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## **The Enlightenment in Contemporary Cultural Debate**

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## CHAPTER TEN

### THE ENLIGHTENMENT IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL DEBATE

Paul Cliteur and Geoff Gordon

Everywhere in the world there seems to be a new orientation on religion as an important political factor. "Whoever misunderstands religion, does not understand politics", is the title of a book by German authors also to be found among the contributors to the present volume on *Religion, Politics and Law*.<sup>1</sup> In the United States of America the secular tradition lies under siege by the so-called 'theocons', scholars and intellectuals who favour a breach with the secular roots of the American Constitution.<sup>2</sup> No less indicative is the upsurge in the Islamic world of countless movements that claim political significance, some of them with a violent character, others more peacefully.<sup>3</sup> It is not very surprising that under those circumstances there is also renewed interest in the tradition that is well known for its secular orientation:<sup>4</sup> the Enlightenment.

Recent decades have seen renewed debate on the Enlightenment.<sup>5</sup> Important books, by scholars such as Peter Gay,<sup>6</sup> Paul Hazard,<sup>7</sup> Ernst

<sup>1</sup> Bärsch, Claus-E., Berghoff, Peter, Sonneschmidt, Reinhard, hrsg., *Wer Religion verkennet, erkennt Politik nicht*. Perspektiven der Religionspolitik, Würzburg: Köningshausen & Neumann 2005.

<sup>2</sup> Linker, Damon, *The Theocons. Secular America under Siege*, New York: Doubleday 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Allen, Charles, *God's Terrorists. The Wahhabi Cult and the Hidden Roots of Modern Jihad*, London: Little & Brown 2006; Karsh, Efraim, *Islamic Imperialism. A History*, Yale: Yale University Press 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Dybikowski, James, "The critique of Christianity", in: Martin Fitzpatrick, Peter Jones, Christa Knellwolf and Ian McCalman, (eds.), *The Enlightenment World*, London: Routledge 2007, pp. 41-57.

<sup>5</sup> Kurtz, Paul, & Madigan, Timothy J., *Challenges to the Enlightenment. In Defense of Reason and Science*, New York: Prometheus Books 1994.

<sup>6</sup> Gay, Peter, *The Enlightenment. An Interpretation, The Rise of Modern Paganism*, London: W.W. Norton & Company 1966; Gay, Peter, *The Enlightenment. An Interpretation, 2, The Science of Freedom*, London: Wildwood House 1979 (1970).

<sup>7</sup> Hazard, Paul, *European Thought in the Eighteenth Century. From Montesquieu to Lessing*, Translated by J. Lewis May, Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith 1973. (Fr. 1946); Hazard, Paul, *The European Mind 1680-1715*, Translated by J. Lewis May, Harmondsworth: Penguin University Books 1973 (Fr. 1935).

Cassirer,<sup>8</sup> Roy Porter<sup>9</sup> and Gertrud Himmelfarb,<sup>10</sup> consider the Enlightenment to be a historical phenomenon. Ongoing debate also considers the Enlightenment to be a contemporary movement, or at least a movement that continues to influence contemporary affairs.<sup>11</sup> Neoconservative attempts to bring democracy to the Middle East, for instance, have been presented as an Enlightenment project, because the Enlightenment principles hold democracy and the rule of law to be universal values, applicable the world over.<sup>12</sup> Attempts to integrate newcomers into European societies by referencing to universal ideas about the equality of men and women have likewise been perceived as part of an Enlightenment agenda – an agenda at odds with a popular, multicultural support for local cultural traditions that obtains even where particular traditions run afoul of modern values.<sup>13</sup> In this context, multiculturalists hold ‘the Enlightenment’ responsible for violating cultural traditions, advocating instead a kind of radical pluralism and cultural relativism: Enlightenment values are not superior to pre-modern ways of thinking.

So there is not only debate about the Enlightenment as a historical phenomenon, but also about the contemporary significance of this cultural movement that started in the 17th century and flourished in the 18th century. Some writers are staunch defenders of the Enlightenment; others see a commitment to universal values, science and rationality as

<sup>8</sup> Cassirer, Ernst, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, Translated by Fritz C.A. Koelln and James P. Pettegrove, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1951 (Germ. 1932).

<sup>9</sup> Porter, Roy, *Enlightenment. Britain and the Creation of the Modern World*, London: Penguin Books London 2000.

<sup>10</sup> Himmelfarb, Gertrude, *The Roads to Modernity. The British, French, and American Enlightenment*, New York: Vintage Books, Random House 2005.

<sup>11</sup> See for a defence: Bronner, Stephen Eric, *Reclaiming the Enlightenment. Toward a Politics of Radical Engagement*, New York: Columbia University Press 2004; Grayling, A.C., *Against all Gods: Six Polemics on Religion and an Essay on Kindness*, London: Oberon Books 2007; Grayling, A.C., *What is Good? The Search of the best Way to live*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2003.

<sup>12</sup> See for instance: Frum, David, & Perle, Richard, *An End to Evil. How to win the War on Terror*, New York: Ballentine Books 2003. For a critique: Fukuyama, Francis, *After the Neocons. America at the Crossroads*, London: Profile Books 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Regarding the tension between cultural traditions and Enlightenment ideas on equality, see: Moller Okin, Susan, “Feminism and Multiculturalism: Some Tensions”, in: *Ethics*, July 1998 (108), pp. 661–684; Moller Okin, Susan, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women? With Respondents*, edited by Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha Nussbaum, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1999.

typical Western preoccupations that should be disparaged being a pretext for 'ethnocentrism', 'Euro-centrism', even 'racism', or at least for Western arrogance.<sup>14</sup>

In this chapter, we want to contribute to this debate by referencing to the work of two contemporary scholars, Jonathan Israel and Ian Buruma.

Let us start with the British historian, Jonathan Israel, in whose work the debates about historical phenomena and contemporary significance meet. His work has given both debates a new stimulus, particularly with the publication, in 2001, of *Radical Enlightenment*, and, in 2006, *Enlightenment Contested*.<sup>15</sup> In these impressive volumes, Israel describes the ideas of an enormous number of philosophers, men of letters, theologians and other scholars. In fact, it is hard to discuss the nature of the Enlightenment nowadays without reference to the new interpretations Israel draws from his scholarship. Therefore, we begin with a description of his main theses.

