Evangelical zealots and whingeing secularists

Is the West facing opposite cultural dangers in USA and in Europe?

George Virsik

When asked whom I would have voted for if I were an American I usually recalled my father's reply when I asked him, as a teenager, whom he would have backed: the fanatic preacher Savonarola or the corrupt pope Alexander VI. His answer was something like, "no one is obliged to make choices, and to take moral stands, in fictitious situations and/or cultural and historical environments that one is not part of".

Another thing that would come to my mind was the reply, in the seventies, of the then Melbourne Archbishop *Frank Little* to an interviewer who kept on nagging him about the encyclical *Humanae vitae* (concerning the use of contraceptives): "If you cannot understand any other answer only yes or no then the answer must be no." I think I could paraphrase this into "If you cannot understand any other position only that of a conservative Christian or a destructive secularist, then you must count me to the former."

Perhaps this applies also to the alternatives Bush or Kerry, though, as stated above, I did not have to make that choice. Among those who had to — or thought that they had to — the majority of voting Americans judged Bush on his professed adherence to traditional Christian understanding of the sanctity of human life and family, and embraced him, whereas the majority of Europeans judged Bush on his hapless Iraq war, arrogant attitude to allies, and ideological bigotry (masquerading as religious piousness) and rejected him. Quite a lot has been written in an attempt to understand this crack in Euro-American relations, and these lines are trying to do the same from a Christian (non-fundamentalist) angle.

Let me start with a paradox: If the prevailing attitude in the US is now seen as Christian traditionalism and conservatism, it must be remembered that, after all, it is also the result of an import from 18th century Europe (well before the French revolution). On the other hand, in Europe the prevailing attitude (in politics and opinion-forming media) is that of the secularists, whose moral code is a consequence of the antiestablishment and anti-everything free morals of the flower generation "making love not war" of the Seventies (as much as these were influenced by the students' revolts in Paris of 1968), and of political correctness that followed, both imports from the US.

Another paradox concerns the separation of Church and State which is guaranteed by the American Constitution but not in many European countries (e.g. Germany, where the State takes responsibility for the collection of Church-tax). The praxis is, however, quite different: Bush and his evangelicals certainly do

not behave as if they adhered to such separation, whereas e.g. in Germany the politicians (and media) not only ignore traditional religion but promote their own (secular but often intolerantly secularist) anti-religion with its own understanding of values and human rights, a kind of plastic replica of their Christian originals. In USA it is the Evange-



Bush announcing his invasion of Iraq: the picture (appearing on the front page of DER SPIEGEL) that horrified European Christians but gave malevolent satisfaction (Schadenfreude) to secularists.

licals, in "old" Europe the secularists, who want to dictate their values, taboos and ethical norms to the weaker rest of the country or continent.

Of course, opposition to Bush's international politics does not have to mean opposition to his stand on traditional moral issues (however theatrically he tries to defend them) or even endorsement of the secularist position and agenda. Notable examples are not only the Pope and Buttiglione, or American (non-neo-) conservatives but also such a knower of the Arab and Islamic world as *Peter Scholl-Latour*. In distinction to such Catholic conservatives as *Richard Neuhaus* of the *First Things* monthly, who seems to have endorsed Bush *in toto*, including his Iraq war.

At a CNN organised pre-election discussion table, Scholl-Latour pointed to the difference between his and the American participants' approach to elections and political choices. He said something like: "I do not like any of the German politicians; I like this or that policy, political statement, not persons." I think this could be generalised to a certain extent: the (educated) European opts for a political party — a swinging voter often just because of one item in its political programme — and gets the person (Bundeskanzler, President, Prime Minister) with all his/her personal merits and shortcomings as a necessary consequence of this choice. The (educated) American seems to go the other way around: he/she chooses the person (Pre-

_

An 80-year-old author, former TV news commentator and household name, who is regarded as Germany's top Mideast expert. He studied in Mainz, Paris und Beirut so he is fluent not only in German, French and English but also in Arabic. He is profoundly familiar with the history of the countries he describes in his reports and books; he has spent decades studying the Islamic-Arab region. In his last book called *Weltmacht in Treibsand* (World power in quicksand) he presents a concise report describing his recent journeys to Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon

sident, Governor) and gets his/her policies as a consequence of this choice.² Of course, in both cases it is a 'package deal' involving both the person(ality) and the policies, but the emphases seem to be different.

