

Sigurd Skirbekk:

The Immigration Debate:

A Question of Moral, Science, Ideology, Myth or Belief?

F. Anti-racism as belief

A myth can create an oversimplified picture that is easy to accept, since the myth shares the reality in two parts of disparate moral value. A choice between good versus evil is an easy one, theoretically (at any rate, provided the evil is portrayed grimly enough.

Myths complement ideologies. Despite this fact, myths are not necessarily sufficient to legitimize ideological thinking. A myth can exemplify and personify an account, with a strong appeal on the personal level. Nevertheless, to be socially valid, the myth must assume that what is good for one individual is also good for others and for society. This often turns out to be a dubious assumption, especially when seen in relation to a well-known sociological micro/macro problem statement.[1](#)

It is difficult to conceive of a culture based solely on logical reason and certain empirical knowledge and which, on such a basis, laid claim to a direct rendering of reality and a morally binding authority. In practice, all societies must institute certain forms of joint reality orientation and have faith that their interpretive cultures are propitious. This may be one reason why all surviving societies appear to have a religion[2](#).

We may be up against cultures with an explicit credo; but there are also societies with no explicit foundation for a belief system. But it is difficult to imagine a functional society with no common culture that is dependent on premises that are belief-governed. Where belief, myths and ideology are not explicit, this might necessitate approaching such premises on the basis of analyses of assumptions for ideas that are taken for granted.

The belief systems can be the kingway to «the ultimate values» in a culture, axiomatic assumptions that are not based on other values. Belief can appear sacrosanct, bounded by taboos and rites. The very nature of that which is sacred is that it is something that cannot be exchanged with anything else. The sacred is unique and exemplary, and cannot be circumscribed by comparative perspectives without losing something of its distinctiveness. One of the functions of a taboo is to prevent a wide-ranging relativisation.

Even New Liberal ideology (with liberty, equality and tolerance as the most important explicit values (must rest on several assumptions in order to be credible. The UN Declaration of Human Rights is apparently the closest we can come to a common statement of faith compatible with implicit premises of contemporary liberal thinking. But, this declaration lacks an overall grounding in a particular philosophy or science. Instead, it is framed by a preamble which, in forceful terms, depicts the perniciousness of not believing in the declaration. This suggests that we are dealing with something which could be regarded as supreme common values.

Public mention of human rights can serve to illustrate another typical aspect of our relationship to these rights. The preamble to the UN declaration has been spoken of as mythical. This is enlightening enough in many contexts, but it does not cover all uses of the declaration. Both the presumably self-justifying status of human rights and the casting of the articles themselves as taboos, suggests that perhaps we should regard the declaration as a manifestation of a belief system. Different rites, in connection with UN days and the like, only strengthen this conviction.

But, we must ask, where does anti-racism enter into this belief system? We could approach this question by asking what is the axiomatic prerequisites for the UN declaration and for the new liberal values that pervade the declaration.

The notion that all people are fundamentally created equal, and that human beings have an innate right to liberty and the pursuit of happiness, can appear strange to people with backgrounds in cultures other than those adapted to a contemporary variant of Western civilization. But in order to fit the mantle of indisputable values, human rights need a counter-balance that can put a stop to a relentless relativisation. This is where anti-racism comes in.

To the extent that a cult of the liberal values of liberty, equality and tolerance are tied to the repulsiveness of a specific opposite, we can conclude that many debatable issues will have to be avoided or be shrouded in taboos. Attempts at systematic comparative studies of the Holocaust with other genocides are repeatedly resisted on moral grounds. The Holocaust must stand as something unique (which, in a sense, it is. Nevertheless, there is a great deal of insight to be gained by comparative perspectives, by relativisation. When relativisation is perceived as a form of desecration, there is reason to believe that we are close to a cult with a religious content.

A number of researchers have come to see that certain issues in the migration debate has religious connotations. The Norwegian social anthropologist Inger Lise Lien, for instance, has written that «racism» in the public immigration debate has become a word used to label the demons among us, the impure from whom all decent people should remain aloof.³ And in fact, this characteristic has something in its favor. She could even have gone further and said that for many New Liberal interpreters, Hitler, racists and the Holocaust have become secular mental images of Satan, demons and Hell.

