

Cartoon Wars

by Silvester Breinl

1.

The discussion about the anti-Islamic cartoons (originally) published in a Danish newspaper contain their fair share of double talk. Many journalists criticize some editors' decision not to republish them as cowardice, emphasizing the freedom of the press which has to be exercised under all circumstances. Jose Saramago, who got the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1998 rather dryly remarked in this context: "Just imagine that the Danish Cartoonists, instead of ridiculing Mohammed, had made fun of their editor-in-chief. This would have been very brave indeed, but the next day they would all have lost their job." Everybody knows that it's better not to publish certain articles because either your boss won't like them or, which is maybe even more important, advertisers will stay away from your paper.

2.

The publication and re-publication of these cartoons was a clear provocation in the name of the freedom of the press. First, concerning the message of these cartoons: They leave no doubt that the distinction, which - above all - President Bush used to stress while the remains of the Twin Towers were still smoldering, between Islam (morally just as unquestionable as the Christian Faith) and terrorists (who abuse this venerable faith) no longer exists. 'So what', one may say, if some cartoonists equates Islam with terror... no one takes this seriously. Considering the political context, this is slightly naive, to say the least, which takes us to the second argument. The Middle East community takes the cartoons as just a further bit of proof that now not only the USA but also the EU treats them as people to be regarded with suspicion. They see double standards all along: Hamas was elected democratically and the result of this election is not accepted, neither by the EU nor by the US, although they both have always stressed that what the Middle East lacks mostly is democracy. Iran is denied the right to develop nuclear weapons while Israel... Not to mention Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib.

3.

Before lamenting that the protests against the cartoons endanger freedom of expression – among our most cherished, basic human rights – we might like to take a closer look at this very value. It may then turn out that it is not only subject to economic and restrictions imposed by one's career. If whatever people say enjoys legal protection this on the other hand implies that it is subject to legal interpretation and therefore freedom of expression has very definite legal limitations always and everywhere. One might even argue that by making this *freedom* subject to legislation and therefore legal interpretation and discussion the *content* of people's "discourse" (well possibly very interesting in its own right), is declared to be of very

limited relevance. The social “discourse” taking place in this way is just some playground and its debates are not supposed to create any kind of consensus which is of practical consequence for society itself. Freedom of expression is therefore based on the practical and logical assumption that the decisions which are crucial for society are and have to be taken elsewhere. So freedom of expression goes along with freedom of government which of course is free to choose from among all the different points of view circulating in public. After the crucial decisions have been taken freedom of expression does one more good job whenever the decision-makers are confronted with verbal protests. Then they cynically do not refrain from demanding freedom of expression for themselves. ...

4.

This rather mundane method of governing is now ennobled as an achievement of European Enlightenment and offered to the Muslim World as the precondition of reasonable dialogue. Intriguing! "We", the West, are not party in some conflict but we rather tell the other side that without accepting this *conditio sine qua non* they are not qualified to take part in a civilized debate. "They" are not just fanatic worshippers of Allah but lack everything which is vital to communicate sensibly. What a sophisticated concept of an enemy!