Our aim in this section is twofold. First, we will give a sketch of four themes that recur throughout Israel's work. Second, we will discuss his ideas concerning the importance of one of those themes, in particular the significance of the principle of free speech, or, as it was called by Spinoza, "*libertas philosophandi*".<sup>16</sup>

#### 1. FOUR THEMES IN THE WORK OF JONATHAN ISRAEL

*The unity of the Enlightenment.* The first theme that characterises Israel's approach to the Enlightenment is the ambition to present a new comprehensive analysis of this movement. The historiography of the

<sup>14</sup> See for an interesting analysis and critique: Scruton, Roger, *The West and the Rest. Globalization and the terrorist Threat*, London/New York: Continuum 2002; Windschuttle, Keith, *The Killing of History. How Literary Criticism and Social Theorists Are Murdering our Past*, San Francisco: Encounter Books 1996; Gellner, Ernest, *Postmodernism, Reason, and Religion*, London: Routledge 1992; Bruckner, Pascal, *La tyrannie de la pénitence: Essai sur le masochisme occidental*, Paris: Bernard Grasset 2006.

<sup>15</sup> Israel, Jonathan I., *Radical Enlightenment. Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2001; Israel, Jonathan I., *Enlightenment Contested. Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670–1752*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2006.

<sup>16</sup> Spinoza's work in English is available in: Spinoza, Benedict de, *A Theologico-political Treatise and a Political Treatise*, Translated from the Latin with an introduction by R.H.M. Elwes, New York: Dover Publications 1951 and more recently: Spinoza, Benedict de, *Theological-Political Treatise*, L. 1670, Edited by Jonathan Israel, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2007.

subject, prior to Israel, was dominated by different schools of historians who stressed the national differences between the various Enlightenment traditions. For instance, the subtitle of Himmelfarb's book on the Enlightenment is: "The British, French, and American Enlightenments". She segregates between a typically French Enlightenment, an American Enlightenment, a British Enlightenment, and, perhaps one may add, a German Enlightenment and an Anglo-Scottish Enlightenment. The Anglo-Scottish Enlightenment, in particular, had a high reputation for being modest, non-sectarian and not explicitly anti-religious. For that reason, it was considered more palatable to the majority of European intelligentsia – and, *a fortiori*, to European rulers – than the more radical French Enlightenment.<sup>17</sup>

Significantly, Israel breaks with the proliferation of Enlightenment traditions along national lines. There was one Enlightenment. In *Enlightenment Contested*, he specifies his reasons:

Ultimately, the view that there was not one Enlightenment but rather a 'family of Enlightenments' leads to distraction from the core issues, and even a meaningless relativism contributing to the loss of basic values needed by modern society, and hence also to the Counter-Enlightenment and Postmodernism.<sup>18</sup>

Instead of a diverse family, Israel offers a new typology, discerning instead two competing strains of thought, not tied to nationality, within the whole of the Enlightenment tradition. On the one hand, there is the radical strain beginning with Spinoza, Bayle and Diderot. On the other hand, there is the more moderate strain. Many people favour the latter tradition, but Israel adheres to the former, arguing that the most important contribution to modernity has been made by the radical brand of the Enlightenment.

Viewed from the democratic, egalitarian and anti-colonial perspective of the post-1945 western world, the more important Enlightenment was surely that of the radical stream, which also drew on many sources, and figured many writers and thinkers, Descartes and Hobbes prominent

<sup>17</sup> Broadie, Alexander, *The Scottish Enlightenment. The Historical Age of the Historical Nation*, Edinburgh: Birlinn 2001. An important supporter of the Anglo-Scottish Enlightenment was F.A. Hayek. See: Hayek, F.A., 'The Results of Human Action but not of Design', in: Hayek, F.A., *Studies in Philosophy, Politics, and Economics*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1980 (1967); Hayek, F.A., *Law, legislation and liberty. A new statement of the liberal principles of justice and political economy*, Complete edition in one-volume paperback, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul 1982.

<sup>18</sup> Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, op. cit. p. 863.

among them, but was intellectually unified and crafted into a powerful philosophical apparatus primarily by Spinoza, Bayle, and Diderot.<sup>19</sup>

Radical Enlightenment can be conceived as a package of eight cardinal points: (1) adoption of philosophical (mathematical-historical) reason as the only and exclusive criterion for what is true; (2) rejection of all supernatural agencies, magic, disembodied spirits, and divine providence; (3) equality of all mankind (including racial and gender equality); (4) secular universalism in ethics; (5) comprehensive toleration and freedom of thought, based on independent critical thinking; (6) personal liberty of lifestyle and sexual conduct between consenting adults, safeguarding the dignity and freedom of the unmarried and homosexuals; (7) freedom of expression, political criticism, and the press, in the public sphere; (8) democratic republicanism as the most legitimate form of politics.<sup>20</sup> These basic tenets, so Israel argues, make up the essence of 'philosophical modernity'.

*A reappraisal of Radical Enlightenment.* A second important theme in the books of Israel is his re-evaluation of Radical Enlightenment. Radical Enlightenment is not – *pace* postmodern critics, cultural relativists and so called moderates – a kind of “fundamentalism”,<sup>21</sup> comparable to religious extremist positions, but something different, something more important than most of us are willing to acknowledge.

What many “moderates” abhor in Radical Enlightenment is its critique of religion, especially the public role of religion. Moderate Enlightenment thinkers try to harmonise Enlightenment rationalism with faith. There is no clash of reason and faith, because reason can support faith, so they contend. True faith would be rational. Thinkers like Voltaire, Newton and John Locke tried to show that once the Christian tradition is purged of elements unnecessary to a true understanding of the Christian faith, reason and faith can be placed in a harmonious relation.<sup>22</sup> According to Newton, gravity was created by God. According

<sup>19</sup> Israel, *op. cit.* p. 866.

