

An Evangelical magazine from Germany

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'If Turkey joins, will God and Allah be included in the constitution?' This question was put by the magazine Spektrum in the heading of an article about the impending decision, in early December 2004, by the EU Commission on whether to initiate accession negotiations with Turkey. This is an example of provocative journalism: a completely bizarre claim launched in the public domain only to be then attacked all the more vigorously.



Spektrum is all too willing to address the anxiety-ridden theme of Islam. Issue no. 51/2004, for example, carries an article drawing attention to the fact that the Koran permits the beating of women, and another that joyfully announces that an Egyptian Muslim became a Protestant vicar. After the murder of the Dutch film director Theo van Gogh, the cover of issue no. 47/2004 of Spektrum carried quotations by Muslims printed in capitals and full of hatred for the German population, and spoke inside of possible 'street fighting in large cities' in the future, and of 'growing fears of civil war' among 'servile Germans' who no longer had the courage to engage critically with Islam. It also asked whether immigration should not have been 'put a stop to' earlier.

Who or what is Spektrum? It is a magazine published by the Information Service of the Evangelical Alliance (Informationsdienst der Evangelischen Allianz – idea) in Wetzlar. Idea is a registered non-profit organisation and includes among its members different personalities both from the state churches of the EKD (Evangelische Kirche Deutschlands) and from evangelical free churches. It sees itself and its various media activities as a 'Protestant news agency', and thus as a competitor of the epd (Evangelische Pressedienst) published in Frankfurt am Main.

Idea and its magazine Spektrum have been in existence for 25 years. Spektrum is published weekly and has a current circulation of 28,000. Since 1998 it has been able to increase its circulation by approx. 8,000 copies per week, i.e. by almost 40%. The magazine costs only 1,50 euro. According to its own readership analysis, Spektrum has three readers per copy; almost 70% of its readers are among the decision-makers in their respective church communities; 35% of its readers have at their disposal net monthly income of at least 2,500 euros per household – and are therefore among Germany's well-to-do.

Inflammatory reporting

'Islam Bashing' is a long-running issue in Spektrum, as the following quotations indicate: Spektrum fears that if Turkey becomes a member of the EU, then 'the percentage of Muslims in the population will exceed that of Protestants in the EU' (No. 5/2004). As for the current state of affairs, Spektrum claims anxiously that 'Paris has surrendered to Islamic militancy', Germany exhibits 'western cowardice' towards Islamists, and 'Europe should remember the Christianity on which our civilization rests' (No. 36/2004).

According to Spektrum, the whole world is actually under threat from Islam. For example, in Nigeria the 'major evangelization of a Pentecostal Evangelist had to be abandoned after threats of violence from fanatical Moslems' (No. 37/2004), and in 'Islamic countries Christian minorities are in serious danger during the fasting month of Ramadan' (No. 43/2004).

The second major theme that Spektrum presents positively is the traditional large Protestant family. In such a family, the man has a profession, while the happy wife stays at home and devotes herself to their children. Deviations from this ideal family are negatively portrayed in Spektrum. Homosexual and feminists represent particularly unacceptable deviants.

Here are a number of quotations for the purposes of illustration and to enable the reader to form a personal opinion. For example, issue No. 42/2004 carries a cover story about Ursula von der Leyen, Minister of Family Affairs in the federal state of Lower Saxony, showing a picture of her with her husband and their seven children. In the text we read: 'Where there are children, a Golden Age reigns', 'Career with Seven Children', 'We sing wonderful religious songs' and 'We say prayers at table'. In contrast, anyone who is 'off-side' in their family or sexual behaviour is condemned by Spektrum. For example: 'Single involuntarily', and 'When a Christian finds no Partner' (both No. 43/2004), female bishop 'in a lesbian partnership' (No. 49/2004), 'My Mammy is a Man' (No. 45/2004) or 'Homo Blessing' (No. 50/2004).

The third and surely the most important theme for Spektrum is, of course, the correct approach to God, the Bible, Faith and Piety. The enemy-images are enlightenment, rationalism and sexuality, the Evangelische Kirche Deutschland (EKD), which is considered too progressive, and Islam.

Spektrum again: On the occasion of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, it claims: 'What is missing here is a Christian', 'Where are the pious thinkers?', 'The pious scene scarcely influences the West: Models are missing' (all in No. 50/2004), 'Christians fights against porn' (No. 36/2004), 'It was theological liberalism that necessitated the evangelical movement' (No. 38/2004), 'against a falsification of the Bible' (No. 45/2004), 'The Protestant Church is neglecting Holy Communion' (No. 43/2004), 'Generalized maxims – for example from Antoine Saint-Exupery's Little Prince – are not suitable texts for official Church functions' (No 49/2004) or 'Bible readers know more' (No. 51/2004).

