

Ayaan Hirsi Ali: Infidel and Champion of Free Speech

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AYAAN HIRSI ALI: INFIDEL AND CHAMPION OF FREE SPEECH

Ayaan Hirsi Ali is an activist, a former politician and a religious critic. In 2005, Time Magazine ranked her as one of the 100 most influential persons in the world. Hirsi Ali is the author of 16 books and is currently a research fellow at the Hoover Institution at Stanford.

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When I received this Quest topic, I remembered reading, just a few weeks prior, a Wall Street Journal interview about her titled: Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Islam's Most Eloquent Apostate. The religion she left was the Islamic faith. While that article was fascinating, provocative and perhaps even shocking, I could relate to no aspect of her life other than I am a woman, I believe in equality and I certainly believe in the freedom of speech.

As I was writing this paper, I was reminded of the Lemony Snicket books which many of you may know; they are subtitled A Series of Unfortunate Events. The narrator begins his children's books this way:

“If you are interested in stories with happy endings, you would be better off reading some other books. In this book, not only is there no happy ending, there is no happy beginning and very few happy things in the middle.”

If there is even a possibility of a good ending to today's story, my wish is to inspire you. Read one of her books, watch one of her recorded interviews or most importantly take action to support Hirsi Ali's advocacy for women across the globe as she fights against female genital mutilation, child marriage and honor violence.

This will be a difficult paper to hear.

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I've divided my talk into four parts using some of her book titles as guideposts: Nomad - an autobiography of Hirsi Ali's life from Mogadishu to the United States. Infidel - a book which tracks her journey of examining Islam and the Quran. And her 2015 book, Heretic which proposes a path forward in reforming Islam which must begin, she believes, with free speech.

Let us ask ourselves as Hirsi Ali does: what will be achieved in this world, if she and others were truly allowed the freedom of speech?

Hirsi Ali strives to inform western liberal thought about the Muslim world and she believes free speech is essential to this endeavor.

I will quote from her books liberally today as she is well capable of telling her own story so well and concisely.

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Let me open with Hirsi Ali speaking frankly about her former religion; this comes from the Australian newspaper The Guardian from 2017:

“It’s all about freedom. I see radical Islam as an ideology that is hostile to individual freedom. It’s an ideology that seeks to govern the relationship between the individual and God, between men and women, between believers and unbelievers, and it’s got very rigid lines about what people should and should not do.” (Guardian April 2, 2017)

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As Nomad begins Hirsi Ali is 5 and can recite her bloodline back 300 years. Maintaining the honor of one’s clans and sub-clans keeps one safe her grandmother advised. But, it is solely the male lineage that is of value.

Hirsi Ali’s mother, Asha, married at 18 in an arranged union; she divorced and moved to the Somali capitol, Mogadishu.

Asha met and married Hirsi Ali’s father Hirsi Magan Isse. Magan Isse studied at Columbia University in New York and then returned to the African nation to teach reading and writing. Literacy, he felt, was necessary for a successful nation.

Ayaan's father was a descendant of a warrior clan and described as a revolutionary; he drifted in and out of Ayaan's life.

Hirsi Ali's mother and grandmother essentially headed this household. Ayaan began traditional school and also Quran school at the age of 5 where the students made their own writing materials and wrote the Arabic alphabet on boards. She began learning the Quran, memorizing it line by line.

Ayaan's grandmother took charge when both parents were away and while neither of Ayaan's parents believed in what we call female genital mutilation, she ordered her grandchildren made "pure".

From *Infidel*, Ayaan writes:

"In Somalia, like many countries across Africa and the Middle East, little girls are made 'pure' by having their genitals cut out. There is no other way to describe the procedure, which typically occurs around the age of five. After the child's clitoris and labia are carved out, scraped off, or, in more compassionate areas, merely cut or pricked, the whole area is often sewn up, so that a thick band of tissue forms a chastity belt made of the girls' own scarred flesh. A small hole is carefully situated to permit a thin flow of pee. Only great force can tear the scar tissue wider, for sex." (p 31 *Infidel*)

And Ayaan continues talking about her grandmother:

“She caught hold of me and gripped my upper body in the same position as she had put Mahad. Two other women held my legs apart. The man, who was probably an itinerant traditional circumciser from the blacksmith clan, picked up a pair of scissors. With the other hand, he caught hold of the place between my legs and started tweaking it, like Grandma milking a goat.