<sup>20</sup> Israel, *Enlightenment Contested*, *op. cit.* p. 866.

<sup>21</sup> See for a critique of the concept “enlightenment fundamentalism”: Philipse, Herman, *Verlichtingsfundamentalisme? Open brief over Verlichting en fundamentalisme aan Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Mede bestemd voor Piet Hein Donner, minister van Justitie en coördinerend minister in de strijd tegen terreur*, Amsterdam: Uitgeverij Bert Bakker 2005.

<sup>22</sup> See for different positions: Helm, Paul, ed., *Faith & Reason*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1999.

to Voltaire, atheism was something to be avoided,<sup>23</sup> just like biblical Christianity.<sup>24</sup> Moderate Enlightenment thinkers Locke and Voltaire were as much offended by 'radicals' such as Spinoza, Bayle, Meslier, Holbach and many anonymous authors,<sup>25</sup> as they were by the intolerance of the Catholic Church.

Some of the early defenders of moderate Enlightenment may be seen as precursors to radical Enlightenment's contemporary critics, critics who disavow thinkers like Spinoza as "Enlightenment fundamentalists", a label usually found between quotations. The label "Enlightenment fundamentalism" remains imprecise in meaning and application. It draws its inspiration from critics of the Enlightenment like John Gray<sup>26</sup> and Stuart Sim<sup>27</sup> and it holds currency in postmodern circles as we will see when we analyse the work of Ian Buruma.<sup>28</sup>

*Cultural self-understanding in the United States and in Europe.* A third theme in the work of Israel pertains to the cultural self-understanding of Europe and the United States. What is the essence of European culture? Is it the Enlightenment? Or would that be too restrictive? And if it would be too restrictive, what basis is there for an alternative identity? Multiculturalism?

<sup>23</sup> The books of Holbach were much too radical according to Voltaire. See: Holbach, Pierre Henri Dietrich baron d', *La Contagion Sacrée, ou Histoire Naturelle de la Superstition ou Tableau des Effets que les Opinions Religieuses ont produits sur la Terre* (1768), in: D'Holbach, *Premières Œuvres*, Préface et notes Paulette Charbonnel, Paris: Éditions Sociales 1971, pp. 139–175.

<sup>24</sup> See for Voltaire's critique on the Bible: Voltaire, *Examen important de Milord Bolingbroke ou le tombeau du fanatisme*, (1736), in: Voltaire, *Mélanges*, Préface par Emmanuel Berl, Texte établi et annoté par Jacques van den Heuvel, Paris: Gallimard 1961, pp. 1001–1099.

<sup>25</sup> Prominent among the anonymous publications were: *Traité des trois imposteurs: Moïse, Jésus, Mahomet*, Paris: Max Milo Éditions 2002 (1712) and the work of Jean Meslier. See: Desné, Roland, 'L'Homme, l'Œuvre et la Renommée', in: Jean Meslier, *Œuvres de Jean Meslier*, Tome 1, Mémoire des Pensées et sentiments de Jean Meslier, Préfaces et notes par Jean Duprun, Roland Desné, Albert Soboul, Paris: Éditions Anthropos Paris 1970, pp. xvii–lxxix.

<sup>26</sup> Gray, John, *Al Qaeda and what it means to be modern*, London: Faber and Faber 2003.

<sup>27</sup> Sim, Stuart, *Fundamentalist World. The New Dark Age of Dogma*, n.p.: Totem Books USA 2004.

<sup>28</sup> See Buruma, Ian, 'Der Dogmatismus der Aufklärung', in: Thierry Chervel & Anja Seeliger, (eds.), *Islam in Europa: Eine internationale Debatte*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 2007, pp. 126–128., a reaction on: Cliteur, Paul, 'Krieger ist nicht gleich Krieger', in: Thierry Chervel & Anja Seeliger, (eds.), *Islam in Europa*, op. cit. pp. 117–128, also in: Cliteur, Paul, 'The Postmodern Interpretation of Religious Terrorism', in: *Free Inquiry*, February/March 2007 (Volume 27, Number 2), pp. 38–41.

Everywhere in the Western world, these questions are being posed: "Who are we?" is the title of a book by the well-known American political scientist Samuel Huntington;<sup>29</sup> the question is equally prevalent in Europe. The French, for example, are preoccupied with the question whether they can still uphold the secular values enshrined in their constitution since 1905. Is that ideal still viable, under the changing demographic conditions?<sup>30</sup> Should the traditional 'laïcist' ideals accommodate new religious movements, therewith changing the religiously neutral state into a multicultural state with reference to all the cultural and religious traditions that are represented on French soil?<sup>31</sup> The debate goes on,<sup>32</sup> probably nowhere in such an acrimonious manner as in The Netherlands. Since the murder of the politician Pim Fortuyn in 2002, and even more so since the murder of Theo van Gogh in 2004, the Dutch ask themselves: Who are we? Some people make a plea for a revitalization of the Judeo-Christian roots of The Netherlands, but is that still a viable option?

These questions are intimately linked with the research done by Israel. His research does not only point to the *history* of Europe, but also to its *future*. If Israel is right in his books *Radical Enlightenment* and *Enlightenment Contested*, the Enlightenment remains the core of the European and American tradition. The Enlightenment principles are more suitable to regulate the life of people from a different background and religion in modern multicultural society than postmodernism and the ancient religions are. Misguided attempts to revitalise Judeo-Christian roots can only exacerbate 'us and them' tensions. The same is true of multiculturalism, another aspirant to the mantle of Western self-definition.

Israel refers in his research to a discussion entertained in the Dutch Republic since 1650, a discussion largely initiated by Spinoza, with great influence on the American and French Revolutions as well as

<sup>29</sup> Huntington, Samuel P., *Who are we? The Challenges to America's National Identity*, New York: Simon & Schuster 2004.