Bush is opposed by most of the world because of Iraq, and not because he is supported by the 51% of presumably 'religious Americans': only European (and other) secularists — of whom DER SPIEGEL has shown itself to be an unwearied advocate ³ — conflate their opposition to Iraq war with their hatred of Christianity as such, identifying it with its fundamentalist minority.

Somebody familiar with the German situation could say that Bush was a better alternative for the USA, whereas Kerry would have been a better alternative for the world, in somehow the same sense as Edmund Stoiber was better for Bavaria and Gerhard Schröder better for Germany. Therefore Bavarians voted for Stoiber, Germans for Schröder, Americans for Bush ... but nobody asked 'the world'.

In spite of this, Europeans (and others) should judge the enormous variety and complexity of views, opinions and attitudes coming from America not by deciding whether they can be assigned to a particular, loved or hated, person (politician, columnist, philosopher etc.) but on their own merit. Making a strict distinction between good and bad politicians, acceptable and non acceptable sources, is always misleading especially for a European tainted by socialist prejudices that do not have their counterpart in the USA.

Even in America, the choice Bush or Kerry was not simply the choice between religious or non-religious. Not all Christians voted for Bush, and Kerry knew he could not win backed solely by the non-Christian, liberal, politically correct or what-you-have minority. He had to attract at least some of those who stood for traditional, conservative if you like, well established values but disliked Bush's Iraq war, while at the same time inducing the politically correct and other anticonservatives to come to vote. And that contardictio in se of tactics needed to win, was the millstone round his neck. "Towards the end of the general election, one reporter on a major newspaper told me they had no idea what Kerry stood for. That was after a year of campaigning, three successful debates, and a month of Kerry attacks on Bush's handling of the war in Iraq. It's hard to blame voters for feeling the same way".

[http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6445381/ site/newsweek/]. Of course, in retrospect everybody is a prophet.

Regarding one of those values, it might be interesting to note the solution Germans found to the problem of gay marriages, though I am not sure to what extent this is applicable to the American situation. The Federal Constitutional Court (Bundesverfassungsgericht) decided that gay marriage (Homo-Ehe is the nice German word for it) is not against the Constitution whose Article 6 says explicitly that marriage is "the union of a man and a woman intended to be a lasting living community (auf Dauer angelegte Lebensgemeinschaft)". In other words, a Homo-Ehe is by definition not the Ehe mentioned in the Constitution, though the law can endow it with all sorts of outside resemblances to a marriage. For instance, financial security and other rights for the partner (which is the easier one to concede), or the right to rear children, (which is the harder one 4). After all, for a Christian there is marriage as sacrament (witnessed by the Church) and marriage as contract (witnessed by the State). So in my opinion a Christian should not object in principle to a *Home-Ehe*, or *Multi-Ehe* or what our secularists might come to think of to pervert the secular version of traditional marriage.

Of course, this kind of argumentation, requires also a mental 'separation of State and Church'. In particular, it goes against Bush's statement during his campaign trail in Iowa "I believe marriage is a sacred commitment...and I will defend it." He does not represent any religious authority only the State, and it is a confusion of Christian marriage (which is a sacrament, and available only to like-minded) with its secular version, which ought to be available to all citizens. He can (and should, in my opinion) defend the traditional notion of marriage, but not because it is a sacrament, a meaningless term for non-Christians, but for all sorts of practical reasons. Leon Wieseltier of The New Republic describes the danger of this conflation of the sacred and profane very aptly: "It is never long before one nation under God gives way to one God under a nation." (c.f. http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/04/07/opinion/m ain610681.shtml).

Another thing is the irrational argumentation and emotional-bordering-on-hysteria agitation of some

Needless to say, there are exceptions. For instance the recent elections in Slovakia were concentrated around the question of whether one likes or hates Vladimír Mečiar.

There is now a daily English summary available for free on http://service.spiegel.de/cache/international/0,1518,324167,00.html.

