

BRAVE SOMALI WOMAN REJECTS ISLAM WITH A VENGEANCE

By Nick Gier

Read all my columns on Islam at www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/IslamPage.htm

Read about secular fundamentalists at www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/SecFund.htm



Ayaan Hirsi Ali (left) and actress in her film *Submission* (right)

Ayann Hirsi Ali is on a crusade against her former religion, claiming that Islam is inherently violent and is particularly destructive of the lives of women. In 2004 her anti-Islamic activism led to the murder of a Dutch filmmaker and resulted in death threats against her. Five years later as a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, Hirsi Ali still requires full-time bodyguards.

As a teenager in exile in Kenya, Hirsi Ali came under the influence of Wahabi Islam, which is officially promoted by Saudi Arabia and is embraced by jihadists around the world. She wore the hijab and attended meetings sponsored by the Muslim Brotherhood, the organization that assassinated Egypt's president Anwar Sadat and of which Hamas is the Palestinian off-shoot.

Hirsi Ali's father was a high profile Somali rebel leader. When he arranged a marriage to a prosperous Canadian Somali, Hirsi Ali reluctantly agreed. On her way to Canada in 1992, she had a lay over in Germany, and there she decided that she could not go through with the marriage. Slipping away from her Somali relatives in Düsseldorf, she boarded a train to the Netherlands. Once there she received political asylum, learned Dutch, became a Dutch citizen, received a master's degree in political science, and, incredibly enough, was elected to the Dutch Parliament in 2003.

While in a refugee camp, Hirsi Ali's fiancé finally tracked her down, and a group of Somali men from various European countries put her on trial right in her small house trailer. When she was asked why she could not marry the Canadian, she answered: "It is the will of the soul. The soul cannot be coerced." The men were stunned by Hirsi Ali's courage, eloquence, and theological acumen. To their credit these ad hoc Islamic judges ruled that what she said could not be disputed, and they left her to pursue her new life in the Netherlands.

The suicide attacks of September 11, 2001 were the turning point in Hirsi Ali's life. Contrary to all the evidence and reasoning, she insisted that the attacks were not result of Muslim extremists: "This was the core of Islam . . . [this was] not frustration, poverty, colonialism, or Israel: it was about religious belief."

All the major American Muslim civic and professional organizations rejected the idea that Islam could justify such an abomination. The governments of Egypt, Jordan, Syria, and Iran condemned the attacks. The King of Morocco convened a service of solidarity for the victims in the Catholic cathedral in Casablanca. At a soccer match in Iran, 60,000 fans observed a moment of silence for the victims.

There is some dispute about whether TV images of Palestinian celebrating in the streets were authentic (a German professor concluded that the pictures were not

related to 9/11), but the Palestinian Authority also joined in to criticize the attacks. Even the Taliban in Afghanistan condemned the attacks, but they claimed that Osama bin Laden, a guest in their country, had nothing to do with them.

There is simply no evidence to support Hirsi Ali's charge that the "vast mass of Muslims would see the attacks as justified retaliation against the infidel enemies of Islam." She took the isolated celebration of some Muslim school boys in the Netherlands as a sign of world-wide Muslim jubilation.

A 2005 Pew Research poll found the following percentages of respondents said that "violence is often or sometimes justified against civilians in defense of Islam": Morocco (13); Pakistan (25); Indonesia (15); and Turkey (14). With greater numbers of Palestinian refugees and Hezbollah supporters, Lebanon (39) and Jordan (57) had much higher percentages.

When Hirsi Ali read some of Osama bin Laden's writings, she was afraid to consult the Qur'an because she was certain that she would find the verses he used therein. This is not at all surprising. The pastor of the second largest church in my town cites Bible verses to justify that Southern plantation owners were right to hold slaves, that homosexuals should be executed, and that women should not be allowed to vote. (For more see www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/Wilson.htm) Following the Bible, the Puritan fathers of Massachusetts passed a law that disobedient children should be stoned. Fortunately, the law was never enforced, but it stayed on the books in the 1960s.

There are crazy Jewish fundamentalists as well. Referring to divinely sanctioned slaughter in the Hebrew Bible, Rabbi Mordecai Eliyahu declared that all Palestinians are responsible for the actions of the militants. "If they don't stop [the rockets] after we kill 100, then we must kill 1,000. . . If they still don't stop we must kill 100,000, even a million" (*Jerusalem Post* 5/30/07). The good rabbi needs

to be reminded that the Geneva Conventions prohibit collective punishment of civilian populations.

In 2002 Hirsi Ali denounced her Muslim faith and became an atheist. Christopher Hitchens, one of the “new atheists,” has taken up her cause. Writing the Foreword for Hirsi Ali’s best selling book *Infidel*, Hitchens supports her belief that there is no such people as moderate Muslims. Hitchens mocks Tariq Ramadan, the most famous European Muslim intellectual, as a fraud. For Hitchens and Hirsi Ali the only Islam is the Saudi Wahabi version, which is absurd as to saying that Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson are the essence of Christianity.

Hirsi Ali has debated Ramadan (you can see the debate on YouTube), and she, although very quick on her feet, is unable to refute the fact that Islam has a history of scriptural interpretation older than and just as sophisticated as the Christian tradition. As Ramadan has said so astutely: “Whenever you quote a verse, you are already interpreting.” One needs to know why the person is using the verse: what is the cultural and political context and for what specific ends is it being cited?

