Affect and Emotion in the Religious-Secular Divide

by Christian von Scheve

The above photograph appeared in the online edition of the German daily *Der Tagesspiegel*, in an article updated on September 21, 2012. The picture shows protesters in an unspecified German city who rallied against the release of the film "The Innocence of Muslims", an anti-Islamic film produced by Nakoula Basseley Nakoula.

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The film was widely perceived to be offensive to Muslims and has stirred both violent and non-violent protests on a global scale. Protesters complained that the film ridiculed their belief, was deeply injurious, and perceived as dishonoring and demanded – amongst others things – the film be removed from the online platform *YouTube*. The controversy was further aroused when some Western commentators claimed the film was protected by the right to freedom of speech and expression. The banner shown in the photograph reading "No to the freedom to offend" represents a further development in this controversy, claiming that the right to freedom of speech and expression must not include the right to insult and offence. But what, precisely, do these and related controversies – such as the Danish Mohammed caricatures, Rushdie's *Satanic Verses*, or *Charlie Hebdo's* cartoons have to do with irritation, dishonor, insult, injury, and offence? And is there anything specific to hurt *Muslim* sentiments, as these examples might suggest and indeed many in the public debates surrounding these controversies claim?

We may find some of the answers when interpreting the photograph within the larger context of the status of feelings, affect, and emotion in controversies arising between religious convictions and worldviews on the one hand and the principles and self-understandings of liberal-secular states on the other hand. Although there is a well-established tradition in many disciplines dealing with these issues from normative, judicial, or political perspectives[1], feelings and emotions have only recently attracted attention as an important dimension of systematic analysis.[2] Probably closest to this perspective is the literature on blasphemy for which the conflicts surrounding religious insult usually have a strong affective component.[3] Here, instead, I want to take a more sociological perspective that is not primarily concerned with the careful elucidation of an individual's actual phenomenal feelings, but rather with the discursive and political evocation and construction and the potential social ramifications of these emotions.

To uncover this role of emotions, a promising initial step is to look at how emotions are explicitly referenced in these discourses. For example, the controversy over a German *Leitkultur* vis-à-vis other, in particular Islamic cultures in 1998 (and again in 2015), the debate over the Mohammed caricatures in 2006, or discussions about whether Islam is an integral part of German society in 2010 all make frequent reference to specific emotion words. The Mohammed caricature and the "Innocence of Muslims" controversies in particular show the significance that speakers in a discourse ascribe to emotions and to their potential injury. Furthermore, the articulation of these emotions frequently becomes an essential part of collective mobilization, as is evident in the manifold protests against these artworks and political statements.[4] Emotions in these debates are often (self-)attributed to (collective) religious subjects as being (unduly) affected and suffering from hurt "religious feelings". Likewise, discussions regarding the adequacy and the legal status of certain religious practices, such as the wearing of headscarves, ritual slaughtering, or circumcision, are often framed referring to notions of anger, indignation and resentment in those being confronted with and opposing these actions, as well as notions of anger and injury in the defendants of these practices. The social repercussions of this discursive construction of emotion are manifold, and in the following I would like to emphasize two of them.

First, recourse to allegedly "religious" feelings to some extent constitutes a novel discourse beyond established political language and thereby contributes to the construction of (symbolic) boundaries and cultural identities and the formation of affective communities, i.e. the possible emergence of communal bonds based on similar ways of feeling and being affected in view of specific events and situations. Discourse on conflicts between religious convictions and secular self-understandings hence strives towards the establishment of particular – and antagonistic – "emotion regimes"[5] and repertoires. These regimes include the articulation of informal social norms and expectations regarding the "right" and

"adequate" emotional responses in a given situation, for instance a protest rally. As such, this discourse well fits existing understandings of how collective emotion are produced and fabricated [6], as illustrated in view of religious offence both historically[7] and in view of recent debates.[8]

Importantly, these framings also provide insights into the mutual constitution of "the religious" and "the secular" within this discourse. In line with the works of, for instance, Mahmood (2015) or Asad (2003), it becomes obvious how "the religious" is viewed and constructed only in conjunction with "the secular". Accepting the view that the secularism is no culturally or religiously "neutral" baseline from which a secular public views and appraises religious practices and beliefs, but instead is in itself an outcome of specific historical constellations that have led to ideas of the separation of state and religion, mostly in the Christian world, this discourse can be interpreted form at least two different angles.

On the one hand, when speakers in the discourse, representatives of Muslim communities or organizations as well as the secular critics of religion and Islam, ascribe religious pain and injury to "the Muslims", they do so in view of some secular "other", either subjects or state institutions, which are – willingly or not – portrayed as calm, rational, deliberate, and "affect neutral", to use Talcott Parsons's analytic category. In contrast, the Muslim subject is constructed as one with undue religious sensibilities from the perspective of representatives of the secular state. Affect and emotion hence are characteristic of the religious subject, and it is certainly no co-incidence that being "overly emotional" has historically been attributed exclusively to women in states of hysteria, i.e. in almost pathological conditions. Likewise, taking historical framings serious, "the emotional" in the Western world is traditionally seen as and sometimes even defined in its opposition to reason and rationality.

