

The Fight Against Radical Islam

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Let me take you back to a moment in October of 2002. I attended one of the first debates in Amsterdam about the September 11 2001 attacks in New York and Washington. The debate was organized by a publishing house together with a daily newspaper. The title of the evening was “Islam and the West: Who Needs a Voltaire?” for two hours. I listened to five of the six speakers propose a Voltaire for the West. The West was arrogant, imperialist and cruel and took without giving. America was most evil of all, was under the control of the Jews, and was responsible for all the conflict in the world today. It was too bad that innocent people were killed by airplanes in buildings, but if Americans did not want to be attacked again at home and abroad then they had to change their foreign policy. Islam was a civilization and the only source of peace. No Voltaire required there.

Only one speaker refuted these claims Afsheen Elia, an Iranian professor of law then at the University of Amsterdam, pleaded for a reformation of Islam and urged that Muslims must embark on a process of enlightenment. I was frustrated listening to the other five speakers talk of Muslims only as victims. I agreed with Mr. Elias and as he was outrageously outnumbered I joined in when the audience was allowed to, and supported him. I ended my plea with: “The West has countless Voltaires. Allow us just one, please.” Then it was time for the break. The organizers of the event and various other intellectuals and journalists circled around me and started to question me eagerly. Who are you? I am Ayaan. Ayaan, who? Just Ayaan. The rest of my names are difficult, I said. It didn’t seem appropriate then to take them through my bloodline. Where do you come from? Somalia. Are you still a Muslim? Of course. Dressed in trousers, head uncovered and holding a glass of wine in my hand, I was not a very convincing picture of a devote Muslim woman. “Well, a liberal Muslim,” I said. At the time I was not aware of the logical inconsistency in the compound word “liberal” and “Muslim.” Where did you learn to speak Dutch so fluently? I lived in Holland for almost ten years, I said. There aren’t very many places in the world where Dutch is spoken, I always thought when people ask me that question. Will you write for my paper an article in which you expand on your intervention tonight about allowing you Muslims a Voltaire? “All right,” I said. I sold my article to my labor party think tank.

They continued to interview me, publish my articles and so on. Weeks later, the guy who first asked me to write an article introduced me to a publisher. That was in early 2002. She asked me what I thought was the debate on the relationship between Islam and the West. I said, “Well, Westerners have developed stages of superstition, ignorance and cruelty towards societies that puts an emphasis on reason, knowledge and humanity. You have created manmade institutions and you repair them as time goes by. We Muslims haven’t done that. We live in tribes, we long for a Utopia. Our dream is to build a social order based on the Koran, follow the edicts of Allah and look to the prophet Mohammed for moral guidance, and achieve peace, harmony and

happiness while abiding to the laws of Allah. Clearly, we have failed and that is why we come here in large numbers. “It’s quite a journey,” I told her, “to let go of the pain of a society designed by Allah. You won’t understand. “You have to know it, you have to live it.”

“Tell me how you did that,” she said. I told her where I was born, of my family, how we lived and why I came to Holland. “That is the book you’re going to write,” she said. “Tell us about your own journey from being a member of a clan to how you have adapted to our society. Tell us what it is that you see as value in the moral framework you got from your parents, what you don’t like about your own way of life. Tell us what you don’t like in Holland, what you appreciate here and why. Ayaan, you overestimate the Dutch person,” she said, “no one has the time to read research papers on conflicting values and you’ll frighten your audience with terms such as empirical data, consistency and confusion. But your story will help give us an inside into a world that is closed to us.” My publisher continued “Do you think we know what goes on behind those closed curtains in Amsterdam West? We don’t. Those curtains will open if the girls who live behind them tell us their stories. That will create awareness, questioning and eventually change. That is how we Westerners change. We tell each other our intimate stories, our experiences of injustice and brutality and we share our methods of survival.”

She stood up and gave me books written by feminists in the early 20th century. She gave me books written by men who wrote in detail of what it meant to live in oppression, mental oppression inflicted on them by the father at home, the priest in the church and the policeman on the street. This was all well and good. I thought my publisher was a persuasive woman who cared about the world, but at that time I didn’t want to write a self-help book based on my life. I thought that was pathetic. I wanted to establish myself as an academic, as a thinker, as a researcher. I wanted to propose a theory, get about data gathering, make a case based on consistent arguments, draw conclusions and move on to the next assignment.

I felt lucky that the Wiardi Beckman Foundation asked me to look into the question of why the integration of large numbers of non-Western immigrants failed?. I gathered whatever had been written on the subject since 1979. I concluded that most researchers overlooked cultural and religious variables. I looked for and found theorists who took both these variables seriously. I concluded that for the integration of non-Western immigrants to be a success (1) a shift of mentality must occur from being a member of a tribe to becoming a citizen; (2) education directed at this shift of mentality must be put in place; (3) the best place to start is by the emancipation of women and (4) for all the above to be achieved the approach of multiculturalism must be dropped. Cultures are not equal, but human beings are.

