



THEME 1: The Debate on Values

Teaching and learning aids

Islam

Fundamentalism and text criticism

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- The main aim of the COMCULT network is to define and propagate values that serve peaceful co-existence in Europe.

Unfortunately the Koran contains, along with a series of peace-promoting exhortations, views and rules of conduct that can seriously disrupt the peace between individuals or social groups. (Tf 161/1)

It always depends on whether single rules of guidance are taken literally and followed in isolation from all other statements, or whether people are prepared to follow only the constructive intentions of the Koran. This means a thorough examination of the text of the Koran as well as of the historical and geographical conditions at the time of its revelation. (Tf 161/2)

- The central question is this: which values or commandments contained in the Koran are important for all people and all times and which are not?

This very question would be strictly rejected by Islamic fundamentalists, as they see in it the presumptuousness of man: for them no men – not even the Prophet Mohammed – have either the right to alter or to deny the rules laid down in the Koran.

15-16 *"And when our clear communications are recited to them, those who hope not for Our meeting say: Bring a Koran other than this or change it. Say: It does not beseem me that I should change it of myself; I follow naught but what is revealed to me; surely I fear, if I disobey my Lord, the punishment of a mighty day. 16 Say: If Allah had desired otherwise I would not have recited it to you; indeed I have lived a lifetime among you before it; do you not then understand?"* (KORAN, Sura 10,15-16)

Certainly, the use of human understanding or reason gives rise to new questions. Is understanding only given to us to make it clear to man that he is as nothing before Allah or is he himself permitted to use his reason to ask in a different time and in different circumstances what is necessary and meaningful for people here and now?

For fundamentalists the decision is simple. They single out certain directions from the Koran without taking into account their historical and geographical context and transfer them to the present as guidance or legitimation for their actions. This mode of behaviour leads in many Islamic states and to a certain extent in Europe as well, to the violation of human rights and in its radical form to terrorism.

- How did this situation arise?

For most Muslims today the Koran is still – ever since the defeat of the Mu'tazilites in the ninth century – the infallible word of God and as it is written in the Koran itself: *"And surely it is in the original of the Book with Us, truly elevated, full of wisdom."* (Sura 43,3) *"Say: The Holy spirit has revealed from your Lord with the truth that it may establish those who believe and as a guidance and good news for those who submit."* (Sura 16,102) *"Surely We have made it (the Book) an Arabic Koran so that you might understand."* (Sura 43,3)

A critical examination of the Koran texts and the Islamic tradition collected in the Hadith is not possible in Islamic countries because of the close alliance between religious and secular authorities existing there. Naturally, there was and there still is today Koran research in Islamic countries, but of course not in the sense that there has been Bible research with text criticism in Europe since about the middle of the nineteenth century in Europe.

Muslims who nevertheless dare to undertake a critical examination of the numerous contradictions and ambiguities of the Arabic Koran text or the Hadith must fear for their lives in Islamic countries or else emigrate.

This was also the fate of the Egyptian Islamic scholar Abu Zaid (or Said), whose marriage was forcibly dissolved by the courts in June, 1995, on the grounds that it could not be expected of a Muslim woman to live with an apostate (renegade). Abu Zaid then fled with his wife to Holland, where he has since been teaching at Leyden University. (ABU SAID, 1999, p. 167ff)
(cf. Also Tf 161/2)

Summary

There are Islamic scholars who consider the concept of Islamic fundamentalism to be superfluous or misleading, as they follow the principle that all Muslims take the text of the Koran literally. Thus all Muslims would logically be fundamentalists in any case.

In the 21st. century, however, there are many new problems that are not offered any ready answers by the text of the Koran (7th. century) or by that of the Hadith (9th. century).

Since Islam does not have any central court of justice that could decide on open questions in a way that would be binding on all Muslims, it is in principle possible for each Muslim to base his conduct on one statement or another of the Koran or, in case of doubt, to obtain a counsel's opinion – a so-called fatwah. This, however, is not necessarily binding but only a religious recommendation and if the believer is not satisfied with it, then he can obtain a different fatwa from another mosque or university or even by telephone or via internet.

However rigidly – and as laid down for centuries - some Islamic “fundamentalists” (believers in the word at its face value) behave, others do look via internet and satellite-TV for pragmatic solutions for a life that has a religious base. This “not only but also” attitude gives Islam great adaptability to the actual local and temporal conditions under which its followers live.

Of course, there is the great disadvantage that „Islam“ as such is nowhere tangible as a binding unit and cannot even be held responsible for obvious developments in the wrong direction – as, for example, terrorism.

A global ethical code of responsibility that also includes non-Muslims in it on an equal footing is very difficult to develop on the basis of the Koran when taken literally.