

Sebastian Trapp

My neighbor, no Muslim

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For further information please contact:

Silja Samerski
Albrechtstr.19
D - 28203 Bremen
Tel: +49-(0)421-7947546
Fax: +49-(0)421-705387
e-mail: piano@uni-bremen.de

source: <http://www.pudel.uni-bremen.de>

My neighbor, no Muslim

By Sebastian Trapp

“You’re a Muslim? Throwing bombs and everything, eh?” This is the opening round of a seminar that I give. The fellow opposite to me, a very friendly, warm hearted man from Pakistan gives a faked sigh.

“Yes, I know, it is a problem” he admits with a sad expression on his face. We talked to each other before the seminar began and I immediately took a liking to him. Otherwise I wouldn’t have cracked a joke like this. The seminar is part of an international university program in Eastern Germany. In a quiet room of an old building of an engineering institute are gathered people from Poland, Jordan, Brazil, Iran, even Vietnam, also some Germans.

During our noon break the Pakistani stays with me in the Institute. It is Ramadan, so he won’t eat anything, during daylight anyway. We keep joking along the same lines. “Now look around in the world! They are everywhere! Even in Northern Ireland – and those people don’t even know that they are Muslims!” We have a good time. He doesn’t care that I am wolfing down a sandwich and tells me about his work and his country. I admit that when I first saw him I mistook him for an Indian because he reminded me of a good friend of mine who happens to be Indian. “Oh, that’s alright” he smiles, “We started to get along with each other recently.”

His home country is far abroad, it is very different from Saxony where we are right now. But he seems to be comfortable in this cold land, at least for the time being. Perhaps that’s because he is a scientist? The scientific community spans the whole world, and all scientists work according to the same rules of objectivity and disciplined curiosity. Even though they may differ wildly in personality, in their work – and this is a work place – that shouldn’t matter.

Or does it? In a very interesting book¹ the Dutch sociologist Geert Hofstede analyzed data from around the world to find out the differences between different peoples. The basis for this was a questionnaire filled in by workers of IBM in different countries around the globe. They all answered the same questions, but in ways that differed characteristically. US Americans showed a different characteristic than people from, say, India, and even Germans and Dutch people were easily discerned by their behavior and the pattern of their answers. Hofstede could even find traces of the roaming of ancient peoples and the Roman Empire in his data, remnants of things that happened hundreds or even thousands of years ago! The differences between the Western world and the Far East were even more marked.

So how far away is Pakistan? Science is a western endeavor, a tradition that has its roots in Christianity. In the world of the Islam there was a scientific era, ground breaking work that turned out to be of great importance for the West, but this era ended more or less in the 12th

¹ Hofstede, Geert H.: Culture's consequences: international differences in work-related values, Sage Publications, Beverly Hills 1984.

and 13th century. Compared to societies in the West there was scientific stagnation in these countries.

One of the reasons for this lies in language. The Qu'ran, the revelation as given by the prophet Muhammad, is written in high Arabic, a language that wasn't to change for nearly 1400 years. The Qu'ran is the word of God, after all, and mustn't be changed. The language is said to be so overwhelmingly beautiful that even skeptics who heard it being recited converted on the spot.² It is most obvious that these are God's words. They can't be arbitrarily changed. There was no change up to this day, even though the vernacular changed a lot.

This quality is unknown in Christianity. Here, the message always was much more important than the actual words. That is why for the bible comes in all kinds of languages. When "New Spain", Mexico, was conquered by the Spanish in the 16th century, it took less than fifty years until the propagation of bibles in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs, was growing out of bounds. The Spaniards felt that they lost control of the defeated Indians – the very fact that they translated the holy book never was considered a problem but on the contrary as helpful in the attempt to convert the pagans.

And there is another quality that isn't apparent in the Qu'ran: While the Qu'ran gives advice in form of aphorisms, the Suras, and makes clear how to behave as a Muslim, the bible tells stories all the time. The revelation itself comes in the form of a story. In the New Testament we learn how Christ was born, how he grew up and baffled the scholars in the temple, gathered disciples around him, worked wonders and in the end was crucified.

This story-like character is at the heart of western civilization. For us to be meaningful a message has to be in the form of a story with a beginning and an end. I realized this working as a trainer of rhetoric. My occupation makes me interested in the rules of perception. A PowerPoint-sheet is looked at like we read a book page: you start in the upper left corner and end in the lower right. This organizes every intelligible sheet. But there is more: A presentation – and a single sheet or a book or even an advertisement, for that matter – is subconsciously expected to make up a history of a certain form: It starts out with a problem, gives the details and ends with a solution. That's why the logo of a firm usually is in the lower right corner of an advertisement: the arrangement symbolizes that this firm is the answer to your wishes or problems. We are used to stories having this form, forming an arch of suspense, and for things to form a story.

