

Thoughts

Its not semantics, it's a message!

Some days ago I visited the english-language website „ikhwanweb“ in order to obtain information on the actual political positions of the Muslim Brotherhood and its parliamentary spin-off the „Freedom and Justice Party“ in the Egypt of today.

However, I was much surprised by the fact that on the website the usage of terms like „islamist“ and „jihadist“ is widespread and abundant. I assume that those responsible for this type of language do not really understand or fail to comprehend the extent to which these terms are tarnished in western media and politics. In almost all western media and social discourses the term “jihadist” and “islamist” is equalized with „terrorist“ and „terrorism“ or at best extremism and radicalism. It is very unfortunate that at this moment in time Muslims are not in a strong position to confront these wrong – and in my view deliberately misleading - interpretations of these terms with substance and in a broad, multileveled manner. Therefore they should exercise extreme caution while using a highly questionable language, because Muslims seem to have lost the definitional sovereignty over their technical islamological terms in the public discourse. This kind of language is in my view a good example for what George Orwell defined as “Newspeak”, which in this context turns anything Islamic into “ungood”.

There is no doubt that there are a few people who consider their criminal activities as consistent with Islamic teachings and as true reflections of the art of jihad. This is very unfortunate and Muslim scholarship has to do the utmost to educate and if needed to admonish and penalize their uneducated fellow Muslims for these shockingly high levels of ignorance.

At the same time Muslims in general should understand how people in the media and in politics use and misinterpret to an alarming extent certain terms that have a religious and contextual background. It is for this reason that generally the language employed and applied by Muslim activists for the description of ideological and political differentiation is of great importance, specifically within a political framework. The Quran puts strong emphasis on the proper use of human language while talking about Islam. In Surah An Nahl we find the following beautiful advice:

“Invite to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious.”

In my view the central teaching in this quranic verse is the call for the wise and prudent use of words.

No doubt, it is indeed comprehensible that the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt wants to draw a visible line in a political arena where party distinctions are of great importance. In the Egyptian context this happens to be the „Al-Nour“ party, which did exceptionally well during the recent parliamentary elections. It may be assumed that for the very purpose of demarcation terms like „Islamist“ and „jihadist“ were used.

But, is this labeling smart? One could argue, that politics in a democracy is not about wisdom but about creating majorities and satisfying the demands of one's voters and supporters. Nevertheless, a movement and a party founded and supported by Muslim activists in Egypt - or anywhere else - in the pre-dominantly Muslim world should pay more attention to the proper use of terms which exist in a relationship with religion and are equipped with a religious message. Words do not exist in a vacuum. They carry messages, right and/or wrong, depending on the environment, culture, degree of information or dis-information, degree of knowledge and political atmosphere. Words create emotions. Words are used to create images of friends and foes alike.

The political discussions and social discourse of today in Europe with regard to Muslims and Islam are overwhelmingly marked by a form of tedious negativism, which is characterized by a persistent refusal of Islam in most of its shapes; for obvious but without logical reasons. Is it then wise to adopt a language, which is heavily tainted at the same time? Is it wise to give credit to wrong perceptions of central Islamic teachings by using an artificially created language, which purports dubious interpretations? Wouldn't it be wiser to dissociate from this negative use of terminology and adopt a new, more precise and descriptive language? Doesn't this rather unreflecting use of language create a chain of evidence? A chain, which sort of finishes on the Muslim end of the chain as the source of proof to those who misuse language for self-evident reasons and who have anything in mind but constructive communication. Why shouldn't Muslims use terms like „misguided Muslim“, „immoderate Muslims“, „reactionary Muslim“ or in extreme cases „seditious Muslim“ in order to draw a line for descriptive purposes in the political arena.

Muslims should exploit the richness of a language, not because they have to hide anything, but for the sake of realistic and authentic accuracy. After all, there is a nut for every bolt. Bin Laden was not an „Islamist“, he was a person who in his later days indulged in unacceptable, intolerable and highly criminal activities, and who just happened to be a Muslim. If Muslims call him an „Islamist“ they do draw a direct and a completely wrong line of connection between his criminal acts and Islam. The same applies to the fallacious and extremely deceptive use of the terms „jihadist“ and jihad. Murdering people, Muslims and Non-Muslim civilians alike, who are not party to a conflict is not jihad. The beheading of prisoners or anybody else is not jihad, and those who do it are murderous criminals and not „jihadists“ or mujahidin.

Since when do the rules of jihad condone and allow for the mistreatment and killings of prisoners, innocents and non-combatants? Whenever a Muslim kills innocent civilians and propagates the ideology of suicide attacks he is not an “Islamist” or a “jihadist”, he is a criminal, who just happens to be a Muslim.

The Muslim community has criminals in its midst, but then they should be called criminals, like in every other religious, social or cultural community!

The Muslim community has murderers in its midst, but then they should be called murderers, like in every other religious, social or cultural community!

The Muslim community has violent fanatics in its midst, but then they should be called violent fanatics, like in every other religious, social or cultural community!

Muslims should not serve or nourish the derogatory descriptions of jihad and Islam. The attaching of a religious label to a group of Muslims who are going or have completely gone astray hinders the serious examination, containment and necessary management of an easily identifiable intellectual illness that has entered parts of Muslim communities; it becomes all the more difficult, at times impossible. Islam is a religion of precision and not a self-service outlet and take-away shop.

Are other religious communities free from criminals and murderers? Has anyone ever heard that Non-Muslims criminals, like G.W. Bush, Tony Blair, Rabbi Kahane, or most recently the Norwegian Anders Breivik, all of whom have related their - criminal - actions to their religious convictions as being called „Jesuit“, „Christianist“ or „Jewist“? Is the Christian „Lord Resistance Army“ that aspires to create a religious state, which is subject to the commandments of the Bible ever labeled Jesuit? What about the Christian and hardly ever reported Nigerian and Christian „Akhwan Akwop“ or „Egbesu Mightier Fraternity“ groups, which is calling for an ethnic cleansing of Muslims in the Christian majority areas of Nigeria? Christianists?

This comparison should demonstrate that it is not about semantics, it is about transporting specific, carefully painted and well cultivated images, it is about creating foes, it is about maligning Islam. Muslims should be aware of the environment where language is no longer used as an instrument to create communication but to create dissent. We live in an age where the malignant interpretations of a terminology which is consciously detached from a deep understanding of religious concepts is in constant use to uphold the image of a perceived foe.

Muslims should know and identify the booby traps in the use of a specific language and do not become trailblazers for those who specialize in bending the air, when it comes to Islam and Muslims.

When some years ago a group of young Muslims in Germany was asked to explain the word „jihad“, almost all of them translated it with „holy war“. They seem to have taken their basic religious education from German publications and politicians. What will happen next?

In the bible we find the following phrase: „In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.“ Anyone out there still saying words are just words and doubting their weight and impact?

Time to think about it!

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