On the other hand, it is interesting to see that in cases where representatives of certain faiths demand changes in legal regulations, in particular concerning freedom of speech and expression, that put religious sensibilities under special protection and shall contribute to the recognition of Muslims, the *secular* subject is portrayed as highly affected and emotional. Politicians as well as self-proclaimed representatives of the liberal state tend to voice outrage, indignation, and anger in view of these demands. This likewise applies to cases in which certain religious practices shall be recognized, even though they might clash with legal rulings and existing religious privileges in some cases, such as the wearing of certain kinds of headscarves by public servants, circumcision, or the building of mosques. When Muslim representatives claim for the acceptance of these and other practices, "secular affects" are frequently aroused in the critics of these demands.

Second, I want to propose an understanding of these highly contested religious-secular constellations not by looking at the ways in which specific emotions are articulated in discourse, but at the specific *affective arrangement*[9] the discourse constitutes. Capitalizing on explicit references to feelings and emotions in discourse provides insights into what is said and written about contested religious-secular constellations in predominantly secular publics and about the emotions and sensibilities that go along with these constellations. On the one hand, this says very little about what individuals *actually* feel and experience in view of these debates. Analyzing discourse in terms of its symbolic contents reveals what speakers *say* how people are (or should be) affected by these debates. In fact, these statements and attributions can be interpreted first and foremost as political strategies to legitimate or de-legitimate certain claims. This might be effective in two ways. First, an audience might take these attributions of emotions for granted and make decisions or take actions based on these appraisals and modes of making sense of the world. Second, an audience might *take up* the attributions of emotions and make them, preformatively, their very own emotions. In the sociology of emotion, this "taking up" of emotions has been discussed in theories of collective emotions[10], collective emotional orientations[11], or emotion regimes[12], to name but a few. This would be one way in which discursive attributions of emotions have consequences for different forms of social action, for instance issues related to integration, belonging, or collective behavior, such as social movement participation.

An alternative reading would we be more substantially geared towards a Foucaultian understanding of discourse. Although the status of social actors is of course hotly debated within this framework, the concept of *subjectivation* includes the notion that discourse always contributes to the formation of subjectivities. In this understanding, one need not exclusively focus on explicit statements concerning the emotions that individuals might or might not experience, but on the consequences discourse brings about for forms of self-understanding and self-relatedness. In this regard, it is imperative that forms of subjectivation also encompass a bodily dimension, for which it is not so much language and conceptual thought that matter, but ways of being affected in a non-conceptual and non-symbolic sense.[13]

For this reading, the concept of affect rather than of emotion can be instructive. Although the concept of affect has many meanings in different disciplines, the understanding proposed here[14] is that affect is a "mode of being" and a continuous bodily orientation towards the world that has meaningful evaluative qualities. The orientation that affect provides is not achieved primarily through linguistic representation and deliberative thought, but through basic perceptual and evaluative capabilities of the body. Because affect is ubiquitous and continuous (like sensory perception), it is best thought of not as something episodic, but rather in terms of steady fluctuations along the different dimensions on which affect may be described or in terms of changes in the modes of being and the sensibilities and capacities to act. These fluctuations are caused by and have effects on other processes. Although they can be instigated by thoughts, memories, and other (higher) cognitive processes, they are equally well generated outside conscious awareness. Bodies

constantly register information from the world through their perceptual systems and hence constantly shift their affective mode. Mostly, this happens subtly, without subjects being aware of these shifts. However, as a matter of intensity, context, or relational position, we may become aware of these shifts and also attribute certain causes to them. Affect has effects primarily in its capacity to alter body's capacities to act. This can happen in various ways, through alterations to cognitive and perceptual processing, to the endocrine and hormonal system, or to autonomous and peripheral nervous system activity.

An affective arrangements is a "material-discursive formation as part of which affect is patterned, channeled and modulated in recurrent and repeatable ways. Such arrangements usually bring multiple actors into a dynamic conjunction, so that these actors' mutual affecting and being-affected becomes a vital part of the arrangement itself".[15] These notions of affect and affective arrangements therefore seem fruitful for an alternative understanding of the contested constellations of the religious-secular divide in many contemporary Western societies, because they open up a possibility to come to terms with their non-linguistic and non-conceptual dimensions. Taking this perspective would lead us to focus less on what *is said* about emotions or on how discrete emotions – such as anger, indignation, or humiliation – are represented, portrayed, or articulated in discourse. Rather, it prompts us towards the potential of a certain discourse to excite, arouse, and affect, i.e. on the *Affectif* [16] or *affective arrangement*.

