roots and living the faith preached by their founders?

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rioting in France in November 2005 and the abortive debate on the allegedly 'positive role' of colonisation. Another consequence is the widespread feeling among Muslims that society has two sets of rules and that they are less well protected than others from the injustices of which they

are, or perceive themselves to be, the victims.

Once again, the objectivity of this resentment towards the Western powers, which is also very widespread in Muslim countries, is open to debate. And when it results in Holocaust denial and 'blasphemy' in respect of the Prophet being put on the same level, then expression of that resentment becomes absolutely intolerable. However, the resentment is none the less real for all that and feeds the spiral of 'stigmatisation-victimisation' from which it is very difficult to escape, since it tends to metamorphose into one of those mimetic rivalries in which each side makes the other its scapegoat, thereby providing itself with an explanation of the problem and a convenient solution that exonerates it from all responsibility. Thus the image of a genetically anti-modern Islam, increasingly widespread in the West, and that of an essentially arrogant and diabolical West, assiduously cultivated by radical Islamists, feed each other. It is all the more essential not to get trapped in this mimetic impasse since it is a very effective means, particularly for populisms of all kinds, of concealing the socio-economic factors and power imbalances that exacerbate too many conflicts.

One illustration among many others is

provided by the Turkish writer Orhan Pamuk as he describes the results of the European debate on Turkey: '*The cruel irony of this whole affair is that, by stirring up anti-Turkish nationalism in Europe, all the Europeans have succeeded in doing is to elicit from the Turks a nationalistic reaction of the crassest kind*' (7). And we should be concerned about this retrograde step, since Turkish nationalists (who had a field day with the Danish cartoons) are very actively engaged in constructing a new identity for themselves on the basis of the Islamic heritage from which Atatürk sought to emancipate Turkey.

In this regard, as in the case of the Muslim reactions to the Danish cartoons, we have already heard the standard cries of 'We told you so!' so beloved of Western populists, and no doubt they will continue to echo in our ears. And the same thing has been heard from Islamists and other populists in the East as they comment on the tensions that have afflicted the West.

And then there is the art of manipulating crowds by fabricating what is said in order better to pit one side against the other. How often have we heard

statements like these: 'They will always be what they have always been, so let's not change anything about ourselves' or, even worse, 'so let's force them to become what we are'?

In order to extricate ourselves from this populist trap, perhaps we should draw some lessons from the Danish cartoon affair, the first of which would be that it highlights one of the effects of a form of globalisation so closely associated with 'cultures' (and religions) with universalist pretensions that are not, in fact, so immediately universal.

A second lesson might be that it emphasises how much more difficult but undoubtedly more urgent it is to break down the walls of prejudice and ignorance between 'cultures' (in the sense of intangible, self-satisfied 'identities') than to lower the few barriers that still stand in the way of the free circulation of capital, goods and services. However, this debate does not even figure on the WTO's agenda. And yet interchanges between cultures are undoubtedly as old as humanity itself. As indeed is migration.

**More urgent
it is to break down
the walls of prejudice
and ignorance
between 'cultures'**

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Notes of reference

1- 'Géopolitique de l'indignation', *Le Monde*, 9 February 2006.

2 -In this regard, read the great novel by Orhan Pamuk: *My Name is Red*. It is very illuminating on the problem of the image in Islam and its confrontation with the West.

3 -Although the Organization of the Islamic Conference did succeed in having added to the preamble to the text establishing the UN's new Human Rights Council a phrase stipulating that '*the media have an important role to play in promoting respect for religions*'. Should we be promoting respect for religious beliefs that claim to justify, for example, inequalities between men and women?

4 -*Libération*, 13 February 2006. He is the author of the book *Les nouveaux penseurs de l'Islam* (Albin Michel, 2004).

5 -*Le Monde*, 13 March 2006. Marcel Gauchet is particularly well known as the author of *Le désenchantement du monde: une histoire politique de la religion* (Folio, 2005). A clearer understanding of his thinking on the restructurings taking place in the political and religious spheres can be gained by reading *Un monde désenchanté?* (éditions de l'Atelier, 2004), a collection of articles in which he explains his thinking in some detail.

6 -Olivier Roy provides an excellent analysis of this 'essentialisation' of Islam in his most recent book: *La laïcité face à l'Islam* (Stock, 2004).

7 -'La honte silencieuse des Turcs', *Le Monde*, 30-31 October 2005.

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