<sup>30</sup> Zarka, Yves Charles, *Faut-il réviser la loi de 1905? La séparation entre religions et État en question*, Paris: Presses Universitaires de France 2005; Kaltenbach, Jeanne-Hélène & Tribalat, Michèle, *La République et l'islam. Entre crainte et aveuglement*, Paris: Gallimard 2002; Kriegel, Blandine, *Philosophie de la République*, Paris: Plon 1998.

<sup>31</sup> As seemed to be the position of France's president Sarkozy, Nicolas, *La République, les religions, l'espérance. Entretiens avec Thibaud Collin et Philippe Verdin*, Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf 2004. See on the laïcité: Brovelli, Ivan, *Laïcité: Réflexions autour d'un mal français: Les limites d'une société sans Dieu*, Toulouse: Editions de France 2006; Cabanel, Patrick, *Entre religions et laïcité: La voie française: XIXe siècles*, Toulouse: Éditions Privat 2007.

<sup>32</sup> Dierkens, Alain, & Schreiber, Jean-Philippe, eds., *Laïcité et sécularisation dans l'Union européenne*, Editions de l'Université de Bruxelles, Bruxelles 2006.

subsequent constitutional developments in those countries. The circle of philosophers around Spinoza and those who followed his lead was perhaps small, but it was influential if not epochal. Their influence may be observed in the worldview that found expression after 1945 in national constitutions and international treaties on human rights, all deeply influenced by radical Enlightenment. Our conceptions of human rights, democracy, tolerance, the rule of law and basic freedoms of conscience and speech are much indebted to thinkers like Spinoza, Bayle, Diderot and other representatives of the radical, rational Enlightenment thought of the 17th and 18th centuries. The accounts of these thinkers demonstrate that human rights gained supremacy not *thanks to* religion but *in spite of* religion.

*A plea for a radical conception of freedom of speech.* That brings us to a fourth theme in the work of Israel: his advocacy of a radical conception of tolerance and free speech along Spinozist (and not Lockean) lines. No one familiar with Israel's previous volumes can be surprised by his radical notion of free speech as expounded in a lecture he held at the University of Nijmegen in November 2006. For Israel, following Spinoza, freedom of speech holds primacy over freedom of religion, rather than being coextensive with it, much less subordinate to it.<sup>33</sup>

## 2. WHAT IS THE MEANING OF FREE SPEECH?

In his lecture, Israel starts with a passage that points to the actual significance his historical research has for contemporary debate on the identity of European culture. On November 10th, 2006, he said:

Judging from the number of British newspaper and television reports about the change of position of toleration and freedom of expression in the Netherlands since the murder of Theo van Gogh, in November 2004, the intellectual and political ferment in progress in Dutch society today is attracting the attention of the English-speaking world to a degree that has perhaps never been witnessed before.<sup>34</sup>

Here we see that the Netherlands is the focus of attention of the English-speaking world (and, we may add, of the non-Anglophone world). That

<sup>33</sup> Israel, Jonathan, "Freedom of Thought versus Freedom of Religion: an Eighteenth-Century – and now also a Twenty-first-Century-Dilemma", Thomas More lecture, Radbouduniversiteit, November 10, 2006, also on: [www.ru.nl/soeterbeeckprogramma/](http://www.ru.nl/soeterbeeckprogramma/) and abbreviated in: NRC Handelsblad, 12 november 2006.

<sup>34</sup> Israel, op. cit. p. 1.

attention has something to do with a "change of position" in the Netherlands with respect to toleration and freedom of expression.

These are important words but they should be clarified to understand their true meaning. What exactly is that change? That change is informed, sadly, by an observable, increasing reluctance to welcome people from abroad into Dutch society.<sup>35</sup> Immigrants from non-Western cultures feel less at home in Dutch society. Tensions are dramatically demonstrated and exacerbated by religious-cultural conflicts such as the Danish Cartoon-affair, the murder of Van Gogh, and other incidents. Dutch society is less willing to embrace newcomers. An important question, however, is to what extent should this should be understood as a decrease in 'tolerance'?

Here we must distinguish between two concepts of tolerance. A popular conception recently developed but widely held, mixes up toleration with solidarity. Someone is considered 'tolerant' who is prepared to back up everything that ethnic and religious minorities do or say, even if what they do or say is a gross violation of universal human rights or the core principles of democracy and the rule of law. But is tolerance the same as solidarity? That may be contested. The new idea of tolerance erodes our classical concept of tolerance, referred to in the famous words attributed to Voltaire, "I disagree with you in everything you say, but I shall defend, to the death, your right to say it". These words are not exactly to be found with Voltaire, but that is irrelevant. They certainly incorporate the essence of a Voltairian tradition of tolerance. That essence is: tolerance has to do with free speech. It is the ethos that sustains free speech. Tolerance in this classical conception holds that we should not try to suppress what people say even if we disagree with the content of what is being said. This conception of tolerance was also ingrained in the work of Spinoza. We consider this a classical conception of tolerance because it represented an agenda in itself before toleration became admixed with other social agendas, such as economic solidarity, open borders, etc.

Israel, in the prefatory comments to his lecture, does not give an example of what he means with his reference to a change of position on tolerance in the Netherlands, but it is in harmony with his previous work to warn against an erosion of classical tolerance. This concern is

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<sup>35</sup> Perhaps more than in other countries. See for the United States: Jacoby, Tamar, 'Immigration Nation', in: *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2006, pp. 50–65.

not limited to The Netherlands, but undoubtedly, Israel is right, in the wake of van Gogh's murder, that in The Netherlands this erosion is particularly clear. In this context, Israel states: "The same phenomenon is reflected in the interest being shown in, and lively reactions to, Ian Buruma's new book, *Murder in Amsterdam*".<sup>36</sup> We turn, then, to Buruma's work,<sup>37</sup> and begin by noting what Israel does not specify: Buruma's book is largely antithetical to Israel's defence of radical Enlightenment.

### 3. THE IMPLICATIONS OF *MURDER IN AMSTERDAM*

Buruma's book is, in our view, a clear manifestation of the decay of the classical tradition of tolerance. The writer himself probably had no other intention with his book than relating the events that led to the murder of Theo van Gogh. For the main part, it is a lively written account of what happened and what key players in the discussion about this murder had said. What we concentrate on, however, are the ideological presuppositions of the writer himself. His own position represents a clear-cut example of the loss the classical conception of tolerance. This has escaped the attention of almost all the commentators on Buruma's book.