Then the scissors went down between my legs and the man cut off my inner labia and clitoris. I heard it, like a butcher snipping the fat off a piece of meat. A piercing pain shot up between my legs, indescribable, and I howled. Then came the sewing: the long, blunt needle clumsily pushing into my bleeding outer labia, my loud and anguished protests, Grandma’s words of comfort and encouragement.” (p 32 Infidel)

From Somalia, the family moved to Saudi Arabia, “God’s country” according to Ayaan’s mother. While praying was a bit haphazard in Somalia, it became more strict in this Muslim country. Praying five times daily was instituted. Men and women were segregated at prayer.

While genders were separated at Mosques, even at home, females were to stand behind males at prayers. Ayaan asked the unanswerable question, “Why?”

“Allah wills it,” her father advised.

“But why does Allah will it?”

As we are aware, women are not allowed out of the house without a male relative accompanying them. In September, 2017, Saudi Arabia permitted women to drive cars. Drivers’ licenses will be issued in June of this year; at that time, the women will be free to ask permission of a male before they can drive.

Ayaan was beginning to focus on the inequality of women in the Muslim faith.

In 1979, the family was deported first to Ethiopia and then finally moved to Kenya. These “unbeliever” countries housed people Ayaan’s mother and grandmother described as “cannibals, filthy, slave and infidels”.

During these years, these nomadic children learned multiple languages. In Kenya, school was in English. For the first time, Ayaan, at the age of 10 was taught how to tell and understand time. The school library offered her a whole new world brought to her through books. Starting with Nancy Drew, 1984, and Huckleberry Finn; her reading continued on to Valley of the Dolls and Danielle Steel books.

But more important than her exposure to western novels was her exposure to Western ideas...

In *Infidel* she writes, “races were equal, women were equal to men - and concepts of freedom, struggle, and adventure that were new to me.” (p 69 *Infidel*.)

Probably the last influential religious person in Ayaan's life was Sister Aziza, a Kenyan Islamic teacher. Sister Aziza's softer approach was more compelling and Ayaan began to pray five times daily.

So that men had no impure thoughts, which would be the woman's fault, Ayaan was encouraged to cover her entire body; the tapping of a women's heels was forbidden, perfumes and scents were next. The sequela, naturally, was to not leave the house so a woman has no contact with men. Ayaan also chose to cloak herself as Sister Aziza did.

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Ayaan writes:

“A Muslim girl does not make her own decisions or seek control She is trained to be docile. If you are a Muslim girl, you disappear, until there is almost no you inside you. In Islam, becoming an individual is not a necessary development; many people, especially women, never develop a clear individual will. You submit: that is the literal meaning of the word islam: submission. The goal is to become quiet inside, so that you never raise your eyes, not even inside your mind.” (p 94 Infidel)



At 17, Ayaan began thinking deeper and questioning Islam. She wanted to make sure Islam was true. Her discomfort with the religion included that it was anti-Western and its goal was for a global Islamic government.

Ayaan and her younger sister attended secretarial school so that one day they would be able to support themselves; they read novels and attended cinemas and skipped Islamic debates. It was during this time when Ayaan witnessed a stoning for the first time and coincidentally in 1989, a price was put on former Muslim Salman Rushdie's head for writing the novel *Satanic Verses*; Ayaan felt that fatwa to be just.

Hirsi Ali had a brief secret first marriage. In 1992, Ayaan's seldom seen father announced he had arranged a marriage to someone of their same tribe - a Somali raised in Canada. The marriage did not require Ayaan to be present at the rite. The men celebrated alone after the ceremony. Ayaan's father instructed her on how to be a good wife which included asking permission to leave the house and always be sexually available.

En route to Canada, Ayaan flew initially to Frankfurt then Dusseldorf while awaiting the visa that would permit her travel. A bathroom, running hot water, clean streets, named streets, uncovered women and calm were all a surprise. Bonn was the next stop and it was there that Hirsi Ali thought of escaping the life she was born into.

Ayaan thinks of July 24, 1992 as her real birthday for it was the day she boarded a train to Amsterdam. She was not escaping Islam nor looking for democracy but looking to go to a place where she could make decisions for herself.

