

BÜCHER ÜBER POLITISCHES DENKEN IM ISLAM

Distinguishing Between Friend and Foe

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Executive Summary

The conception of the threat that Western industrial countries see in terrorism is dominated by their experiences with Islamic terrorism during the last few years. Attempts on the part of the West to understand this kind of terrorism are still very fleeting and inconsistent; there is a dispute over many definitions, and many explanatory patterns are ambivalent. Above all, many explanations are informed by enemy images whose rational ground obscures rather than illuminates. On the other hand, dealing with terrorism responsibly calls for addressing its apparent irrationalities. The distinction between friend and foe should not be recklessly used as a template but should be taken seriously as an immanent criterion of mutual perception.

The West needs to acquire a much more differentiated knowledge of the Islamic world to combat terrorism more aggressively and selectively. In this respect, studies such as Mr Steinberg's are not only important but even indispensable in the fight against terrorism. It still holds true that western values, western living conditions, and western political disputes are considerably better known in the Islamic world than vice versa. However, the collection of biographical portraits of leading political thinkers of the Islamic world published by Katajun Amirpur and Ludwig Ammann is highly welcome and appreciated. They show 'that Islamic aspiration and democratic terms of reference do not inevitably contradict each other'. The younger generation, and especially the women, are fully aware of their share of democratic responsibility. More importantly, more and more Muslim brothers are willing to demonstrate their democratic competence – currently, a marked change in their behaviour may be observed in several Islamic countries. Thus, the vital question is not whether Islam is 'modernizable', but which new forms and models of 'modernity' can be found here.

Furthermore, the two highly different books by Diner and Kermani show very clearly that not only Islam but also Christianity and Judaism are open to static, conservative, and reactionary thinking as well as to sophisticated criticism and progressive thought. Many of the negative phenomena which Diner attributes to Islam also existed among Christians in a similar form. One question remains: What does this book contribute to the current fierce discussion about how to live with and to deal with Islam? This debate has been setting off undifferentiated charges of hastiness in attempts at fraternization for quite some time now. What is needed, however, is a critical and even self-critical dialogue without any implicit negative prejudices or enemy concepts. Whereas Diner rather tends to increase the gap between the West and Islam, Kermani narrows it down. His book is sophisticated in as-much as it ignores all friend/foe categories existing between and often even inside the three monotheistic religions; instead, it addresses an issue with great intellectual openness, stupendous know-how, and self-critical distance which has haunted believers at all times: The problem of theodicy, i.e. the question of God's justification in the face of evil, sorrow and all the calamities of the world. He concludes by saying that a culture proves its strength especially in cases, where it does not leave radical criticism to outsiders but practices it itself, and where self-criticism is possible and even promoted institutionally.