As Israel wrote, Buruma's book solicited "lively reactions", especially in the Dutch-speaking intellectual community. Partly this had to do with Buruma's unorthodox way of operating. His interviews were rather informal affairs, without a recording device – in some cases, apparently, even without notes – none of which stopped him from putting a considerable amount of the book's text between quotation marks, attributed to interviewees without further consultation. This led to no small amount of consternation and controversy<sup>38</sup> concerning what actually was and was not said.<sup>39</sup> The contested quotations distracted from the content of

<sup>36</sup> Israel, op. cit. p. 1.

<sup>37</sup> Buruma, Ian, *Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance*, New York: Penguin 2006.

<sup>38</sup> A journalist from the Dutch newspaper NRC Handelsblad asked some of the "interviewees" whether they were correctly quoted. Frits Bolkestein, Paul Scheffer, Theodor Holman, Afshin Ellian and Bart Jan Spruyt all stated that they were not. See: Mat, Joke, 'Ian Buruma over de multiculturele samenleving na de moord op Theo van Gogh', in: *NRC Handelsblad*, 16 september 2006. One of the authors of the present article, Cliteur, also had a chat with Buruma. He can also acknowledge that he was not aware of Buruma's plan to use the information to be quoted in the book.

<sup>39</sup> In the second impression of the Dutch version of the book, some of the contested passages were amended, but not all of them.

the book, which requires our attention as well. *Murder in Amsterdam* is important because the implicit and explicit predilection of its writer for the moderate Enlightenment is the exact antithesis of Israel's preference for radical Enlightenment as expounded in *Radical Enlightenment* and *Enlightenment Contested*. Furthermore, Buruma represents the de-valuing process described, above, by Israel as a consequence of having divided up the Enlightenment tradition among a variety of national identifications. Buruma's own multicultural bias creates a value-eroding blind spot. The effect of Buruma's work seems precisely to disavow the tradition of Enlightenment that Spinoza, Bayle and Diderot tried to stimulate.

Contrasting the books of Buruma and Israel may seem strange for two reasons. The first is that, though Buruma references Israel's work, he does so only as a quote within a quote, by citation of a passage in a newspaper article concerning *Radical Enlightenment*. Moreover, though the word "Enlightenment" occurs at least thirty times in *Murder in Amsterdam*, it often does so by attribution, with limited explication, and Buruma's own apparent predilection for the accommodation of moderate Enlightenment is not explicitly worked out against the ideas to be found in Israel's books or elsewhere.

The second reason why it may seem strange to treat the books in relation to each other is that they are products of different scholarly ambition. Buruma's work offers a mix of journalism and opinion for general consumption, offered in an effort to capture and perhaps explain the climate of opinion directly before and after the murder of Van Gogh. Israel's volumes are weightier contributions to scholarly historical research, set to take a rightful place among the tools of countless future historians. Buruma's book is a slender, engaging affair, based largely on informal (if controversial) interviews and anecdotal material, whereas Israel's books are substantial tomes based on extensive reading in primary sources and donnish analysis of material squirreled away in the archives of European libraries. It is, however, testament to the vital force of Enlightenment ideals that these two very different works draw so much on the same source, and that ultimately the authors of these works demonstrate similar concerns. For all the similarity, however, the two authors are most interesting to compare because they demonstrate opposite sides of the Enlightenment. Moreover, Buruma's book is indispensable insofar as it reflects widespread feelings of unease with radical Enlightenment, an unease that we must understand, and – so we will try to argue – overcome.

## 4. DIMINISHING REASON

Israel is concerned with the historical protagonists of the Enlightenment: Spinoza, Bayle, Diderot, Voltaire, Locke, and countless others. Buruma treats the contemporary protagonists of radical Enlightenment by focussing on the work of two Dutch intellectuals: Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Afshin Ellian.

Ellian (1966) is a Dutch professor of jurisprudence at the University of Leiden, and of Iranian background.<sup>40</sup> Hirsi Ali (1969), of Somalian background, was a member of the Dutch Parliament for a liberal party and co-author of a feminist film, *Submission*, made by Van Gogh.<sup>41</sup> The film criticizes the suppression of women in the Islamic world, and according to many commentators, this film was the direct incentive for the assassination of Van Gogh. This is speculation, there is no hard evidence,<sup>42</sup> but that does not alter the fact that the film was unpopular within radical Islamic circles, similar to the reaction to the Danish cartoons that ignited a worldwide controversy in January 2006.

Both Hirsi Ali and Ellian, so Buruma contends, were representatives of a tradition that Israel dubbed radical Enlightenment. They “embraced a radical version of the European Enlightenment”, Buruma writes.<sup>43</sup> His attitude, however, towards the tradition Hirsi Ali and Ellian have embraced is ambivalent at best, and, more cynically, Buruma consigns their philosophical or political embrace to a sort of psychological

<sup>40</sup> Ellian is a colleague of Cliteur.

<sup>41</sup> Hirsi Ali, Ayaan, *Submission*. Transmitted in the T.V. program “Zomergasten” on 29 august 2004; text, reactions and backgrounds, with a contribution by Betsy Udink, Amsterdam: Augustus 2004, on the internet: <http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=846339861805446088>

<sup>42</sup> During the trial, the murderer did not complain about the film. He referred to a “law” that required of him “to cut off the head of everyone who offends against Allah or his Prophet”. Most commentators tend to ignore this statement by the murderer himself. The Netherlands is in a state of denial. It is very popular to interpret the murder as a reaction to the rude criticism of Van Gogh. Not the content of Van Gogh’s books and public statements was the cause of his murder, but his style (insulting) was the problem. But if that were the case, why is the moderate mayor of Amsterdam, Job Cohen, condemned by religious terrorists? Michael Burleigh, *Sacred Causes*, London: Harper Press 2006, p. 457, rightly reminds us that the murderer left a letter on the body of his victim: “This contained death threats against the Somali-born Dutch liberal MP Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Amsterdam’s socialist Jewish mayor Job Cohen”. Dutch society’s denial seems to construct a sort of warped symmetry, however unsatisfying, to Bouyeri’s violence: Theo van Gogh was offensive, so he was killed – but Bouyeri’s fundamentalism demonstrates still less balance than even this sick formula would allow.

