

The Cultural Zoo

Many well intentioned people seem to consider other people who are skeptical towards political Islam as suffering from a number of diseases. They are not only inhibited by xenophobia but also suffering from fear of strangers and their customs in general. But as any culture will imply that something is preferred to something else, all cultures can be said to suffer from xenophobia to some extent. Although it shouldn't cause any problems as long as this xenophobia is restrained and prevented from developing into criminal acts. Universal human rights are a good and reasonable tool for that purpose, as all cultures must abide to them.

But in the struggle against xenophobia one can sometimes hear strange motivations which ought to be scrutinized. During the Cartoon Crisis and while the embassies were burning in the Middle East, some well intentioned people in Denmark came up with what they saw as a bright idea to fight xenophobia. They organized an Arabian food fair and invited people to come and taste the delicacies of the Middle East cuisine.

The underlying logic for this appetizing initiative seems to have been that the problem with the Cartoons of the prophet Muhammad was a fear of anything alien on the part of the Danish population. How could people who had never tasted Arabic food in the first place possibly know that it wasn't scary at all? The confused – and unconscious – argument seems to be that reservation towards sharia, repression of freedom of expression and totalitarian Islamist politics can be identified with reservations towards Arabian culture in general - and also Arabian gastronomy. Experiencing the delicacy of the Falafel and the Kebab will be just the first step in opening one's eyes to the fascinating exotica of the alien culture. Some sort of distorted logic seems to provoke these conclusions.

And maybe it is a tourist approach to real social and political problems that seems to cause the confusion. When you travel to a faraway country the motivation is often to experience people who live in another way, a way different from your own. It's a beautiful discovery to enjoy the diversity in architecture, religion, culture - and also gastronomy. But there is a trap to beware of if you apply that tourist approach - as a citizen, as a fellow citizen - to the social and political problems in your own society. You will then tend to see the society as a Cultural Zoo. When you travel you want to experience cultural authenticity and indigenous people living a life not influenced by your presence. Maybe this is what impels tourism? You are genuinely curious. You don't want to be fooled by the travel agency and some thrifty natives who set up a local scene of village life just as long as you are there with your camera. You want to experience the real diversity not influenced by

the travel agency or any other part of Western culture. Everything should be preserved as if you or any other agent from Western culture had never been there: headhunters should still roam the forest, cannibals eat their enemies, young girls should be circumcised in initiation rites, thieves have their hands cut off. Everything should be truly authentic.

It is remarkable what happens when this tourist approach is applied to political problems in Western societies. Then, the well intentioned people find themselves helplessly allied with the most reactionary and fundamentalist forces in pre-modern cultures - those who propagate the view that nothing must be changed, for Man is inextricably bound to his culture and cannot live in any other way. And any attempt to defy that wisdom is seen as an intolerable form of arrogance and colonialism. Therefore the cultures must be kept traditional and without any influence from Western culture. Some fundamentalist might in fact invent a more archaic tradition to make the cultures appear even more authentic than they ever were before they migrated to the West!

There seems to be something magic ingrained in the term of Culture. Well intentioned people are prepared to accept machinations against freedom of expression, misogyny, violence against human rights, so long as it all takes place inside a culture. One wonders if it is the tourist approach that is applied and society is seen as a Cultural Zoo. In this post-modern condition everything is as harmless as the exotic food on the plate. It might even be strangely attractive, like fermented mare's milk or a soup of goat penis. Outlandish customs like genital mutilation and hanging of homosexuals are unspoiled traditions in the Cultural Zoo. Who are we to impose our cultural norms and corrupt this authenticity?

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