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## 'The Trouble Is the West'

Ayaan Hirsi Ali on Islam, immigration, civil liberties, and the fate of the West.

[Rogier van Bakel](#) | November 2007 [Print Edition](#)

It was a heinous murder that made the best-selling memoirist Ayaan Hirsi Ali internationally famous, but she was neither the victim nor the perpetrator. The corpse was that of Theo van Gogh, a writer and filmmaker who in November 2004 was stabbed, slashed, and shot on an Amsterdam street by a Dutch-born Muslim extremist of Moroccan descent.

The assassin, driven to rage by *Submission*, a short film Van Gogh had made about the poor treatment of women under Islam, left no doubt about his motives. A letter he pinned to his victim's chest with a knife was a call to jihad. It was also a death threat against Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a member of the Dutch parliament. She had persuaded Van Gogh to make *Submission* and had written the movie's script.

Then 35, Hirsi Ali had already seen plenty of turmoil. She had endured a heavily religious upbringing in Somalia, Saudi Arabia, and Kenya, including a brutal circumcision to keep her "pure." She chafed under the yoke of an embittered and sometimes violent mother and longed for a father who was perennially absent—often imprisoned or in hiding, due to his opposition to the Somali dictator Siad Barré.

In July 1992, Hirsi Ali defied her family's wishes, refusing to marry the man to whom her father had betrothed her. She fled Kenya for the Netherlands, gaining refugee status and finding employment as a cleaning woman and a factory worker. She assimilated quickly, learning perfect Dutch and studying political science, a choice that led to a job as an analyst at the Labor Party's think tank. There, to the consternation of her bosses, who had been courting the Muslim vote, Hirsi Ali worried out loud about Holland's ever-burgeoning immigrant community and the rising tensions between Muslims and the native Dutch.

In Rotterdam, the Netherlands' second-largest city, immigrants—mostly Muslims from Morocco and Turkey—had become a majority, with Amsterdam well on its way to a similar demographic sea change. That might not have been a problem, Hirsi Ali argued publicly, if the Dutch had only encouraged the newcomers to embrace the country's culture the way she had. But the country's multiculturalist mind-set, paired with the national inclination to tolerate almost any form of behavior, had led to minorities' ghettoization and to a certain lawlessness. Dutch Muslims were largely content to stay in the neighborhoods they formed together, Hirsi Ali observed. Raised on a steady diet of Islamic preaching and Middle Eastern and North African satellite TV channels, many of them rejected the Dutch way of life as hedonistic, even sinful.

Hirsi Ali wasn't shy about mentioning the Muslim community's self-imposed insularity, or the crime wave involving disproportionate numbers of second- and third-generation Dutch Moroccans. But mostly she agitated against the oppression of local Muslim women by male family members: forced marriages,

denial of education opportunities, domestic slave labor, and, in some horrific cases, honor killings. By extension, she criticized the native Dutch for turning a blind eye to the injustices in their midst, and for tolerating those who themselves refused to tolerate alternative lifestyles.

It was a shock and a revelation to see a young, black, Muslim woman championing causes previously associated with middle-aged white male pundits who had often been dismissed as racists or Islamophobes. Hirsi Ali's star rose quickly, especially after she accepted an offer from the VVD, Holland's pro-market party, to run for parliament. By then, she was receiving a stream of death threats from radical Dutch Muslims and their sympathizers. Once she won her parliamentary seat, the hate mail intensified. A security detail shadowed her everywhere. Van Gogh's murder proved the threat was all too real.

Throughout her parliamentary career, which lasted from 2003 to 2006, Hirsi Ali reaped both praise and controversy. She continued writing and speaking out in favor of free speech and the right to offend. 2004 was an especially turbulent year both privately and publicly. In May she swore off Islam and all religion. Van Gogh's assassination made her internationally famous, and she garnered a spot on *Time's* list of the 100 most influential people in the world and a European of the Year Award from the European editors of *Reader's Digest*. Even the readers of *De Volkskrant*, a newspaper that had long embraced unfettered multiculturalism, were enthralled: They chose Hirsi Ali as their Dutch Person of the Year at the end of 2004.

