Fear and Loathing in Europe

by martijn on October 5, 2011 · 0 comments

in Activism, International Terrorism, Murder on theo Van Gogh and related issues, Religious and Political Radicalization, Some personal considerations

The following text was used for a spoken column at the ICCT’s expert meeting on Freedom from Fear: Answering Terrorism with Public Resilience on 3 October 2011. In this expert meeting the dilemma between fighting terrorism effectively by high-profile policies and the consequence that such measures might instil fear in the public was central in the contributions and debates.

It was probably in September 1219, almost 800 years ago, when a Christian monk stood before the sultan of Egypt, Malik al-Kamil. It was the time of the Crusades and this monk had the audacity of telling the sultan in his own quarters that he was on the wrong path, misled by a false prophet and that in order to preserve his own soul he’d better convert to Christianity. The monk had renounced his riches and his heritage to pursue a life of poverty and preaching modelled on that of the Apostles in which martyrdom was the highest reward. This monk like many who followed him tried to convert Muslims not by engaging in a dialogue with restraint and eloquence but by insulting and hoping those aggressive Muslims would kill them and allowing them to go to heaven as a martyr. Those following this monk for example went to the Caliph in Spain and attempted to convert the Caliph by saying many bad things about Muhammad and his damnable law. They were imprisoned and tortured but persevered in their insults and sacrilege. Through their determination they succeeded in becoming martyrs and when the monk heard the news of his five brothers he stated that: ‘Now I can truly say that I have five brothers’. Other sources however claim that he responded by saying “let everyone be glorified by his own martyrdom and not by that of others!” . Apparently the martyrs caused ambivalent emotions whereby
some look with doubt at this active embrace of suicide by preaching while others held great admiration for such an active quest of martyrdom.

Nowadays such people would be seen as fanatic, erratic people threatening the social fabric of society at least but also fearing that such a fanatic search for martyrdom may lead up to horrible events such as 9/11 and the killing of Theo van Gogh. It is people like them and the fear of what they do or might do that has led to what my colleague Beatrice de Graaf has called a securitization of society. Such a securitization occurs after tragic events that are perceived as exceptional, threatening an order that is good, just and beneficial. Such events produce fear and these fears in turn create the need of risk containment in which phenomena that are perceived as different or even incompatible with what is normal and acceptable, are framed as security risks. Of course bad things have happened and fear is a normal, natural human emotion, even very sensible when you are faced with danger. But this naturalization of fear renders invisible that political entrepreneurs connect fear with existing social fault lines such as inequality, ethnicity and religion. The risk of an economic meltdown becomes a fear for the callousness of the Greek, feelings of insecurity caused by young boys hanging about on streets and apparently engaging in useless chatter and boredom becomes fear for Moroccan streetterrorists and fear for terror attacks becomes fear for Muslims.

Although in the Netherlands there are more problems reported by schools and police with radical right wing youth and we have on average one mosque or Islamic school being vandalized or worse every 2 months, we have set up a policy that has to contain the threat coming from those Muslims. Take for example the recent proposal for banning the burqa in several European countries, including the Netherlands. One of the reasons is public safety; the apparent need to see each others faces in public. The ban however does not produce safety, it produces fear. Where only about 300 women wear the face veil in the Netherlands, the public now is convinced that we can see them everywhere and that tens of thousands of Muslim women wear it.

Other measures to increase public safety include more leeway for intelligence services to monitor and disturb people’s lives; even when there is no official charge, the US last week killed an American civilian Anwar al-Awlaki believed to be an Al Qaeda leader on foreign soil with no official charge or proof, the Dutch evicted several Muslim migrants being implicated in terrorist activities without any charge, the Dutch are active of supporters of the war on terror that caused the deaths of thousands and thousands innocent civilians in Iraq, Afghanistan and Africa. So if we talk about fear and safety, whose fear and whose safety do
we actually mean? After 9/11 the whole risk management idea has turned into a political and commercial ritual that intends to magically reinforce safety but produces feelings of fear and aversion. In the preface of one of my favourite novels, Fear and loathing in Las Vegas, English writer Samuel Johnsson is quoted stating: “He who makes a beast of himself gets rid of the pain of being a man.” The quote refers to the book’s main character’s drug abuse in trying to escape the harsh vulnerabilities of American life and to the books main theme the failure of American counterculture to provide a lasting answer to the harsh realities. Fear is a drug, and policies and management tactics combined with politicians who use feelings of insecurity and plead loudly for ever harder measures to resolve fear, are nothing less than socially accepted models to achieve ritualistic highs and illusions of safety that in the end do nothing except than cultivate that fear.

The “Wave Speech” from Justin Grevich on Vimeo.

The cultivation of fear does not only affect people’s daily lives directly, but also our memories that keep the fear for the Other alive. This year on 9/11 the Moroccan-Dutch goalkeeper of a Dutch soccer team, Khalid Sinouh, tweeted he wanted ‘to concentrate on the present’ and that he ‘felt a little tired of all that 9/11 propaganda’ and closed it with ‘pffff’. The soccer team, Philips Sports Association (PSV) distanced itself from his statements and emphasized the goalkeeper made his statement as a private person (and therefore not as a representative of PSV). The case refers to the monopolization of meaning and memory whereby the purpose of such ceremonials, as French historian Renan has noted, is nothing but the reaffirming of group loyalty rather than the establishing of historical accuracy, let alone the presenting of an event in all its moral and political complexity. To remember is not just grieving it may also mean to harbor a vision of securing justice or vengeance long after it is time to put the guns away. Part of what happens in this production of memory and solidarity is the monopolization of the meaning of ‘9/11?’. I saw many people on twitter saying now is not the time of saying but let’s think of the thousands of children in Africa dying or let’s think about the victims of the War on Terror. If we say our thoughts go to the victims of 9/11, we of course mean to victims of the terrorist attack that hit the US that day, not other people in the US or elsewhere. The negative, and sometimes downright hostile, comments on the tweets of the Moroccan-Dutch goalie show that we ought to remember 9/11 in a particular way; with our thoughts focused on one particular event, one particular category of victims. The commemoration shows a world caught in arms, hate, and fear.

Now of course there is nothing wrong with risk management, counter-radicalization policies and public commemorations perse, but we should recognize that with the attempt to produce safety we also produce meaning. Given the intended and unintended negative consequences of public risk management and such commemorations, alternatives should be considered. This is possible. Remember the monk I was talking about in the beginning? This man desperately looking for salvation through martyrdom is now presented as an animal lover, pacifist and a Christian committed to dialogue. It maybe hard to believe that he once affirmed the false idea that it was a ‘a Muslim belief’ apparently widespread ‘at that time’ that to kill a Christian was a sure path to salvation. It may be hard to imagine that one day we actually celebrate a feast dedicated to the monk. But that is what we do. Tomorrow we on October 4 we celebrate the Feast of St Francis of Assisi. It is a also a day for animals, in Dutch dierendag, a popular day for pets to be “blessed”. I wish you a blessed day as well.