The non-German reader can best imagine Spektrum, both inside and outside, as a visually better version of the well-known magazine Watch Tower by the Jehovah's Witnesses. And there can be no doubt that that magazine is conservative, right-wing populist and Christian fundamentalist. So far, so good, one might say. After all, it is quite compatible with our understanding of freedom of speech and religious tolerance that the mass media represent completely different opinions.

The question of journalistic evaluation, however, arises independently of the question of political evaluation. And here Spektrum simply stands for bad journalism. There are two reasons for this. The first is 'polarization', meaning that Spektrum polarizes and dichotomises its contents in an unbearable way. The magazine accepts neither grey areas nor nuances, it mutilates complex problems rendering them in one-dimensional headings, it asks no questions but just gives authoritarian answers and therefore does not take its readers seriously. The journalism Spektrum embodies is rigid, closed, and dogmatic.

Another feature of its bad journalism is the provocative character of many of the headlines and texts. For example, the heading presents some insignificant event in such a tone as to suggest that the end of the world is nigh. Having caught the attention of the reader, the text can then criticize anything it wishes. Thus for example on the cover story of issue No. 37/2004 we read: 'Huge Gathering in Berlin. Left-wing students oppose Jesus Day'. This represents suggestive journalism insofar as the Berlin meeting of evangelical groups in September 2004 was small and completely insignificant, and there has been no left-wing student movement in Germany for a long time. And of course also the following heading is suggestive: 'Has AIDS got to do with sin?' (No 48/2004).

As in the case of all right-wing populist tendencies and their left-wing critics, the following critical questions and concepts apply to both sides.

1. With the demise of state-prescribed communism in Eastern Europe, concepts that were more universalist in scope became increasingly attractive in political and scientific debate. This applies

in particular to concepts such as totalitarianism, but also to others such as terrorism and fundamentalism. Such concepts are blind to differences. They constantly blot out ruling historical and cultural specifics. Colloquially, the concept of fundamentalism is mainly associated with Islam. People in Europe and the US who consider themselves progressive immediately contradict this religious functionalisation by pointing to the fact that even in the USA there are also Christian fundamentalist social movements.

Looked at theologically, all these claims are nonsense. The Koran is regarded as the word of God and not of man. For this reason, the Koran can only be read and understood literally. However, as the Bible is regarded as the word of man and not of God, it can be read and understood differently. Whoever reads the Bible literally is a fundamentalist. In other words: Only Christians, and not Muslims, can be fundamentalist.

2. Conservative populists like Spektrum give wrong answers to right questions, meaning questions that their left-wing critics and know-it-alls do not even ask. Thus the 'decline of the family' in the industrial nations of the north certainly cannot be countered with moral appeals for sexual abstinence before marriage, against Internet pornography and for Bible reading. However, it also cannot be pretended that the same 'decline' is not taking place.

3. 'Islam bashing' is 'in' at the moment in Europe. For example, in an election speech made in early February 2005, the conservative German politician Edmund Stoiber accused the Social Democratic federal government in Berlin of wanting to do away with the national holiday in Germany and 'introduce Mohammed's birthday' instead. In Europe 'Islam bashing' is to be found not only on the political right, but also on the political left. According to a report by the International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights (March 2005), 80% of Germans associate the word 'Islam' with 'terrorism' and 'the suppression of women'.

In the sphere of influence of the Protestant Church, Spektrum is not the only publication pursuing this frightening game of fear of Islam. And parts of the Catholic Church are doing likewise. In Germany this applies to the association Pro Sancta Ecclesia in Munich (www.pro-sancta-ecclesia.de), which has just initiated a Public Relations campaign against multi-religious feast-days, thereby disassociating itself from the official Catholic German Bishops' Conference.

At the European level, 'Islam bashing' is an essential component of the Catholic-leaning lay organisation Christian Solidarity International/CSI (www.csi.lu) or the magazine *La Civiltà Cattolica* published by the Jesuits in Rome. In the issue of 18 October 2003, Giuseppe De Rosa, S.J. wrote: 'Throughout its history, Islam has shown a warring and triumphant face; for a thousand years Europe lived under constant threat, and what is left of the Christian population in Islamic countries is still exposed to 'constant discrimination' coupled with periods of bloody persecution.'

We still have a long way to go on the road to love and hope – to put it in religious terms – and to reason and dialogue – to put it in political terms. The road itself is a good and necessary one, while Spektrum is an annoying obstacle on it.

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