We could draw yet another parallel between religious terminology and the use of the term "racist": Let us consider the fear and foreboding that people of the 17th century faced when they were confronted with the research of their day, relegated to mechanical/physical explanations, which were designed to unite the incontrovertible part of research with a certain inherited form of theological order. This foreboding was apparently allayed when researchers could be defined as «heretics», i.e. relegated to a familiar, definable category. When a certain fear is linked to something we are sure of, something against which we can muster indignation, in the short term this can drift into a sense of security. The need for such a sense of security can even cause us to provoke others to assume the role of heretics.⁴ But this kind of security, in the long run, comes at a high cost, since it insulates us from participation in interpretations of continuous research findings. We have every reason to believe that the use of the term «racist» in our day has many functional similarities with the use of the word «heretic» three hundred years ago.⁵

The foregoing can appear to be an intellectual and subtle discussion of the status and assumptions of anti-racism. The activist groups, which most people associate with anti-racism, can appear to be anything but subtle, but rather animated by apparently simplistic motives. It is presumably fully possible to join anti-racist movements with the sole motive of identifying with something that appears to be politically correct, or in order to be a part of a collective that entitles one to demonstrate and to harass splinter groups that no one cares to defend.

All the same, it is an oversimplification to assume that we are merely dealing with people who seek legitimacy for finding an outlet for aggression. Behind the slogan «crush the racists», there might well be something more than a primitive desire to exercise violence. The battle also involves an element of being in a struggle for purity versus impurity. And since racism is something murky, anti-racism and the colorful community it purportedly represents, becomes an expression of what is pure.⁶

Essentially, there is something universally human about all this. To be able to live in a sinful world, we all (at least, now and then (need to be able to distance ourselves mentally from sin by seeing the impure as the opposite of that which is pure. We become dependent on a mental image of purity. For those who are unable to associate purity with something that surpasses common social life, the tendency is to seek purity in handy political categories, which totalitarian regimes have been good at exploiting. The image of purity can also assume the shape of a utopian world in which everyone loves everyone else, a world in which there are no wars. The struggle against impure racists can be perceived by anti-racists as a struggle for purity, just as opposing groups might think of their struggle against immigration from foreign countries in similar terms, and just as other groups once perceived the campaigns against the Jews as a form of cleansing.

Perhaps we have found the key to the third shrine (which hides the mystery that can explain why racism and nazism have been daily elements in the immigration debate for decades, while ecology, demography and civilizational problems have been conspicuous by their absence. If anti-racism is an element of a mobilizing ideology, in a myth that provides moral security, and in a faith that ensures purity, then it will be extremely hard for anti-racist interpreters to relinquish their situational understanding in favor of weighty analyses which only allow for morally relative dilemmas.

All this does not mean that "the racists" are right and "the anti-racists" are wrong. But it does mean that the indisputable intellectual and moral superiority often taken for granted by anti-racist groups, is rather dubious. No part in the immigration debate should regard themselves as having a moral and scientific position above what can be discussed. All parts should be open for opponents, when these can present serious arguments.

References

- 1 Cf. Hardin, Russell and Brian Barry (ed.) (1982): *Rational man and irrational society? an introduction and sourcebook*. Sage, Beverly Hills.
- 2 Berelson, Bernard and Gary A. Steiner (1964): *Human Behavior. An inventory of scientific findings*. N.Y. p. 385f.
- 3 Lien, Inger-Lise (1997): *Ordet som stempler djevlene. Holdninger blant pakistanere og*

nordmenn. (The word labeling the devils..) Aventura, Oslo, p 41 f.

4 One example of this is illustrated by the accounts of the immigration researcher Tore Bjørgo concerning anti-racists who have hounded members who attempt to leave racist groups, so that they have to stay within the environment in order to have protection.

5 Cf. Skirbekk, Sigurd (1993):" «Rasisme»: Avsløring eller tildekking", p 50 in Per Bakke and Per Saugstad: *Innvandring. Fakta og problemer*.(Immigration. Facts and problems) adNotam/Gyldendal, Oslo.

6 Cf. Douglas, Mary (1996): *Purity and Danger*. London.

[Back to main page](#)