<sup>43</sup> Buruma, *op. cit.* p. 31.

dysfunction – an arbitrary behaviour rather than a thoughtful or informed choice. Thus Buruma reconstructs the characters of Ellian and Hirsi Ali by emphasizing particular elements of the personal history of each, ultimately making their political philosophies to appear little more than the bitter fruits of frustration, or, better still, “trauma”. Ellian was “traumatized by Khomeini’s revolution”, as Hirsi Ali was by “an oppressive Muslim upbringing in Somalia”.<sup>44</sup>

Buruma presents the ideas of Ellian and Hirsi Ali in the context of their troubled personal histories and this serves Buruma’s tacit agenda to particularize Enlightenment philosophy, reducing the universalizing powers of reason to idiosyncratic psychological discontents. Thus Ellian “rants” and, though Hirsi Ali

expresses herself with a great deal more charm (...) in her battle for secularism, too, there are hints of zealotry, echoes perhaps of her earlier enthusiasm for the Muslim Brotherhood, before she was converted to the ideals of the European Enlightenment.<sup>45</sup>

Buruma goes on to diminish the rational grounds for adopting Enlightenment values by using the word ‘converted’, thereby emphasizing an inescapably religious nature to the choice, as he sees it, between Enlightenment values and religious fundamentalism.

Other exponents in *Murder in Amsterdam* of the worldview that Hirsi Ali and Ellian defend include the former EU-commissar and prominent Dutch intellectual Frits Bolkestein, and the Amsterdam professor Paul Scheffer. But Buruma does not concentrate on their worldview. Why not? Because here the psychological theory that traumatizing experience lies behind Enlightenment ideas is less convincing? If the radical ideas of Ellian and Hirsi Ali are caused by their upbringing, where did Bolkestein and Scheffer pick up their radical secular ideas?

Buruma’s treatment of the Dutch philosopher Herman Philipse (1951) furthers the point. We learn of Philipse, in *Murder in Amsterdam*, in the context of the crucial point at which Hirsi Ali embraces Enlightenment political philosophy. But Buruma shows us Philipse’s character only to dismiss him. First Buruma recalls Philipse from a shared kindergarten sandbox, offering only the memory that Philipse was a pompous kindergartner. Reencountering Philipse, Buruma’s contemporary take goes no further than to describe him as “the sort of

<sup>44</sup> Buruma, *op. cit.* p. 31.

<sup>45</sup> Buruma, *op. cit.* p. 158.

man who likes to personify the high European civilization of the French Enlightenment".<sup>46</sup> The Enlightenment, in the form of Philipse, is reduced to a pretension, better suited to aid method actors playing villains in Harry Potter films than for serious discussion in political or academic circles. Revealingly, however, Buruma discusses Philipse one more time, in the context of Hirsi Ali's comments that the Enlightenment elevates the individual above the vagaries of local culture:

It takes courage for an African immigrant in Europe to say that, even if she is from a privileged class. For a man like Herman Philipse, secure of his rightful place at the high table of European civilisation, it is easier to dismiss culture in this way, for there is much that he can take for granted. There is no need for shortcuts if you are educated to believe in universality and individualism; they are products of the civilization to which Philipse was born.<sup>47</sup>

Buruma nowhere takes up in a serious way the reasoned arguments of the Enlightenment, preferring instead, as here, to make a caricature of Enlightenment ideas, sketching them with the broad brush of status consciousness: even as Philipse represents the universal individualism of egalitarianism, he stands farcically above the concept (at least, however, Buruma is consistent: not even the exoticism of an African past exempts Hirsi Ali's statements and argument from indirect dismissal for class considerations). In this way Philipse is somehow compromised by being the inheritor of Enlightenment values, not because he has turned his back on them, but precisely because, having been raised in the political community of their production, he continues to uphold them. Still, the values themselves are not the only thing that is at fault in *Murder in Amsterdam*. Instead, we have a sort of nihilism, a consistent rejection of everything that appears before us. Everyone is biased, so everything is wrong. In arriving at that dismal conclusion, however, we must first decipher a confused statement that traffics in exoticism and resorts either, in the case of Philipse, to derision, or, in the case of Ellian and Hirsi Ali, to convenient psychological analysis.

Returning, then, to Buruma's 'frustration-thesis', it could be equally tempting to speculate on the origin of the ideas of Spinoza himself, the founding father of radical Enlightenment. If Hirsi Ali as an "heiress of Spinoza" is radicalized by her Somalian upbringing, how did Spinoza

<sup>46</sup> Buruma, op. cit. p. 166.

<sup>47</sup> Buruma, op. cit. p. 168.

get radicalized? By unpleasant experiences within the Jewish community perhaps? On the other hand, Ellian: if he, as “Nietzsche’s disciple”, got his extremist ideas by being frustrated because of the developments in his native Iran, where did Nietzsche himself pick up his radical ideas? Not from Iran, for sure. Was he traumatized by his Christian upbringing perhaps? Moreover, how do we explain the widespread adherence to the ideas of Nietzsche in Europe after his death in 1900? Were all those adherents of the Nietzschean philosophy traumatized by something, and if so, by what?

Many other examples can be adduced, of course, but we do not have to go into them to suspect that this way of treating your subject is not very convincing. Buruma offers soft psychology instead of a discussion of ideas, perhaps not as an intended attack, but with sad consequences all the same. Many people make this mistake – attacking perceived motive and psychology without being actually responsive to the argument at hand, and it takes them all the farther from anything like a solution to the problems they would treat. We can also address the question in abstract terms. Is it justified *at all* to “explain” the convictions of people with whom you disagree, or even merely want to understand, by declaring those people “traumatized” by their upbringing? Why would experience with oppressive regimes make people “traumatized” instead of making them insightful or farsighted, or both? Joseph Brodsky, Solzhenitsyn and many others had experiences with oppressive regimes, that made them particularly cognizant of and sensitive to political decadence, they weren’t considered ranting victims of heavily traumatizing events.