In May and June of last year, a tempest in a teacup erupted over her alleged truth-twisting at the time of her Dutch asylum application. (She allegedly used false biographical data.) Hirsi Ali had already decided to move on. The publication of her autobiography, *Infidel*, was imminent. Early whispers about a resident fellow position with the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative think tank in Washington, D.C., turned out to be correct. Hirsi Ali moved to America, and she joined the institute in the fall of last year.

In June, Hirsi Ali talked with the Dutch-born journalist Rogier van Bakel in Washington, D.C. Comments can be sent to [letters@reason.com](mailto:letters@reason.com).

**Reason:** Tell me how you came to the United States and the American Enterprise Institute.

**Ayaan Hirsi Ali:** I was a member of parliament back in the Netherlands, and my party asked if I wanted to run for the next elections, in 2007. I declined. Prime Minister Jan Peter Balkenende's cabinet was very precarious anyway; every two or three weeks we thought the government would fall, which would mean elections, which would force all of us members of parliament to think about what we were going to do next. So I had already decided I didn't want to run for elections, and wanted instead to go back to being a scholar. Cynthia Schneider, who was then the U.S. ambassador to the Netherlands, said she'd be delighted to take me around in the United States and introduce me—to the Brookings Institution, the Johns Hopkins Institute, Georgetown University, the RAND Corporation. I balked at paying a visit to the American Enterprise Institute, though.

**Reason:** Why the initial aversion?

**Hirsi Ali:** Because I thought they would be religious, and I had become an atheist. And I don't consider myself a conservative. I consider myself a classical liberal.

Anyway, the Brookings Institution did not react. Johns Hopkins said they didn't have enough money. The RAND Corporation wants its people to spend their days and nights in libraries figuring out

statistics, and I'm very bad at statistics. But at AEI they were enthusiastic. It turns out that I have complete freedom of thought, freedom of expression. No one here imposed their religion on me, and I don't impose my atheism on them.

**Reason:** Do you see eye to eye with high-profile AEI hawks such as former Bush speechwriter David Frum and former U.N. Ambassador John Bolton?

**Hirsi Ali:** Most of the time I do. For instance, I completely and utterly agree with John Bolton that talking to Iran is a sheer waste of time.

When I was with the Labor Party, I'd get into trouble because the party bosses determined that some of what I wrote, or proposed to write about, wasn't conducive to their policies or to electoral success. But at AEI there are no such restraints. As long you can argue it with some intelligence, no one interferes.

**Reason:** Religion is hardly inconsequential in European politics, but it's virtually a prerequisite for electability here: If you're not devout, forget about it; you won't be elected to public office.

**Hirsi Ali:** I'm not going to become president, and I'm not going to run for Congress. Your Constitution doesn't allow it. [Laughs.]

**Reason:** But do you feel at all uncomfortable with that heavy emphasis on religion in American public life?

**Hirsi Ali:** Yes. And the good thing is—and that's what I've tried to tell all my European friends—I'm *allowed to say so*.

I think that it's a great mistake for this country to reject a very good atheist. I mean, when you have two candidates, and one is an atheist and the other is a religious person and the atheist would make the better public official, it's a great loss not to elect him. Anyway, atheists here can forward their agenda and fight back safely without risking violence.