Let us take the above photograph of the protests against "The Innocence of Muslims" as an example. This is of course part of a larger discourse that includes other images, written texts (by journalists, political commentators), speeches (by politicians, representatives of religious groups, social movement leaders), material objects (e.g., mosques, headscarves), and various symbols (Christian crosses, star and crescent, etc.). These elements of discourse and their specific relations contour the ways in which affect – as a potentiality – can be channeled, patterned, and modulated in recurrent fashions. They align multiple actors within a dynamic constellation so that their mutual affecting and being-affected becomes an essential element of this very arrangement. The above photograph then becomes important not only with respect to its communicative intent (demanding freedom from religious offence), but also regarding its visual properties. In conjunction with other (also historical) elements of discourse, the six women in a public space wearing hijabs contribute to the channeling and patterning of affect. Furthermore, the photograph associates certain bodies, material objects, and speech acts with certain ways of being affected, thus constituting specific Muslim subjectivities. These analytical perspectives have of course substantial parallels in Aesthetics, where affect is an established concept for the analysis of artworks.[17] Aside from the written text that refers to injury and offence, the visual properties in themselves hardly convey any specific emotions, not least because there is little to observe when it comes to facial expressions or specific body postures that are usually associated with emotions. Admittedly, analyzing the role of language as part of an affective arrangements is a non-trivial endeavor since affect is positioned as in some sense being beyond language and conceptual thought. However, a number of theories can be instructive here. Butler's work on excitable speech[18] offers ways of understanding the performative rather the conceptual and structural aspects of language and how they contribute to arousing, exciting, and affecting bodies. Likewise, the distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts points to the performative aspects of language in that certain sayings are actually *doings* – with rather specific affective consequences I contend.[19] Also, the work of Denise Riley (2005) on *Language as Affect* is instructive here.[20]

Other examples from controversies between religious convictions and the self-understandings of liberal-secular states can be found in the caricatures of Mohammed or the artistic ridiculing of the Pope during the Cologne carnival. Whether these actually elicit specific (religious) emotions is debatable and at least subject to empirical scrutiny. However, that these portrayals *affect* bodies in specific ways can hardly be questioned. Needless to say, different bodies will be affected in different ways, but as Wetherell (2012) and Seyfert (2011) have suggested, bodies "learn", during enculturation and socialization, to be affected in specific ways.[21] These "ways of being affected" (as a dimension of subjectivation) form the backdrop for any political or strategic attempt at inciting collective (religious) emotions I have outlined in the previously, and are essential elements for thoroughly understanding political cleavages such as contested constellations of the religious and the secular.

[1] E.g. Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in a Secular Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015); Martha Nussbaum, *The New Religious Intolerance* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012).

[2] E.g. Saba Mahmood, "Religious Reason and Secular Affect: An Incommensurable Divide?" *Critical Inquiry* 35, no. 4 (2009): 836-862.

[3] Austin Dacey, *Future of Blasphemy: Speaking of the Sacred in an Age of Human Rights* (London: Continuum, 2012); Rebecca Ross, "Blasphemy and the Modern, 'Secular' State," *Appeal* 17 (2012):3-19.

[4] E.g. Amélie Blom, "The 2006 Anti-'Danish Cartoons' Riot in Lahore: Outrage and the Emotional Landscape of Pakistani Politics," *South Asia Multidisciplinary Academic Journal* 2 (2008). http://samaj.revues.org/1652

[5] William Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

[6] Christian von Scheve, Sven Ismer, "Towards a Theory of Collective Emotions," *Emotion Review* 5, no. 4(2013): 406-413.

[7] Julia Stephens, "The Politics of Muslim Rage: Secular Law and Religious Sentiment in Late Colonial India," *History Workshop Journal* 77(2014): 45–64.

[8] Cherian George, *Hate Spin. The Manufacture of Religious Offense and Its Threat to Democracy* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016).

[9] Jan Slaby et al., "Affective Arrangements," *Emotion Review* (2017, in press).

[10] Scheve, Ismer, "Towards a Theory".

[11] Daniel Bar-Tal, "Why Does Fear Override Hope in Societies Engulfed by Intractable Conflict, as It Does in the Israeli Society?" *Political Psychology* 22, no. 3 (2001): 601-627.

[12] Reddy, *Navigation*.

[13] See Christian von Scheve, "A Social Relational Account of Affect," *European Journal of Social Theory* (2017), ePub ahead of print, DOI: 10.1177/1368431017690007; Jens Slaby, "Relational Affect," *Working Paper SFB 1171 Affective Societies*, 02/2016. http://edocs.fu-berlin.de/docs/receive/FUDOCS_series_000000000562

[14] See von Scheve , "Social Relational Account".

[15] Slaby et al., "Affective Arrangements," 7.

[16] Robert Seyfert, "Atmosphären - Transmissionen - Interaktionen: Zu einer Theorie sozialer

Affekte," *Soziale Systeme* 17, no. 1 (2011): 73-96.

[17] E.g. Simon O'Sullivan, "The Aesthetics of Affect. Thinking Art Beyond Representation," *Angelaki* 6 (2001): 125-135.

[18] Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

[19] John L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

[20] Denise Riley,*Impersonal Passion* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

[21] Margaret Wetherell, *Affect and Emotion* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2012); Seyfert, "Atmosphären".

Citation