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The West as ‘the big Satan’ and the Role of the Media

On October 23rd, 2008 United Netherlands organized a successful symposium entitled ‘Occidentalism and the Media’. During this symposium the famous philosopher Avishai Margalit was invited, to discuss the images of the West that exist in the East. Together with Mariwan Kanie, freelance journalist and researcher at the University of Amsterdam and Oscar van den Wijngaard, philosopher from Maastricht University, they debated the various aspects involving this topic.

Avishai Margalit introduced the term ‘Occidentalism’ in 2004, together with the writer and academic Ian Buruma. It refers to the stereotypical and dehumanizing portrayal of Westerners in the East. According to Margalit, movements of political Islamic try to depict a picture of the West as a corrupt machine that stands for the wrong values. Its inhabitants are not human beings and combining this dehumanizing picture combined with an ideology can have catastrophic consequences. Political Islamic movements use this picture of the West as the ‘Big Satan’ to recruit people for their cause. And although these movements do not want to conquer the world, they do want to make a so-called ‘bid’ on the world.

This dehumanizing picture can be dangerous, the philosophers agreed. According to Van den Wijngaard Occidentalism challenges the Enlightenment and our use of ‘reason’ as a means to discover the truth because the most important underlying claims, being the idea that ‘art is autonomous’, ‘ethics is universal’ and ‘tradition in itself is not authoritative’ are undermined by the concept of Occidentalism. “But is every form of criticism Occidentalism?” Although Occidentalism undermines our idea of shared humanity, the idea that every form of criticism is Occidentalism goes too far, said Kanie.

The different philosophers disagreed about the influence of the media in the conflict between Islam and the West. Van den Wijngaard stated that the media only responds to the demand of the public. It might support our prejudices, but it is questionable whether the media can actually create new conflicts. Kanie agreed that we cannot point to the media alone. “It is about power and influence in this world and not only about the image that is spread by the media.” Margalit replied that the images do have influence. “People die from lack of oxygen but that is not the explanation.” Especially in the Middle East, the picture that exists and is spread by the media plays an important role in recruiting people for the movements of political Islam.

During the debate the idea was raised that a dehumanizing picture in itself might not be of great danger. “Dehumanization does not mean I want to exterminate”, a member of the audience said. Margalit concluded with a metaphor, pointing at the relevance of ‘potency’. “If you fill a glass for 90% with water and for 10% with whisky, you might say you are mostly drinking water but you know it is the whisky that matters.”