##### 5. CONFLATING RADICAL AGENDAS

Buruma’s confusion goes deeper than his resort to nihilism and psychological shorthand to describe the rise and role of radical Enlightenment ideas. He also overreaches with a cultural or sociological explanation of the ideas of contemporary radical Enlightenment – touched on in his comparison of Hirsi Ali and Philipse – likening ‘radical Enlightenment’ to another type of radicalism, to wit ‘radical Islam’ (or ‘political Islam’ or ‘Islamism’). He introduces this identification with the claim that both Hirsi Ali and Ellian are “warriors”. Why this militant qualification? “They are warriors on a battlefield inside the world of Islam”.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Buruma, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

Why a battlefield inside Islam? Hirsi Ali is an unbeliever. She defected from Islam. Ellian never was a Moslem, so why are they portrayed as warriors *inside* the world of Islam? It would be possible to construct a battlefield inside the world of Islam between, for instance, reformers such as Rifaa (1801–1873)<sup>49</sup> and radicals such as Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966),<sup>50</sup> but neither Hirsi Ali nor Ellian partakes in this struggle.<sup>51</sup> What Buruma tries to convey, however, appears in the follow up of his curious reasoning. He states that the ideas of both Hirsi Ali and Ellian embrace universalism. This is true, of course, because radical Enlightenment thinkers are indeed universalists. And it is also true that they think that universalism is a release from the suffocating particularism of tribal traditions. Nevertheless, although Buruma insinuates that there is something seriously wrong with universalism, he does not make clear what exactly.

As with his resort to psychological caricature, Buruma opts for misdirection: instead of giving arguments against universalism, he disparages this tradition in ethics<sup>52</sup> by pointing out that jihadists are *also* universalists. That seems to be the basis for Buruma's strange identification of radical Enlightenment with radical Islam. This entails making a division between those who are radical because they are prepared to use violence against all those with a different opinion and those who are radical because they are cultural innovators criticizing petrified, received traditions in the name of universalistic, reasoned ideals. After his introduction of the worldview of Hirsi Ali and Ellian with their "radical version of the European Enlightenment" and "bracing air of universalism", Buruma goes on to say:

But the same could be said, in a way, of their greatest enemy: the modern holy warrior, like the killer of Theo van Gogh. The young Moroccan – Dutch

<sup>49</sup> See on the tradition of Rifaa: Sorman, Guy, *Les Enfants de Rifaa. Musulmans et modernes*, Paris: Fayard 2003.

<sup>50</sup> See on Qutb: Jansen, Johannes J.G., *The Dual Nature of Islamic Fundamentalism*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1997, pp. 47–54.

<sup>51</sup> See for a variety of voices: John J. Donohue and John L. Esposito (eds.), *Islam in Transition. Muslim Perspectives*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007 (1982); Taji-Farouki, Suha, ed., *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, Oxford / London: Oxford University Press in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, London 2006 (2004).

<sup>52</sup> Universalism in ethics is: "the view that all human beings are morally equal in the sense that membership of a certain tribe, class, caste, nation, race, etc. as such neither justifies special consideration nor excuses lack of consideration". See: Mautner, Thomas, *The Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*, London: Penguin Books, 2000 (1996), p. 580. In post-modern circles, 'universalism' is considered something of an arrogant pretence.

youth downloading English translations of Arabic texts from the Internet is also looking for a universal cause, severed from cultural and tribal specificities.<sup>53</sup>

From the qualification "in a way" we can infer that the writer had some qualms about his bold identification but not enough to shy away from it. The adherents to radical Enlightenment are "warriors" and the modern jihadists are "warriors", so basically they are the same. The Enlightenment thinkers embrace universalism and so does the holy warrior of radical Islam. So what is the difference?

The answer should be: a great deal. "Krieger ist nicht gleich Krieger".<sup>54</sup> The ideals of those who "struggle" for a world of peace and the alleviation of hunger are not the same as those who "struggle" for the annihilation of the western world because both are struggling. Moreover, the universal ambition to install a caliphate<sup>55</sup> is not the same as the universal ambition of inaugurating democracy everywhere, or at least maintaining it in some places, because both have universalistic aims. It seriously matters *for what ideal* we struggle. Both adherents of the Enlightenment and those who try to annihilate the Enlightenment are struggling for their ideals, and are therewith "warriors"; both have universalist ambitions, and therefore are the same Buruma insinuates.<sup>56</sup>

A similar identification is made by Buruma through the fact that radical Enlightenment and radical Islam are both "radical": "two different versions of the universal, one radically secular, the other radically religious".<sup>57</sup> He states that there is no difference between the two because they have this in common. Nevertheless, radical traditions can be radically different; having radicalism in common does not make them the same. How is it possible that sophisticated modern cultural critics do not seem to notice this?

The answer is: because they are in the grip of a kind of postmodern cultural relativism that makes it impossible for them to proclaim

<sup>53</sup> Buruma, *op. cit.* p. 32.

<sup>54</sup> Cliteur, Paul, 'Krieger ist nicht gleich Krieger', in: Thierry Chervel & Anja Seeliger (eds.), *Islam in Europa*, *op. cit.* pp. 117–128, also in: Cliteur, Paul, 'The Postmodern Interpretation of Religious Terrorism', *op. cit.* pp. 38–41.

<sup>55</sup> As radical islamists advocate, see: Tibi, Bassam, *Islamische Zuwanderung. Die Gescheiterte Integration*, Stuttgart: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt 2002, p. 13.

<sup>56</sup> In Buruma, Ian, 'Der Dogmatismus der Aufklärung', in: Thierry Chervel & Anja Seeliger (eds.), *Islam in Europa*, *op. cit.* pp. 126–128, p. 127 denies this is what he has tried to say with his comparisons, but the writer fails to explain what else he wanted to convey with his equation of radical Enlightenment and radical Islam.

