

Strengthening the reform-minded forces within Islam

KNA Interview with Prof. Hans Küng (7 February, 2006)

Prof. Küng, in the face of the current wave of massive demonstrations against Western institutions in Islamic countries, the West stands shocked and helpless. Can you explain this phenomenon as a reaction to the Muhammad caricatures?

We are confronted with a highly explosive combination of diverse conflicts, problems and political reactions that makes the situation appear chaotic. Naturally, I am opposed – together with all the major Muslim organisations in Europe – to any sort of reaction involving violence, be it against individuals or against institutions, and I condemn the threats of annihilation hurled by President Ahmadinejad against the state of Israel. At the same time, however, we should not overlook the fact that the caricatures merely served as the detonator for all the deep-seated frustrations and resentments that had long been slumbering in the Islamic world. Instead of pointing our fingers at Islam, we in the West should self-critically reflect on our own co-responsibility for what is happening.

There is talk in the air about the “clash of civilisations” proposed by the political scientist Samuel Huntington. Do you agree with him?

No, his all too simple and schematic theory is and hopefully will remain false: cultures do not wage war with each other; they overlap each other at many points and have much in common, so that human beings of different cultures can well live together in peace. But a false policy based on a bogeyman image of Islam can well lead to thinking in terms of political blocks and thus make the theory come true as a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Could the escalating controversy over the caricatures have been avoided?

By all means! Completely misjudging the situation, the Danish Minister President Rasmussen missed several opportunities for dialogue:

1. Already on 15 October 2005, he completely ignored the mass demonstration of Danish Muslims before the city hall in Copenhagen.
2. He brusquely rejected the request of eleven ambassadors of Muslim nations for discussions.
3. He failed completely to recognise the brisance of the trip to Cairo undertaken by leading Danish Muslims including the Imam of Copenhagen to seek assistance from their Muslim co-religionists. It was this trip that spread the news of the insult to the Prophet throughout the Islamic world.
4. Even in the face of the first explosions of anger in Islamic countries, he refused, on purely formal grounds, to issue an apology for what had been a deliberately

planned provocation by a newspaper close to his government frivolously bent on testing the limits of freedom of opinion.

Is the reaction an expression of genuine indignation on the part of the Muslims or is it rather a matter of Islamic fundamentalists stirring up public frenzy?

Without questions, there are radical Islamists, for whom the caricatures are a welcome confirmation of their distorted view of the West and a useful instrument to stir up public wrath. However, the protests were not centrally organised, though they came, now and then, to be steered by certain organisations. But this public outrage could not have been thus instrumentalised, if the West had not already heaped up so much incendiary material, that it needed only the slightest spark to bring to explosion the pent up frustration and anger in the Islamic world.

Among the deeper causes of this outbreak are:

- the war in Afghanistan, which could well have been avoided;
- the illegal and immoral war in Iraq, which was built up on a tissue of lies;
- the oppressive regime in Muslim Chechnya;
- the failure, over the last decades, to create a viable, contiguous Palestinian state, a deplorable failure aggravated most recently by the building of the wall cutting through Palestinian territories.

Are the effects of the caricature controversy now visible in German foreign politics?

Unfortunately, yes, although these reactions only indirectly have to do with the caricature controversy. One-sided political statements in support of the Israeli policy toward the Hamas, the victor in the recent democratic elections, and one-sided, maximalistic demands made on Iran are seen in the Muslim world as being hostile to Islam. In these matters, a courageous, balanced position would be the best diplomacy.

It is often said that Islam did not undergo a process of enlightenment as Christianity had done, and that for this reason it necessarily comes into conflict with modern social forms. Can enlightenment be forced upon it?

Neither enlightenment nor democracy can be imposed upon a group of people from without, all the less by means of a war. In Europe, their development was a century-long process. Such movements must come from within a society, though, of course, they can be supported from without. However, as an example, when the USA failed to support the reform-minded Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, branding him as a representative of a claimed "axis of evil", he was succeeded by the fundamentalist extremist Ahmadinejad.

In all Muslim lands there are extremists, but there are also emancipated, reform-minded Muslims. The task at hand is to isolate the violence-prone fundamentalists in society by supporting the reform parties. A good example of this policy is Turkey. Whether or not this country with the largest Muslim population in the world should become a member of the European Union, the process of democratisation there needs to be supported with all political, economic and cultural means. Turkey presents the opportunity to develop an Islamic democracy which, more than Atatürk's laicism, recognizes and supports the social role of Islamic religion, while continuing to oppose violence-prone fundamentalism.

The violent demonstrations were triggered by the Muhammad caricatures in Western newspapers. A chief editor was fired. The media had to apologise. Is freedom of opinion and freedom of the press now in danger?

Certainly not! Without question, the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of opinion and freedom of the press must be maintained. But freedom of the press includes responsibility of the press.

Already some years ago, the InterAction Council of Former Heads of State and Government under the leadership of Helmut Schmidt had proposed "A universal declaration of human responsibilities" to match the Universal declaration of human rights" adopted by the United Nations in 1948. Unfortunately, this proposal was attacked by international journalists' associations because it declared unequivocally in Article 14 "The freedom of the media to inform the public and to criticize institutions of society and governmental actions, which is essential for a just society, must be used with responsibility and discretion. Freedom of the media carries a special responsibility for accurate and truthful reporting. Sensational reporting that degrades the human person or dignity must at all times be avoided."

That means: when it is prohibited to defame or degrade the human dignity of individuals, then the media should also deal tactfully with outstanding religious figures of human history like the Prophet Muhammad or Jesus Christ. Obstinate defenders of an ethically irresponsible freedom of the press serve only to damage this freedom and call forth inadequate reactions. I am happy to say that, within the media themselves, increasingly codes of ethics are being drawn up and applied.

Interviewer: Uwe Renz (KNA)