While she changed her last name to avoid her family finding her, Ayaan also changed her story with the Dutch Immigration System so she could gain refugee status. An arranged marriage was not reason enough to seek asylum, but fear of persecution in a native land was needed so she claimed it.

Her arrival in the Netherlands brought shedding of the headscarf. It brought her in contact with Christians who seemed to have a dialogue with their God which contrasted with the submission or fear she learned in Islam.

She relates that the freedom of expression and freedom to think was unknown to her until her arrival in Holland. Questioning, in fact, was encouraged.

Hirsi Ali learned the rule of law and gained the ability to speak to her own truth and even to men in her own clan. One job that greatly influenced her was working as an interpreter where she heard and translated stories of immigrants who had not assimilated in to Dutch society. She writes:

“Holland’s multiculturalism - its respect for Muslims’ way of doing things - wasn’t working. It was depriving many women and children their rights. Holland was trying

to be tolerant for the sake of consensus, but the consensus was empty. The immigrants' culture was being preserved at the expense of their women and children and to the detriment of the immigrants' integration into Holland." (p 246 Infidel)

Hirsi Ali sees the future of unassimilated migrants as an abusive one filled with misery and poverty. She became intrigued with immigration and integration. She cited a newspaper article, considered controversial at the time. In part, it said:

"...a new ethnic underclass immigrants had formed, and it was much too insular, rejecting the values that knit together Dutch society and creating new, damaging social divisions. There wasn't enough insistence on immigrants adapting; teachers even questioned the relevance of teaching immigrant children Dutch history, and a whole generation of these children were being written off under a pretense of tolerance." (p 261-262 Infidel)

From Nomad (p 261) she writes:

"In the real world, equal respect for all cultures doesn't translate into a rich mosaic of colorful and proud peoples interacting peacefully while maintaining a delightful diversity of food and craftwork. It translates into closed pockets of oppression, ignorance, and abuse."

And Hirsi Ali's words from Heretic:

“...we who have the luxury of living in the West have an obligation to stand up for liberal principles. Multiculturalism should not mean that we tolerate another culture's intolerance. If we do in fact support diversity, women's rights, and gay rights, then we cannot in good conscience give Islam a free pass on the grounds of multicultural sensitivity.” (p 28 Heretic)

Hirsi Ali tested into the University of Leiden where she was taught critical thinking skills. Her questioning came to a head as she listened to an imam on TV who was explaining why Moroccan boys were harassing gay schoolteachers. Hirsi Ali writes about the Arabic speaking imam:

“He looked at the camera with great authority and explained that homosexuality was a contagious disease that could infect schoolchildren. It was, he said, a threat to humanity.” (p 266 Infidel)

In protest, Hirsi Ali wrote an opinion piece to this news service saying this imam's viewpoint was:

“...systemic in Islam, because this was a religion that had never gone through a process of Enlightenment that would lead people to question its rigid approach to individual freedom.” (p 266 Infidel)

From that point on Hirsi Ali became an outspoken infidel and later elected to be a member of the Dutch parliament. She described herself as prejudiced against America but on September 11, 2001, she found herself hoping the perpetrators of the US attack were not Muslims. In her town of Ede, she watched Muslim kids celebrating the 9/11 attacks. On September 12, while talking to a former university teacher and Labor Party member who dismissed the idea that the attack was brought on by Islam. Hirsi Ali countered:

“But it is about Islam. This is based in belief. This is Islam.” (p 268 Infidel)

“The Muslim mind needs to be opened. Above all, the uncritical Muslim attitude toward the Quran urgently needs to change, for it is a direct threat to world peace.”  
(p 205 Nomad)

She continued:

“I have to wake these people up....It was not a lunatic fringe who felt this way about America and the West. I knew that a vast mass of Muslims would see the attacks as justified retaliation against the infidel enemies of Islam. War had been declared in the name of Islam, my religion, and now I had to make a choice. Which side was I on?”

( p 269 Infidel)

Hirsi Ali met Dutch movie director Theo Van Gogh in February of 2003; the New York Times described Van Gogh as a critic of the “conservative Muslim clergy for perpetuating views that are anti-woman and anti-homosexual”.