I accept that there are multitudes seeking God, seeking meaning, and so on, but if they reject atheism, I would rather they became modern-day Catholics or Jews than that they became Muslims. Because my Catholic and Jewish colleagues are *fine*. The concept of God in Jewish orthodoxy is one where you're having constant quarrels with God. Where I come from, in Islam, the only concept of God is you submit to Him and you obey His commands, no quarreling allowed. Quarreling or even asking questions means you raise yourself to the same level as Him, and in Islam that's the worst sin you can commit. Jews should be proselytizing about a God that you can quarrel with. Catholics should be proselytizing about a God who is love, who represents a hereafter where there's no hell, who wants you to lead a life where you can confess your sins and feel much better afterwards. Those are lovely concepts of God. They can't compare to the fire-breathing Allah who inspires jihadism and totalitarianism.

**Reason:** In *In fidel*, you point out many positive religious experiences you had as a Muslim. For instance, you describe Mecca's Grand Mosque as a place of vastness and beauty. You praise the kindness that you experienced there, a sense of community, a lack of prejudice. Are there times when you miss that aspect of being a practicing believer?

**Hirsi Ali:** I'd love to go and visit the Mosque in Mecca again, just for the sheer beauty of it, not for God—much the way a non-Catholic might go to Vatican City because of the beauty of the buildings and the artifacts. There's a sense of calm in such places that's wonderful, and there's the awe you feel

because of what humanity can accomplish.

But do I miss the religious experience? The feelings of belonging and family and community were powerful, but the price in terms of freedom was too high. In order to be able to live free, I've accepted living with the pain of missing my family. As for community, I experienced a very deep sense of community with my friends in Holland.

**Reason:** Should we acknowledge that organized religion has sometimes sparked precisely the kinds of emancipation movements that could lift Islam into modern times? Slavery in the United States ended in part because of opposition by prominent church members and the communities they galvanized. The Polish Catholic Church helped defeat the Jaruzelski puppet regime. Do you think Islam could bring about similar social and political changes?

**Hirsi Ali:** Only if Islam is defeated. Because right now, the political side of Islam, the power-hungry expansionist side of Islam, has become superior to the Sufis and the Ismailis and the peace-seeking Muslims.

**Reason:** Don't you mean defeating *radical* Islam?

**Hirsi Ali:** No. Islam, period. Once it's defeated, it can mutate into something peaceful. It's very difficult to even talk about peace now. They're not interested in peace.

**Reason:** We have to crush the world's 1.5 billion Muslims under our boot? In concrete terms, what does that mean, "defeat Islam"?

**Hirsi Ali:** I think that we are at war with Islam. And there's no middle ground in wars. Islam can be defeated in many ways. For starters, you stop the spread of the ideology itself; at present, there are native Westerners converting to Islam, and they're the most fanatical sometimes. There is infiltration of Islam in the schools and universities of the West. You stop that. You stop the symbol burning and the effigy burning, and you look them in the eye and flex your muscles and you say, "This is a warning. We won't accept this anymore." There comes a moment when you crush your enemy.

**Reason:** Militarily?

**Hirsi Ali:** In all forms, and if you *don't* do that, then you have to live with the consequence of being *crushed*.

**Reason:** Are we really heading toward anything so ominous?

**Hirsi Ali:** I think that's where we're heading. We're heading there because the West has been in denial for a long time. It did not respond to the signals that were smaller and easier to take care of. Now we have some choices to make. This is a dilemma: Western civilization is a celebration of life—everybody's life, even your enemy's life. So how can you be true to that morality and at the same time defend yourself against a very powerful enemy that seeks to destroy you?

**Reason:** George Bush, not the most conciliatory person in the world, has said on plenty of occasions that we are not at war with Islam.

**Hirsi Ali:** If the most powerful man in the West talks like that, then, without intending to, he's making radical Muslims think they've already won. There is no moderate Islam. There are Muslims who are

*passive*, who don't all follow the rules of Islam, but there's really only one Islam, defined as submission to the will of God. There's nothing moderate about it.

**Reason:** So when even a hard-line critic of Islam such as Daniel Pipes says, "Radical Islam is the problem, but moderate Islam is the solution," he's wrong?

Hirsi Ali: He's wrong. Sorry about that.