In her book *Infidel* Hirsi Ali claims that for centuries Muslims “have been behaving as though all knowledge was in the Qur’an, refusing to question anything, refusing to progress.” She knows that this statement is false because earlier in the book she dismisses out of hand the great achievements of the Golden Age of Islam. Hirsi Ali confesses that she “rolled her eyes and curled her lips” at a cultural history for which she should have some respect.

Medieval Muslim scholars preserved Greek medical and philosophical texts, and a Spanish Muslim Averroes was responsible for introducing Thomas Aquinas to Aristotle’s philosophy. A Persian mathematician gave us the word algebra, and he made substantial contributions in a field of knowledge not found in the Qur’an.

Historically, there were six schools of Islamic law, and the Muslim rulers of Mughal India (1526-1707) chose the most liberal school to apply in that country. Amazingly enough, Hindus and Buddhists were made People of the Book (usually reserved only for Christians and Jews), and persecution and temple destruction was the exception rather than the rule. Except for some extremists on both sides, today 140 million Muslims live in peace in with their Hindu brothers and sisters, and thousands of Indian Muslims recently marched to condemn the recent Islamists bombings in Mumbai.

I have called Hitchens and the other new atheists “secular fundamentalists,” because of their insistence that every aspect of human nature must be held up to the scrutiny of reason. As a result, they show no understanding of things of the heart and why people might find religious faith important to them. I agree with Hitchens that many religious doctrines are irrational, but that does not mean that we should disrespect people who believe in them, and then rudely call for them to give up their faith.

Reading about Hirsi Ali has given me a new insight about secular fundamentalists. Just as the religious fundamentalist maintain a literal reading of scripture, so, too, do secular fundamentalists. In their rejection of all religion they, whom one would think would be the last people to be this simple-minded, insist that scripture be taken literally. While it makes their critique of religion easier, I think it makes them look rather foolish.

Hirsi Ali tries to offer a parallel lesson from the history of Communism. She is correct to say that one cannot understand Stalin and Lenin without reading Marx, but her implication that Leninism is the only way to read Marx is false. In her studies in political science she must have read about the neo-Marxists, who claim that Communists misread Marx, and she must have also known about the founding of the Socialist International in 1861. The Marxists of this organization gave birth

to the Social Democratic, Labor, and Socialist parties, which have created some of the most successful governments in world history. Hirsi Ali's first real job was with the Dutch Labor Party, a member of the Socialist International. Just as there are millions of moderate Marxists, so too are there hundreds of millions of moderate Muslims.

In her courageous fight for justice for Muslim women in the Netherlands, Hirsi Ali has done much to advance their cause. Working as a member of the Dutch Parliament, she was able to get \$40 million for women's shelters. Her greatest victory was convincing the police to give full details surrounding the deaths of women. In a survey of two of 25 Dutch police precincts 11 of the female deaths were "honor killings," girls or women murdered because of extramarital sex usually not at their own instigation.

Hirsi Ali's most provocative act was to team up with Dutch filmmaker Theo Van Gogh (a descendant of the famous artist) to make a 10-minute film entitled *Submission*. The film features an actress on whose half naked body verses from the Qur'an are projected. The woman tells of being beaten by her husband, and then raped and impregnated by her uncle. She told her father about the uncle's first advances, but he told her to keep quiet so as to preserve his brother's honor.

Reaction to the film among European Muslims was understandably very negative. Two months after the film was shown on Dutch TV, Van Gogh was stabbed to death by a Dutch citizen of Moroccan descent. Using the murder weapon the man pinned a note on Van Gough's chest calling for the death of Hirsi Ali. Since then she has been on the run and in hiding, constantly being watched by the Royal Dutch Protection Services.

I first saw the film *Priest*, a sympathetic portrayal of a gay Roman Catholic priest, in Australia, and I was shocked to learn that the Church had succeeded in limiting the screening of the movie in the U.S. In stark contrast, however, is the

fact that the neither the Church nor even extreme Catholics called the death of its director or producer. Here is there is no comparison to the dangers of militant Islam.

In her debate with Tariq Ramadan, Hirsi Ali teased him about being just as handsome as bin Laden and wanted to know why he didn't have as large a following as the jihadists. Religious fundamentalists have a simple message that is easily understood, and the best preachers can play on the fears of their audiences very well.

Ramadan is a scholar and speaks with qualification and nuance, but still he draws large Muslim audiences in Europe and in moderate Muslim countries such as Morocco. Ramadan was instrumental in convincing 38 Moroccan clerics to finally agree to their king's recommendation that the death penalty, required by the Qur'an, be abolished. Muslims are willing to listen to his call for reform, but they are not ready for Hirsi Ali's extreme views and provocative challenges to their faith.

Hirsi Ali's views do, however, resonate with a growing number of Europeans who believe, sometimes with very good reasons (honor killings is one of them), that many Muslims have not integrated very well into their culture. Political parties with anti-immigration policies are gaining in the polls, and the Danish minority government depends on the votes of such a party. These serious problems, however, will not be solved by the extreme and misleading rhetoric of provocateurs such as Hirsi Ali. For a country that has protected the lives of free thinkers and religious refugees, including our own Puritans, surely the Dutch can forge a solution that finds a middle way between unqualified tolerance and hateful exclusion.

Nick Gier taught religion and philosophy at the University of Idaho for 31 years. Read his other columns on Islam at www.home.roadrunner.com/~nickgier/IslamPage.htm.