For non-Western immigrants to live by the values in the Dutch constitution, they have to discard those tribal and Islamic values that are in conflict with the rule of law and I spelled them out. These were the acceptance of manmade laws, as opposed to divine dogma when the two clash, respect for the liberty of the individual, his life, property and choice of life, equality before the law, and equal opportunities between men and women, gays and heterosexuals. There was nothing original in my articles – everything had been said and written before, but all the same I generated great interest with my redundant articles and interviews.

When I wondered why the work of great thinkers, who were consistent besides being eloquent were not as much in demand, the answer always seemed to be—but they are men, and worse still they are middle-aged, and worst of all they are white. If I still looked puzzled after such remarks then the female or young male with unwashed hair who asked for the interview would be kind enough to elaborate and say, “You know they tend to be racist. Be careful they don’t use you as a

ventriloquist for their abhorrent ideas.” Apart from my publisher was my ever-decreasing Muslim Friends and family. “You are selling out”, I was told, “don’t hang your dirty laundry outside. You are a Bounty, “a Bounty is a chocolate bar that contains coconut on the inside, which is black on the outside and white on the inside. You are a Bounty I was told – white on the inside and with a disgusting black surface. “Defend the plights of women,” my father said, “but never bring it in connection with Islam.” You only want to be liked by the white people,” my girlfriends told me. The confusion of faith and religion went unnoticed. When I pointed it out I was accused of imitating the white, middle-aged male again and again. He was thankful to attack Islam as an outlet for his frustrated feelings. I left Holland and Europe with the impression that in the 21st century no misfortunate is greater than being male, middle-aged and white and very soon you might start a charity here in the U.S. to rescue them.

Ladies and gentlemen, this is the background to the telling of the *Infidel*. Nowhere in Europe can an immigrant on the left side of matters join in a debate on the most pressing issues of our times without having to join in the cause of victimhood. We, the immigrants and especially those of us who are Muslims, are victims of racism, Islamophobia, imperialism and most recently colonial feminism. Pity us and let us bring in our most backward beliefs and practices under the banner of multiculturalism or pay and perish, because your forefathers were slave traders, colonizers and racists; or, make public every detail of your life that might convince your peers. Talk about your journey to the West, try and recall your childhood, tell it so that we can understand it, put the face to the statistic—140 million women who have undergone genital mutilation is too much to stomach; one woman among us whom we see and relate to and who is one of us, having undergone that terrible experience, will move us into legislation perhaps. That was the reasoning. But then I ask: what about the United Nations reports? The immigration numbers, the excellent scholarly work of people like Bernard Lewis, the numerous NGOs, all out there in the Muslim land trying to help? What about the endless peace process between the Israelis and the Palestinians mediated by the United States? Kosovo? Bosnia? Victims here in Holland, France, the U.K., Germany, of honor killings, violence against humans in the name of Allah. What would one more story add to the numerous stories? My friends convinced me that it would be a story with a face, the story of someone we know, someone who made the journey and succeeded in becoming one of us with no mental or social despair. And, thus, I was elevated by my new-found friends on the left, catapulted from a recent graduate to icon. An icon of what? In debasing Islam and the treatment of women within the Islamic nations my friends on the left need a Muslim, preferably a woman, to agree or disagree with. A current debate on Islam and the West is not about the left and the right, it’s not about the conservatives and progressives or liberals. It’s a debate within and among liberals—in Europe, at least.

If you radically agree with Hirsi Ali you are an extremist; if you radically disagree with Hirsi Ali you’re an extremist, too. If you agree or disagree with me, depending on what I’m advocating, you are a moderate and interestingly enough this position is most common among my conservative friends. I often recall the evening on Islam and the West and who needs a Voltaire? What if I hadn’t opened my mouth, what if I just defended the good things about Islam? In *Infidel* you will read about my childhood from a tribal Islamic life to my 14 years in Holland as a resident and a citizen. My journey of emancipation from the notion of hell, from the stifling social control of the family and clan, my journey towards becoming an individual and, perhaps most interesting of all, my sexual self-emancipation.

It’s one story and as life stories go, very subjective. It’s not about empirical data but about life in this life, about prejudices and learning to discuss them, about an frightening adventure of putting aside the moral framework that my parents gave me and adopting those of the Great Satan

summarized in the motto “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.”

I am a happy individual and I am happy that I can share in all this wealth of knowledge and progress. But I am also sad. Sad that those humans who have inherited this social order, this civilization called the “West” with its values of human rights, curiosity, rationality, trust and integrity might stand by and watch its decline. To go back to the conversation with my publisher, she had a point—the *Infidel* seems to convince more than all the scholarly sweat of my mentors. It's a disturbing reality that citizens of liberal democracies will be skeptical of research results and allow themselves to be moved into a point of view. Westerners are good at self-reflection. If you ask me what I wonder about the most I would say “What happened to the temple of science and marriage?” Perhaps middle-aged white men, dead or alive, might have a point.

Thank you.

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