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dutch way, muslim way

The problem is not religious freedom but the clash of societal values

Joergen Oerstroem Moeller

Fitna, the film, made recently by Dutch MP Geert Wilders, and the cartoons about Prophet Muhammad that were published by several Danish newspapers some time ago have made headlines and caused controversy.

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Why is this so?

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First, people speak generally about the Dutch or the Danes when referring to the film and/or the cartoons. To classify all Dutch people and/or Danes as having the same opinion is a gross oversimplification.

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The film and the cartoons ignited debates and revealed disagreements inside both countries. They divided the nations in two camps, one supporting, and the other opposing, the film and the cartoons.

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Similarly, it is a gross oversimplification when the Dutch or the Danes speak of Muslims as a homogenous group of people holding uniform views about Islam's role in society.

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The temptation to oversimplify issues has undoubtedly added fuel to the fire. The extremists have attracted the lion's share of attention and crowded the moderates out of the picture.

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Second, in an era of globalisation, debates inside a country reverberate around the globe and resonate with foreign cultures. This is partly because news spreads so fast but a more sophisticated explanation is that many countries have moved from one culture to something like multiculturalism.

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Neither the Netherlands nor Denmark had any Muslim population until about 25 years ago. They were genuine nation-states composed of one ethnicity and one religion (Christianity) that had forged behavioural patterns over centuries.

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The arrival of a visible Muslim minority pushed them into uncharted waters. They now had to deal with citizens who brought along their own culture and societal patterns based on Islam and not Christianity, and who maintained cultural and family links with the countries where they were born.

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Regrettably, the two camps in the controversy looked on each other with suspicion and hijacked most of the debate. Instead of opening the door (their mindset) to understand the

other part, they closed it by clinging to preconceived perceptions and stereotypes of the other.

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Such attitudes have made it difficult for what probably and hopefully are the overwhelming majorities in both camps, who seek better mutual understanding and wish to live in peace and harmony.

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Third, the world has seen how large the gap can be between perceptions of good and bad behaviour. The main problem is the overlap between religious freedom and societal values. Religious freedom has not been a problem; societal values are.

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Many European countries have Constitutions that were drawn up 150 years ago or earlier. They reflect the nation-state as it was then, transforming from absolute monarchy to some kind of democracy. As the kings had exercised censorship, it was of vital importance to secure freedom of expression without any exception.

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The dilemmas that globalisation and immigration could pose for freedom of expression did not enter the mindset of the founding fathers of European democracies, as those dilemmas were unknown.

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Instead, Europeans feared losing their newly-won freedoms. This fear was confirmed when Nazism, fascism and communism emerged in the inter-war period and solidified the belief that freedom of expression, without exception, is an indispensable bulwark against deviation from European democracy.

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Immigrants from Muslim countries used to live in nation-states where the media respected religious feelings. Religion defined, on its own terms, what could and could not be said about religious issues.

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Herein lies the reason for the clash. Europeans see freedom of expression as a cornerstone for the societies that they have built over more than a century; Muslim immigrants do not understand why their religious feelings are ignored or, in some cases, deliberately trampled on.

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No one is really trying to begin a dialogue on the basis of knowing why the other camp takes the position it does.

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If we look for a silver lining, it is encouraging that the two episodes have given rise to political statements about the need for better understanding and restraint. Those seeking violence and confrontation must not hijack the future.

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The Europeans and the Muslim worlds fought each other for more than a thousand years, providing ample proof of the misery that war causes. Even in Bosnia-Herzegovina, there was war a little more than 10 years ago.

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I hope this conflict will recede into history instead of dominating today's agenda.

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This article was written by invitation. The views are the writer's own and do not necessarily reflect those of Iseas.