The question to ask is not what financial and legal benefits homosexual couples (or whoever) are entitled to — that is solely for the law to decide. The moral question is, what is good for the adopted or artificially produced children, their psychological development. For instance, what does it do to a 6-8 years old child's self-esteem to be known to his friends as somebody who has two mums or two dads rather than one of each like the majority. Because, whatever the wishful thinking, the homosexuals are going to be a small minority, that is a fact of nature, and no fault of "conservative" Catholics.

rightists (notably the Evangelicals) during the campaign, but not only then. There is one thing, neither the European secularists nor the American liberals want to see. Namely, that e.g. Limbaugh's style is a reaction to the style that led to political correctness. It was the Left in the Seventies — firstly only among the US academia, then throughout most of the media — who started to debase the intellectual level and objectivity, neglecting the traditional separation of facts/news from opinion/value-judgments in their reporting. Political correctness was exported to Europe though here a Limbaugh counter-attack is unthinkable (if one does not count the not so influential "populist" far right reaction).

Besides, common folk react to attempts to take away what is sacred to them, what they regard — rightly or wrongly — as the basis of their dignity (often expressed through religion) not through carefully formulated expressions of their position and sophisticated argumentation, but through irrational and emotional verbal outbursts often with violent connotations, if not more. One remembers the opposition to communism in Eastern Europe, e.g. in Slovakia. The intellectuals might have had their well thought over reasons for rejecting the atheist Communists, but the Slovak peasants went out with their scythes to protect their parish priest, not so much because of his personality — after all, other honest and innocent people were also persecuted — but because of the *symbol* of something higher their priest stood for for them. Well, the American common folk did not have to take to the scythes, they could vote in free elections, and they took to them!

In the last century we have witnessed that the need to oppose a totalitarian threat — the Nazis or the Communists — at almost any cost, leads to some strange bedfellows in the "anti" camp. There were Christians and Communists, conservatives and socialists in the anti-Nazi camp, and there were Christians and free thinkers, patriots and internationalists, democrats and traditionalists in the anti-Communist camp. The recent ideological extravaganza of the neocons — notably after the ill fated Iraq war — lumps together into one anti-camp some unlikely, and practically incompatible, groups, like anti-war Christians, together with anti-establishment old leftists of the Seventies' breed, together with intolerant anti-Christian European secularists.

The forces keeping these groups together are, of course, not as strong as those in the previous two cases, first of all, because the outside pressure is not nearly as threatening. Nevertheless, I think there is some analogy in the situations. It is therefore impor-

tant to know one's intellectual, political and moral positions, to know both how strong the anti-war ties, that keep a (European) Christian in the anti-neocon camp, are, and how strong are the centrifugal forces that keep Christians at a distance from these temporary strange bedfellows. Lest they run over the timid Christians, a process certainly more advanced in (western) Europe than in the USA.

Post Scriptum

The Dutch filmmaker *Theo van Gogh* (a great-grand-nephew of the painter Vincent van Gogh) was gunned down and stabbed to death on an Amsterdam street on 2nd November. The assailant was a 26-year-old man of dual Dutch and Moroccan nationality. Van Gogh had received anonymous death threats after Dutch television aired his short film *Submission* in August. He called Muslims "goatfuckers" and his film featured four women who claimed to have been abused by their Muslim husbands, and who wore see-through robes showing their breasts (and more), with texts from the Koran scrawled on their naked bodies.

Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende called van Gogh "a champion of the freedom of speech" and warned against polarization and intolerance in Dutch society. Well, nothing can justify the murder, but was van Gogh really a "champion of free speech", was he really killed by the fanatic because he "angered Muslims with criticism" (as e.g. The Washington Post reported). Just with "criticism"? Of course, there are hundreds of reasons why one should criticise the Muslim practice with women, and fight for their rights, but is offending their religion, ridiculing what is sacred to all Muslims, the way to go about it? What else could it have achieved except for what it did: the death of the offender by a fanatic, and some twenty burned down Dutch mosques, Koran schools and churches? Yes, churches, because the secularists make sure that the Muslims see Christians — and not them — as their real adversary in Europe. The only time secularists acknowledge their Christian roots is when they can hide behind them while provoking Muslims.

There is, after all, a difference between criticism and offence! Would the Prime Minister call van Gogh "a champion of the freedom of speech" had he used the same vulgar expression when referring to Jews, desecrated Torah, and called this, for instance, criticism of Ariel Sharon's politics? In August next year Cologne will host the Catholic *World Youth Day* that also the Pope intends to attend. Who do you think will carry slogans offensive to the Pope and to all Catholics: the Muslims or the gay and other defenders of the secularists' "freedom of speech"?