Hartmut Fähndrich

A few words in conclusion

Ladies and Gentlemen, it’s over. The curtain is down and nothing is settled, to quote Bertolt Brecht, the master of this kind of unfinished business on stage, whose major interest was always in raising problems, not in solving them, in making people reflect on questions, not in answering them definitely.

Even after the end of this colloquium, we cannot expect to arrive, within a reasonable span of time, at the kind of situation John Steinbeck envisaged or dreamt of with respect to racism. Racism, he wrote, will have ended the moment I do no longer remember whether the person who asked me about the direction in the street was black or white.

Until now and for some time to come people’s designation of each other as Muslim or westerner, respectively, is going to stay with us — until many obstacles have been overcome, some of which were mentioned or elaborated upon during our conference.

For instance, should we free ourselves of images deeply ingrained in our minds and frequently reproduced in our arts, as manifest in many famous museums, of images that even made it into Christian eschatology and burdened Muslim Turks of the 16th century with the role of being God’s punishment on earth?

Thus, the clichés, both negative and positive, found in the framework of what we now call Orientalism and more recently Occidentalism are not limited to extremist circles but are — as Edward Said clearly demonstrated for Western thought — widespread ideas inspiring the “imaginaire occidentals”. The same is, of course, true on the other side, Arabic literature, for example, being full of images, often shallow clichés of Westerners, be they moralizing, utopian or anti-imperialist.

And, maybe, it is this point to which we should direct our attention much more. Much easier than eliminating the historical and cultural heritage from our minds would be, it seems, to stop military and other aggression against the Muslim world that is supposedly triggering a whole range of so-called fundamentalist invectives against the West.

What we definitely should not do is what more and more Specialists of Islam self-consciously suggest and tend to do: stop talking about Islam. I think this would be — after centuries of essentializing Islam — the “easy” or even the disastrous way out. Islam does exist as an idea of its adherents, phenomenalized in a large number of ways sometimes widely differing.

Yet, as long as millions of individuals designate or even mark themselves as Muslims, as belonging to Islam, we have no reason not to accept this and not to deal with it. The question remains in what way we do it.

Thus, technological progress and worldwide migration force us to widen our view and look beyond traditional forms of dualistic confrontation — this confrontation that has led to the construction of an image of the other that may be merely a projection of our vision of the world behind which the other actually appears, although the other should always be taken as an enrichment not a punishment — be it religious or secular.

How difficult such a change of direction could be is obvious from glances into our media where clichés are reproduced insidiously and in different ways every day not infrequently stressing the exception rather than the norm. And power and propagandist interest may play an essential role in this, particularly through the right or power of definition, i.e. of determining which actions are good and which ones belong to the realm of evil.

Global migration and movement to Europe in particular — will not only change the complexion of the European population. It is also stimulating a double-edged discussion and even the necessity to change attitudes on both sides. Immigrant...
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Grants will lose and have to abandon customs and habits they cherish in another part of this world. Target countries of immigration will have to, and have already begun to, reconsider their own rules of law and life once moulded for a more unified or uniform population.

How painful and how difficult this double rearrangement can be gleaned from our daily press, both in pictures and in texts or in their precarious combination – a press, however, that follows, maybe has to follow, its own particular laws which often do not favour what one would call an unbiased presentation. And so, in the end, this is what will remain: a hallucinating roundabout of images and counter-images of Muslims, Christians, Westerners, Orientals, Europeans, Easteners, cruel or gentle, god-fearing or godless and the question – to borrow the beautiful phrase coined by one of the participants – what to do against the husky fringe to take over.

Many problems were raised and many questions are still to be answered. As mentioned above with the help of Bertolt Brecht: the curtain down and nothing settled.