<sup>57</sup> Buruma, *op. cit.* p. 32.

adherence to universalistic ideals as superior to local and tribal traditions. The postmodern critics think a consistent commitment to Enlightenment principles would push them into the corner of Western arrogance, intellectual neo-colonialism and other despicable ways of thinking. They are in favour of Enlightenment ideals, at least so they say, but only insofar as they are in harmony with the traditions of religious minorities. If not, they immediately shy away from a commitment to the Enlightenment.<sup>58</sup> A more forceful defence of Enlightenment ideals is scorned as "Enlightenment fundamentalism".<sup>59</sup> In the typology of Israel: moderate Enlightenment is the maximum commitment to Enlightenment they think is justified without hurting the feelings of religious and ethnic minorities in contemporary western societies.

Buruma's defence of moderate Enlightenment appears clearly in his laudatory remarks on Voltaire, the paragon of the moderates:

(T)here is a difference between the anticlericalism of Voltaire, who was up against one of the two most powerful institutions of eighteenth-century France, and radical secularists today battling a minority within an already embattled minority.<sup>60</sup>

Sure, there is a difference, but that does not answer the question whose side we should take. The argument that Buruma implicitly uses to advance towards siding with the moderate Enlightenment of Voltaire and against the radical Enlightenment of Spinoza is that that the radical secularists are "battling a minority". Besides, this minority is already embattled and Buruma seems to suggest that taking sides with the embattled minority is an act of elementary justice.

What are the presuppositions of this reasoning? The first is that Enlightenment secularists are opposed to the religious minority of the Moslems in Dutch society. They are not. What they are opposed to is that – perhaps very small – minority that is prepared to commit violence, perpetrate crimes in the name of their religion. It is 'jihadism', 'radical Islam', 'Islamism' or 'political Islam', not religion *per se* that advocates of radical Enlightenment will attack, so political groups that claim the public sphere and the state in the name of religion. Indeed, this necessitates 'struggle', a struggle that the decadent elite of contemporary

<sup>58</sup> See for a good example of this tendency: Sim, Stuart, *Fundamentalist World. The New Dark Age of Dogma*, op. cit.

<sup>59</sup> For instance in: Gray, John, *Al Qaeda and what it means to be modern*, op. cit.

<sup>60</sup> Buruma, op. cit. p. 33.

Western societies (with Ian Buruma as an important spokesman), indoctrinated by cultural relativism and postmodernism, appears to avoid.<sup>61</sup> That struggle also implies “embattling a minority”, but it is neither the battle nor the minority that Buruma addresses. The real conflict is not Buruma’s ethically empty contest of self-interest against self-interest.

The real conflict, instead, concerns an affirmation of positive meaning as a social phenomenon. Meaning and aspirations to truth come about through reasoning or are received. Those who associate truth with the revelations of religion, or other systems of thought inaccessible to the unbelievers, may do so – but cannot insist that others recognize it to be true. For Enlightenment secularists to offer that recognition absent common belief is not an affirmation of human dignity but an act of condescension. Moreover, the Enlightenment gives us a way out of the ineluctable conflicts between closed systems of revelatory thought. The Enlightenment promotes argument based on the common language of reason, rather than based on the inaccessible language of devotion. To shy away from that reason, and from that argument, because the process is difficult or uncomfortable, is testament to crippling decadence. Perhaps, in fact, it is a sense of precisely this decadence – this failure to acknowledge meaning in the Enlightenment tradition, other than by a passive act of accommodation – that drives unlikely radicals such as Mohammed Bouyeri (the convicted murderer of Theo van Gogh) to their strange fundamentalism.

Moreover, to turn away in the face of a revelatory fundamentalism that strives to censure opposing thought, a fundamentalism that will embrace violence to do so, is cowardice. If Buruma really means the following, that

the murder (of Van Gogh; ed.), like the bomb attacks in Madrid and London, the fatwa against Salman Rushdie, and the worldwide Muslim protests against the cartoons of the Prophet in a Danish newspaper, exposed dangerous fractures that run through all European nations,<sup>62</sup>

the next question is what to do about those “fractures”. Certainly, the answer cannot be appeasement.<sup>63</sup> Needless to say, turning a blind eye is

<sup>61</sup> For an insightful analysis, see: Kimball, Roger, *Tenured Radicals. How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education*, Revised Edition, with a New Introduction by the Author, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee Publisher 1998 (1991).

<sup>62</sup> Buruma, op. cit. p. 35.

<sup>63</sup> As Gove and Phillips make clear in: Gove, Michael, *Celsius 7/7*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson 2006; Phillips, Melanie, *Londonistan. How Britain is Creating a Terror State Within*, London: Gibson Square 2006.

no better, as the experiences in London and Birmingham attest.<sup>64</sup> Weak responses serve no one and achieve nothing. Buruma's comfortable nihilism is a manifestation of laziness and lack of conviction – a learned one, yes, but no more satisfying for its urbanity.

Contemporary followers of Spinoza, Bayle and Diderot claim to know what we should do: advocating enlightened morality with a firm rejection of the worldview that undermines liberal democracy. *Murder in Amsterdam* represents not only a rejection of that proposed course, but demonstrates the guilt complex that lies at the heart of this rejection: the Holocaust and a failed colonial history receive great attention, precluding the reluctance to affirm an Enlightenment tradition that has seen terrible abuses occur on its watch and often in its name. Jonathan Israel reminds us however, that abuse of an argument is not proof positive of its failure. We should not throw the baby out with the bath water, and we should not suffer inferior political and cultural paradigms because we have not lived up to something better.

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<sup>64</sup> See on Great-Britain apart from Phillips, op. cit. also: Thomas, Dominique, *Le Londonistan. Le djihad au Coeur de l'Europe*, n.p.: Éditions Michalon 2005; O'Neill, Sean, McGrory, Daniel, *The Suicide Factory. Abu Hamza and the Finsbury Park Mosque*, London: Harper Perennial 2006.

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