**Reason:** Explain to me what you mean when you say we have to stop the burning of our flags and effigies in Muslim countries. Why should we care?

**Hirsi Ali:** We can make fun of George Bush. He's our president. We elected him. And the queen of England, they can make fun of her within Britain and so on. But on an international level, this has gone too far. You know, the Russians, they don't burn American flags. The Chinese don't burn American flags. Have you noticed that? They don't defile the symbols of other civilizations. The Japanese don't do it. That never happens.

**Reason:** Isn't that a double standard? You want us to be able to say about Islam whatever we want—and I certainly agree with that. But then you add that people in Muslim countries should under all circumstances respect our symbols, or else.

**Hirsi Ali:** No, no, no.

**Reason:** We should be able to piss on a copy of the Koran or lampoon Muhammad, but they shouldn't be able to burn the queen in effigy. That's not a double standard?

**Hirsi Ali:** No, that's not what I'm saying. In Iran a nongovernmental organization has collected money, up to 150,000 British pounds, to kill Salman Rushdie. That's a criminal act, but we are silent about that.

**Reason:** We are?

**Hirsi Ali:** Yes. What happened? Have you seen any political response to it?

**Reason:** The fatwa against Rushdie has been the subject of repeated official anger and protests since 1989.

**Hirsi Ali:** I don't know. The British sailors who were kidnapped this year—what happened? Nothing happened. The West keeps giving the impression that it's OK, so the extremists will get away with it. Saudi Arabia is an economic partner, a partner in defense. On the other hand, they—Saudi Arabia, wealthy Saudi people—spread Islam. They have a sword on their flag. *That's* the double standard.

**Reason:** I *want* my government to protest the Rushdie fatwa. I'm not so sure they ought to diplomatically engage some idiots burning a piece of cloth or a straw figure in the streets of Islamabad. Isn't there a huge difference between the two?

**Hirsi Ali:** It's not just a piece of cloth. It's a symbol. In a tribal mind-set, if I'm allowed to take something and get away with it, I'll come back and take some more. In fact, I'll come and take the whole place, especially since it's my holy obligation to spread Islam to the outskirts of the earth and I know I'll be rewarded in heaven. At that point, I've only done my religious obligation while you're still sitting there rationalizing that your own flag is a piece of cloth.

We have to get serious about this. The Egyptian dictatorship would not allow many radical imams to preach in Cairo, but they're free to preach in giant mosques in London. Why do we allow it?

**Reason:** You're in favor of civil liberties, but applied selectively?

**Hirsi Ali:** No. Asking whether radical preachers ought to be allowed to operate is not hostile to the idea of civil liberties; it's an attempt to save civil liberties. A nation like this one is based on civil liberties, and we shouldn't allow any serious threat to them. So Muslim schools in the West, some of which are institutions of fascism that teach innocent kids that Jews are pigs and monkeys—I would say in order to *preserve* civil liberties, don't allow such schools.

**Reason:** In Holland, you wanted to introduce a special permit system for Islamic schools, correct?

**Hirsi Ali:** I wanted to get rid of them. I wanted to have them all closed, but my party said it wouldn't fly. Top people in the party privately expressed that they agreed with me, but said, "We won't get a majority to do that," so it never went anywhere.

**Reason:** Well, your proposal went against Article 23 of the Dutch Constitution, which guarantees that religious movements may teach children in religious schools and says the government must pay for this if minimum standards are met. So it couldn't be done. Would you in fact advocate that again?

**Hirsi Ali:** Oh, yeah.

**Reason:** Here in the United States, you'd advocate the abolition of—

**Hirsi Ali:** All Muslim schools. Close them down. Yeah, that sounds absolutist. I think 10 years ago things were different, but now the jihadi genie is out of the bottle. I've been saying this in Australia and in the U.K. and so on, and I get exactly the same arguments: The Constitution doesn't allow it. But we need to ask where these constitutions came from to start with—what's the history of Article 23 in the Netherlands, for instance? There *were* no Muslim schools when the constitution was written. There *were* no jihadists. They had no idea.

