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**Values and law – Development policy  
needs to take a stand in the debate on  
basic rights, integration, and religion**

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## Values and law – Development policy needs to take a stand in the debate on basic rights, integration, and religion

*Bonn, 18 January 2010.* In late November 2009 the building of minarets is banned by referendum in Switzerland. On Christmas day the passengers on an airliner preparing to land in Detroit narrowly escape a bombing attack. And on New Year's Day, in Denmark, a man forces his way into the house of Kurt Westergaard, the author of the so-called Mohammed caricatures, attempting to assault him with an axe. In Germany this last case has sparked (once again) a discussion that has exposed the up- and downsides of the ongoing value debate here. The discussion centres on attitudes toward Islam, but that, in most cases, ultimately proves to be little more than code. In fact, issue is, in essence, how we deal, at home, but also in our relations with other countries, with other values, cultures, and notions of law; what avenues are open to us, in the long term, to gain recognition for the values that we regard as fundamental to an open and just society.

This debate is of paramount relevance for development policy, for it concerns some central aspects of the policy field. One clear illustration of this is an article authored by Andrian Kreye in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* on 3 January 2010. He writes: "In the West the value debate is predicated on the assumption that the value canon of freedom, equality, democracy, and human rights is something that the entire rest of the world is longing for. (...) However, a Muslim is not an oppressed person languishing under a dictatorship until, in the end, he is delivered from his lot by flight or by a liberator." On 5 January 2010, Peter von Becker, writing in the Berlin *Tagespiegel*, notes: "And it seems downright naïve when we hear the comments of a German bishop who may be convinced of the possibility of negotiating, in peaceful, well-digging harmony, on a decent and humane future with a male society that grants its women fewer rights than a farm-yard goat."

What lessons do we need to learn, what course to take? Should we, as some think, finally stop bowing to threats uttered by violent Islamists and abandoning, in a gesture of cravenly 'pro-active' self-censorship, the basic values on which our society rests? Or is the key error we are making our attempt to export our "Western" ("Christian") values to the rest of the world as the shining paradigm for a new society, without giving due consideration to other cultures and value systems? This is the level at which a good share of the discussion is being conducted, and it is marked at times by a frightening measure of self-righteousness and clueless ignorance.

The reason why the current discussion misses the core of the problem is that it rests on a false opposition. You don't need to be a champion of Islamism to experience the (re)printing of the Mohammed caricatures as an insensitive, or indeed provocative, act. But you don't have to be a warrior of Western civilisation, either, to see how fundamental freedom of expression and the rule of law are to our society. There is no contradiction between these two stances. The central point of the dispute is not whether we hold freedom of expression to be more important than respect for the religious views of others; it is, in actual fact, whether we are intent on conducting the debate on value preferences and notions of society in monologic or dialogic mode.



The monologic seems at present to be gaining the upper hand. But which stance is in fact more naïve – a focus on supporting reform-minded forces in the developing world, seeking to foster, through dialogue, modernisation processes there, or an approach beholden to the view that the rest of the world is bound, sooner or later, to fall into line as long as we continue consistently to defend “our values”?

Development policy needs to help lead the debate in Germany out of argumentative pitfalls of this kind. It has long been aware that far from being automatically realised, the universal basic rights and the value preferences of a secular and urbanised social system need to be achieved gradually, in processes that are inevitably protracted and conflictual. This applies to developing countries as well as to our own society, which needed to establish much of what has become self-evident for us against strong resistance put up by conservative forces (often including the established churches).

Development policy has made plenty of errors in recent decades, but it has also learned plenty. It knows, for instance, that peaceful social change is best effected in and through dialogue between values and interests, not by any one-sided fiat imposed by those convinced they possess the ultimate truth. It knows what it means to support modernisation in an environment marked by weak state structures, entrenched role models, and violent conflict. It has long since lost the naivety it once had when it came to the manageability of complex events and processes, and it is today in possession of skills and knowledge that could play an important role in the domestic debate on integration and changing values.

And one of the most important insights to which development policy has come: We must not allow this debate to be led from the margins. As long as we have only those in mind who are intent on terrorising us, we are likely to opt for the path leading to the abyss of polarisation and exclusion. True, we must defend ourselves against violent attack. That, however, may prove to be easier than paving the way for millions of people to realise the more just order of society to which they are entitled. That calls for a politics that is at once cognizant of the values on which it rests and capable of engaging in open dialogue.



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