This informs our whole world. For a Christian, the world had a beginning and will have an end, and it moves towards this end. That for modern people the creation has been replaced by the Big Bang theory doesn't change the underlying idea. While for a Muslim time doesn't fly because God is always present, for a Christian the world moves, moves toward this end. When with the Enlightenment, God was relieved of his duties the movement lost its aim but not its momentum. No longer was the world moving towards a predetermined end, the Last Judgment, but it was rushing towards a better future, a future that became to be thought of as "open". If you get rid of the Beyond, paradise has to happen in this world. If it is not there yet,

² Kermani, Navid: Silent Sirens. The language of Islam and how Osama bin Laden betrays it. TLS Oct. 1, 2004, p. 12-14.

it will have to happen in the future. So the idea of “development” was framed. With the American president Harry Truman and his presidential address in 1949, “underdeveloped countries” came into existence.³

All too easily we take the notion of “progress”, “development” or its Latin form “evolution” as obvious, as a necessary given. But these notions are unique to the West. If you check out the history of other great countries like China or Japan you can’t avoid the suspicion that these ideas, which in our days are the necessary framework for what is going on in the economic world, the world of “global competition” (too glib-what is going on? Elucidate: Perhaps something like techno-science or economic growth or...), have been imported to these regions from the West. For instance, if you look at Japan you see that Western ideas were brought there beginning in 1587, when the first missionaries reached the country: but the mission lasted only ten years. In 1597 the Christian belief (that many adopted because they hoped for advantages in the trade with Europeans) was prohibited, since 1635 contact to other countries than Japan was under death penalty. For more than 200 years the people of Japan had been completely isolated when in 1853 Colonel Matthew of the US Navy forced the government of Japan to open up the country again.

Look at India, Africa, South America, Central America, the Asian states, check out people with a Buddhist, Hindu, let alone one of the many Shaman backgrounds, to get a feeling for the strangeness of our own convictions. To talk to somebody stemming from one of the older civilizations, religions, countries, may give you some insight in our own nature, in just how special we are. Talking to that friendly Muslim embedded in western culture and science and still living so much in a world different from the one I take for granted gives me a hint of what it meant for the friends and family of that Samaritan when he went out to help the Jew in the ditch.

This to me appears to be very important if one wants to understand the freedom, the unprecedented freedom, that Jesus Christ was – and is – embodying. To look into the eyes of a stranger it is much more difficult to realize his or her strangeness, the distance between us, than simply to call this stranger another “human”. I am convinced that realizing and respecting this otherness is a prerequisite for choosing this person as my neighbor. It’s a deliberate act. I can choose whom I take as my neighbor but it can’t be everyone, since I only feel called by certain humans. “[...] my neighbor is who I choose, not who I have to choose. There is no way of categorizing who my neighbor ought to be.”⁴ I try to be friendly to mostly anybody I encounter, but this is very different from “neighbor”.

So when the story of the Good Samaritan came to be interpreted as giving a rule for general behavior a very important shift happened, a shift from “this person” to “persons in general”. This generality is essential for our society. It is this certainty that I heard when at the conference In State College in November last year someone from the audience asked: “The Evangelical Christians (to which president Bush is supposed to belong) – are they still my neighbors?” A very important question that sums up the whole discussion, the whole problem

³ Sachs, Wolfgang [Ed.]: The development dictionary., 9. impr., London 2003.

⁴ Ivan Illich in: Cayley, David: The Rivers North of the Future. The Testament of Ivan Illich as told to David Cayley. House of Anansi Press, Toronto 2005, p. 51.

around the story of the Good Samaritan. For me, in a way it touches upon the foundations of our society.

There is a clear and simple answer to the question: No.

Every single one of the members of this church might become the questioner's neighbor, if – and only if – he chooses this person and is chosen in turn. But as a group – impossible.

So was the Pakistani scientist my neighbor? Well, in a way. He wasn't lying in a ditch, of course, but that isn't what would make him my neighbor. Across all the cultural differences, the ethical borderlines, if you want, I felt touched by him. It wasn't just that we got along with each other very well. It was him, as a person, not as a guy from Pakistan. When we joked, we joked about all those things that were supposed to separate us – and didn't.

Looking somebody in the eyes and letting him be as he is without categories and prefabricated names is an adventure and one of the most wonderful presents that we can give to each other. And it is the precondition for friendship and for this fragile freedom that Jesus announced to us. In this world of systems and all embracing categories it is just as special as it was in the time of the Good Samaritan.