**Reason:** Do you believe that the U.S. Constitution, the Bill of Rights—documents from more than 200 ago—ought to change?

**Hirsi Ali:** They're not infallible. These Western constitutions are products of the Enlightenment. They're products of reason, and reason dictates that you can only progress when you can analyze the circumstances and act accordingly. So now that we live under different conditions, the threat is different. Constitutions can be adapted, and they *are*, sometimes. The American Constitution has been amended a number of times. With the Dutch Constitution, I think the latest adaptation was in 1989. Constitutions are not like the Koran—nonnegotiable, never-changing.

Look, in a democracy, it's like this: I suggest, "Let's close Muslim schools." You say, "No, we can't do it." The problem that I'm pointing out to you gets bigger and bigger. Then you say, "OK, let's somehow *discourage* them," and still the problem keeps on growing, and in another few years it gets so bad that I belatedly get what I wanted in the first place.

I respect that it needs to happen this way, but there's a price for the fact that you and I didn't share these insights earlier, and the longer we wait, the higher the price. In itself the whole process is not a bad thing. People and communities and societies learn through experience. The drawback is, in this case,

that “let’s learn from experience” means other people’s lives will be taken.

**Reason:** When I read Ian Buruma’s review of your book in *The New York Times*, I felt he wasn’t being fair to you when he wrote that you “espouse an absolutist way of a perfectly enlightened west at war with the demonic world of Islam.” But maybe that’s a pretty apt description of what you believe. Hirsi Ali: No, that’s not fair. I don’t think that the West is perfect, and I think that standing up and defending modern society from going back to the law of the jungle is not being absolutist.

I don’t know what Buruma saw when he went to Holland [to research Theo van Gogh’s assassination for his book *Murder in Amsterdam*], but Theo rode to work on his bicycle one morning, and a man armed with knives and guns took Theo’s life in the name of his God—and that same man, Mohammed Bouyeri, *wasn’t born believing that*. The people who introduced this mind-set to Bouyeri took advantage of the notion of freedom of religion and other civil liberties.

Samir Azouz, another young man in Holland convicted of terrorist plotting, attended a fundamentalist Muslim school in Amsterdam which is still open. He had maps of the Dutch parliament. He wanted to kill me and other politicians. He wanted to cause murder and mayhem congruent with the set of beliefs that he was taught in school using Dutch taxpayers’ money. Now go back in time a little. Isn’t it extremely cruel when you put yourself in the shoes of that little boy? He was just going to an officially recognized school in a multicultural society. Everyone approved—and now he’s being punished for it. He’s in jail.

**Reason:** One of the things in your book that struck me was that many of the women in the book made religious choices that seemed entirely free. Your childhood teacher, Sister Aziza, chose to cover herself “to seek a deeper satisfaction of pleasing God.” You described dressing in an ankle-length black cloak yourself, and how it made you feel sensuous and feminine and desirable and like an individual. There’s also the scene where many women in your own Somali neighborhood, including your mother, began dressing in burkas and jilbabs after encountering a preacher named Boqol Sawm. You and they apparently did so of their free will, without any obvious coercion. So what’s the problem with that?

**Hirsi Ali:** I really thought Sister Aziza was convincing, and I wanted to be like her. And she talked about God and hell and heaven in a way I hadn’t heard before. My mother would only scream, “Pray, it’s time to pray!” without ever explaining *why*. Sister Aziza wasn’t doing that.

But she *did* teach us to hate Jews. I must confess to a deep emotional hatred I felt for Jews as a 15-, 16-, 17-year-old living in Kenya. You almost can’t help it; you become part of something bigger. I think that’s how totalitarian movements function and that’s what’s wrong with them. You lose your faculty of reason. You’re told, “Don’t think for yourself. Just follow the leader.”