By August, 2004 a script written by Hirsi Ali, directed by Van Gogh was aired. The 10 minute film titled Submission: Part One depicted women and their relationship to Islam with verses of the Quran written on their bodies.

Sixty-five days later, Van Gogh was found in the street shot multiple times. A large knife was struck through Van Gogh’s body. A second smaller knife with a note attached was also found on his body. It was a threat to Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s life. She continues, to this day, to be surrounded by bodyguards as she has had multiple fatwas on her head.

Several years later, Hirsi Ali accepted a job at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington, DC where again, she was grateful and amazed to be able to think, read, write and attend discussion by scholars from all disciplines. In 2013, she took the oath to become a US citizen.

Her revelation about life in the US is that it is the American family who is at the core of the nation. Not a clan. From a diverse population, there is unity. She says,

“That for me is America: a large family where anyone can belong, so long as you accept those values.” (p 18 Heretic)

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While once an adherent to the Islamic faith, a practitioner, Hirsi Ali feels qualified to speak of her knowledge and experience living in Muslim societies and even Mecca. The Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) feels otherwise. She has repeatedly been disinvited to speak oftentimes on college campuses. Change.org accused her of “hate speech” petitioning against her scheduled speech and receipt of an honorary degree at Brandeis. Others describe her expression of views as “hate mongering”.

In 2012 she was invited to teach Islamic Political Theory at Harvard. She estimated about half of her students were Muslim; those students routinely questioned her every statement and her right to say it. She wondered how these educated Harvard students thought questioning Islam was to blaspheme it. Hirsi Ali suggests the imagined threat to Islam starts with inquiry which leads to doubt which naturally would lead to reformation.

But for now, the Quran cannot be criticized because it is thought to be perfect and deserves literal reading.

And while Hirsi Ali promotes individual rights, human rights, the groups she feels would be most supportive, women and gays, she is surprised by their opposition to her and her questioning the faith. Those who promote tolerance are intolerant even to her voicing her views. Hirsi Ali feels the suppression of free speech is second only to the suppression of thought.

Hirsi Ali notes that in Saudi Arabia churches and synagogues are outlawed. In Iran, homosexuals may be hanged for their crimes while in Brunei “homosexuality is punishable by death”.

She questions why Islam has not experienced a reformation of its own as did the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century.

More recently Hirsi Ali says she feels the need to re-engage with Islam to aid reformation of the religion. Her desire is that we, in the west, become educated about political Islam or Islamism the ultimate goal of which is Sharia Law for everyone. Sharia courts are now operational in the UK.

In Heretic she lays out five practices that she feels should be reformed in the faith (p 24 Heretic)

1. Muhammed’s semi-divine and infallible status along with the literalist reading of the Quran

Seeing Mohammed as infallible and above mortal critique or criticism was most likely the ignitor of the massacre at the office of Charlie Hebdo, a French satirical weekly magazine. The publication routinely features cartoons and jokes about Catholics and Jews alike.

Muhammed had been on their most wanted list. The editor-in-chief once said, “We have to carry on until Islam is rendered as banal as Catholicism.”



On January 7, 2015, after a history of publishing cartoons lampooning Muhammed, 12 people in the Charlie Hebdo office were gunned down.

Also needing reformation:

2. The investment in life after death instead of life before death;

Hirsi Ali says the obsession with martyrdom is a key to the problem. Child martyrs are not uncommon. Golda Meir, you may recall looked at another side of that same coin; she said, “We will only have peace with the Arabs when they love their children more than they hate us.”

3. Sharia, the body of legislation derived from the Quran, the hadith, and the rest of Islamic jurisprudence;

Zuhdi Jasser, internal medicine physician in Phoenix and founder of the American Islamic Forum for Democracy, uses the phrase: “separation of mosque and state”. A devout Muslim, Dr. Jasser is outspoken on “political Islam”.

Today, Hirsi Ali speaks extensively about Dawa (D-A-W-A) defined as a “political ideology wrapped in a religion”. Without separation of church and state as the US has

defined it, religious leaders are above the law.