“Hate people.” OK. “Kill people.” OK, fine.

**Reason:** But I don’t think that you, at the time, would have said that you had lost your faculty of reason. Nor would your mother have copped to that. You and the other women believed you were all making a perfectly free, rational choice to dress religiously. And why not?

**Hirsi Ali:** Boqol Sawm is a Somali man who was offered a scholarship to go to Medina to learn true Islam. He was indoctrinated in Medina, and then he was sent with a message to go out and be a missionary, and that’s what he was doing and he did it voluntarily. No one kidnapped him. And he convinced a lot of people.

**Reason:** Isn't it all in the eye of the beholder? When you say he was indoctrinated, he would say, "I was enlightened. I was gaining knowledge of my one true faith."

**Hirsi Ali:** I agree with you. When I was with Sister Aziza I thought I was being enlightened. I wasn't aware of all the terms that we are using now: fundamentalism, radical Islam, jihadism, and so on. We were simply true and pure Muslims. We were seeking to live as true Muslims, practicing true Islam, which you find in the Koran. But it's a problematic ideology because it demands subservience to Allah, not just from believers but from everyone.

**Reason:** Having lived in the United States for about a year now, do you find that Muslims in the United States have by and large integrated better here than they have in Europe?

**Hirsi Ali:** Since I moved here, I've spent most of my time in airports, in airplanes, in waiting rooms, in hotels, doing promotion for *Infidel* all over the world, so the amount of time I've actually lived in the U.S. is very small. But yes, I have the impression that Muslims in the United States are far more integrated than Muslims in Europe. Of course, being assimilated doesn't necessarily mean that you won't be a jihadist, but the likelihood of Muslims turning radical here seems lower than in Europe.

For one thing, America doesn't really have a welfare system. Mohammed Bouyeri had all day long to plot the murder of Theo van Gogh. American Muslims have to get a job. What pushes people who come to America to assimilate is that it's *expected* of them. And people are not mollycoddled by the government.

There's a lot of white guilt in America, but it's directed toward black Americans and native Indians, not toward Muslims and other immigrants. People come from China, Vietnam, and all kinds of Muslim countries. To the average American, they're all fellow immigrants.

The white guilt in Germany and Holland and the U.K. is very different. It has to do with colonialism. It has to do with Dutch emigrants having spread apartheid in South Africa. It has to do with the Holocaust. So the mind-set toward immigrants in Europe is far more complex than here. Europeans are more reticent about saying no to immigrants.

And by and large, Muslim immigrants in Europe do not come with the intention to assimilate. They come with the intention to work, earn some money, and go back. That's how the first wave of immigrants in the Netherlands was perceived: They would just come to work and then they'd go away. The newer generations that have followed are coming not so much to work and more to reap the benefits of the welfare state. Again, assimilation is not really on their minds.

Also, in order to get official status here in the U.S., you have to have an employer, so it's the employable who are coming. The Arabs who live here came as businessmen, and a lot of them come from wealthy backgrounds. There are also large communities of Indian and Pakistani Muslims, who tend to be very liberal. Compare that to the Turks in Germany, who mostly come from the poor villages of Anatolia. Or compare it to the Moroccans in the Netherlands, who are for the most part Berbers with a similar socio-economic background. It's a completely different set of people.

And finally, there's the matter of borders. In America, Muslim immigrants typically pass through an airport, which means the Americans have a better way of controlling who comes in—a far cry from Europe's open borders. Forty years ago, when Europe began talking about lifting borders between countries to facilitate the free traffic of goods and labor, they weren't thinking about waves of immigrants. They thought of Europe as a place people *left*. America, on the other hand, has always been



an immigration nation, with border controls that have been in place for a long time. I know the southern border is difficult to monitor, but for Arab Muslims and Pakistanis coming to America, it's very hard to enter illegally.

Without passing any moral judgment, those are the differences between the two places.

**Reason:** Are you concerned about the efficacy of your message? Do you worry that, at least in the short term, you have exacerbated the miserable treatment of women under much of mainstream Islam by prompting moderate Muslims to turn inward to their religion because they *really* don't want to follow the path of the apostate Hirsi Ali?

**Hirsi Ali:** Young men now want to become terrorists in response to something I've written, that sort of thing? I don't think that is the case. If we continue that reasoning, we'll never scrutinize anything. Can we *ever* write? Can we *ever* criticize anything?

**Reason:** You write in your book that you would never have voted for Pim Fortuyn, the murdered leader of an anti-immigration party who had been considered a candidate for the Dutch prime ministership. I wonder what ideological differences you had with him.

**Hirsi Ali:** It wasn't an ideological difference I had with Pim Fortuyn. In the Netherlands, new parties provoke change; they're *shock parties*. They don't carry out policies. Also, Fortuyn had no experience and had an explosive temper. Don't get me wrong; he would have been a wonderful addition to the Dutch parliament, because rhetorically he was far stronger than all the other candidates. But I don't think he really wanted to become prime minister. He was only joking.

**Reason:** He was?

**Hirsi Ali:** I think he was. He was a flamboyant hedonist. To be a prime minister, you sleep about four hours a night. So anyway, I wouldn't have voted for him. I've always voted for the establishment.

**Reason:** You don't sound like an establishment-supporting kind of person. You're supposed to be a big rebel.

**Hirsi Ali:** Yeah, but there are rebels and rebels. There are rebels who are always *against* something, like the Socialist Party in the Netherlands. To them, rebelling itself is the aim. That's where they get their thrill from. But I'm rebelling *for* something. I *want* something to be established.

**Reason:** *Tolerance* is probably the most powerful word there is in the Netherlands. No other word encapsulates better what the Dutch believe really defines them. That makes it very easy for people to say that when they're being criticized, they're not being tolerated—and from there it's only a small step to saying they're being discriminated against or they're the victims of Islamophobia or racism or what have you.

**Hirsi Ali:** We have to revert to the original meaning of the term *tolerance*. It meant you agreed to disagree without violence. It meant critical self-reflection. It meant not tolerating the intolerant. It also came to mean a very high level of personal freedom.

Then the Muslims arrived, and they hadn't grown up with that understanding of tolerance. In short order, tolerance was now defined by multiculturalism, the idea that all cultures and religions are equal. Expectations were created among the Muslim population. They were told they could preserve their own

culture, their own religion. The vocabulary was quickly established that if you criticize someone of color, you're a racist, and if you criticize Islam, you're an Islamophobe.

**Reason:** The international corollary to the word *tolerance* is probably *respect*. The alleged lack of respect has become a perennial sore spot in relations between the West and Islam. Salman Rushdie receiving a British knighthood supposedly signified such a lack of respect, as did the Danish cartoons last year, and many other things. Do you believe this is what Muslims genuinely crave—respect?

**Hirsi Ali:** It's not about respect. It's about power, and Islam is a political movement.

**Reason:** Uniquely so?

**Hirsi Ali:** Well, it hasn't been tamed like Christianity. See, the Christian powers have accepted the separation of the worldly and the divine. We don't interfere with their religion, and they don't interfere with the state. That hasn't happened in Islam.

But I don't even think that the trouble is Islam. *The trouble is the West*, because in the West there's this notion that we are invincible and that everyone will modernize anyway, and that what we are seeing now in Muslim countries is a craving for respect. Or it's poverty, or it's caused by colonization.

The Western mind-set—that if we respect them, they're going to respect us, that if we indulge and appease and condone and so on, the problem will go away—is delusional. The problem is not going to go away. Confront it, or it's only going to get bigger.

*Rogier van Bakel is a freelance journalist and runs the blog [Nobody's Business](#).*

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