4. The practice of empowering individuals to enforce Islamic law by commanding right and forbidding wrong;

From Nomad, Hirsi Ali writes:

“The Muslim mind needs to be opened. Above all, the uncritical Muslim attitude toward the Quran urgently needs to change for it is a direct threat to world peace. Today 1.57 billion people identify themselves as Muslims. Although they certainly have 1.57 billion different minds, they share a dominant cultural trend: the Muslim mind today seems to be in the grip of jihad. (p 206 Nomad)

5. The imperative to wage jihad, or holy war

Maajid Nawaz, himself a former jihadist, says prisons are jihadi training camps. He blames political correctness in prisons as there is unsupervised worship where prison guards are encouraged to leave the room.

Is Hirsi Ali’s five point plan a modest proposal? Perhaps.

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Finally, we turn to Ayaan Hirsi Ali's work today.

There are an estimated 513,000 girls in the US at risk of female genital mutilation according to the CDC.

Many of you may recall the Detroit, Michigan case last year where two doctors were arrested for practicing female genital mutilation on young girls. These two 7 year olds were brought to Michigan from Minnesota according to Chicago Tribune writer John Kass. If practiced on girls under the age of 18, it is a federal crime, made so in 1996 with a penalty of five years imprisonment. Female genital mutilation is not currently a crime in Indiana nor in 23 other US states.

A UK Independent News Service story reminds us that the New York Times editors banned the term "female genital mutilation" stating it was too "culturally loaded".

The United Nations, while reporting on this downward trend of the practice, calls for its complete elimination by 2030 as it is considered a human rights violation.

Hirsi Ali's second focal point: child marriage. NPR's Nurith Aizenman reports that in the US, between the years 2000 and 2015, more than 200,000 children, mostly girls younger than 18, were married. Twenty-five states do not have a minimum age for marriage. "Girls not brides" is the catch phrase for what is considered, by a growing number of people, to be another human rights violation.

Sweden legalized child marriage ONLY for immigrants; the legal age for Sweden's natives remains 18. One Sunday Express headline read, "Marriage is for ADULTS with the subheading Sweden hit by huge number of child brides as young as ELEVEN".

"Bring back our girls" was the rallying cry for the hundreds of kidnapped little ones in Nigeria in 2014; the girls were captured as a commodity to sell into marriage. Abubakar Shekau leader of the Boko Haram militant group who said the girls were abducted so, "we would marry them out at the age of 9."

The age of statutory rape, or the age when individuals are too young to consent to sexual activity, in New Jersey is aged 15 or younger. That state recorded 177 child marriages of girls between the ages of 12 and 15 during the years 1995-2012. The girls, primarily, were marrying much older men.

From these child marriages, unhealthy, unsustainable and sometimes life-threatening pregnancies result. In some of these situations, gynecological health of the girl may be compromised for a lifetime. In this population, girls receive less education, are less employable and hence less able to support themselves.

Hirsi Ali's third focus is honor violence. The New York Times writer, William Grimes, highlights one of Hirsi Ali's initiatives while in the Netherlands; she lobbied the powers to record honor killings something the country was reluctant to do. She was allowed to conduct a

pilot project in just two police divisions; she found 11 girls had been murdered by their families in a single year.

Unfortunately, honor killings and honor violence are not limited to foreign lands.

In Phoenix, 2009, Hirsi Ali writes, Nool al-Maleki, age 20, was run over by a jeep. Driven by her father. His daughter had refused to accept an arranged marriage.

In Irving, Texas, Sarah Said, age 17, was heard on a 911 call she made; she is begging for her life. She and her 18 year old sister were found shot to death in the back of their father's taxi. They had rejected his plans for arranged marriages. He felt they had become too American.

No official statistics are kept in the US but it is estimated approximately 27 honor murders occur annually.

According to the Arab Human Development Report of the UN, in a civil society you measure three things: political freedom, education and the status of women.

While each of those may overwhelm our thinking, Hirsi Ali asks: What can we NOT tolerate?

The oppression of half of humanity. (p 210 Heretic)

And in Hirsi Ali's desire for Islam to undergo a reformation, she now distinguishes between Islam, the religion and political Islam or "Islamism" which she feels undermines a free society.

Again, she emphasizes the term “dawa” a “political ideology wrapped in a religion”. Sharia Law is the ultimate goal of Islamism.

Finally, from the book Nomad, Hirsi Ali in the freest of speech says (p 212):

Here is something I have learned the hard way, but which a lot of well-meaning people in the West have a hard time accepting: All human beings are equal, but all cultures and religions are not.

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