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The Postmodern Interpretation of Religious Terrorism

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Terrorism, the use of force by private actors or organizations to intimidate others to achieve political and ideological goals, is a significant menace to contemporary democracies. In the preceding decades, terrorism was perpetrated for the sake of a piece of land (geographical terrorism) or the realization of political goals (political terrorism). Nowadays, we are confronted with religious terrorism: people commit violent acts and justify their deeds with reference to religious ideas or passages of holy scripture.

There is a difference between religious terrorism as it manifests itself in the United States of America and religious terrorism as it has become known in Europe. First, European religious terrorism is perpetrated by nationals, not by foreign forces or organizations—"home-grown terrorists," as they are called. Mostly, the aggressors are youngsters estranged from the societies and ideals of their countries. They seek solace in an international religious community with radical ideas, such as that an appropriate punishment for blasphemy is death, as happened in the case of Theo van Gogh, not a small fine or a short prison sentence.

A second characteristic of European religious terrorism is that the aggression of the terrorists is directed at individuals. This is not the only religious terrorism that has manifested itself on European soil: the Madrid bombings of March 11, 2004, and the London Metro bombings of July 5, 2005, were indiscriminate in their attacks on large numbers of persons. Nevertheless, it is an important phenomenon in Europe that terrorism sometimes targets specific individuals. The most well-known example is, again, Van Gogh.

Third, terrorist attacks in Europe cannot be explained as a reaction to military intervention in foreign countries that may be motivated by humanitarian concerns. The terrorists themselves point to what they see as the state of decadence in their local and national communities. They do not criticize their own government for becoming involved in Iraq or Afghanistan but for having made legislation that deviates from holy law. An important factor in their discontent is the freedom in Western societies to criticize and even mock religious ideas. So religious terrorism is explicitly directed at the principle of free speech, as the "cartoon crisis" that began in Denmark makes abundantly clear.

Dutch authorities are in a state of bewilderment. How to react to this new phenomenon? How is it possible that relatively successful young citizens can reject the society and culture into which they have been born? How can we explain that second-generation immigrants feel less affinity with Western culture than their immigrant parents? What makes these youngsters so vulnerable to radical propaganda by teachers of hate and radical religious indoctrination on the Internet? And, most important, what can be done about it? In this article, I want to focus on the British and the Dutch approach to integrating minorities into national culture.

For many years, the official credo of the Dutch government was multiculturalism, an approach that fitted well with Dutch history and culture. Multiculturalism is nowadays affiliated with a postmodern outlook. The pivotal ideas of this vision of life are relativism (cultural relativism, in particular), a negative attitude toward Western political tradition, the cultivation of collective guilt for the transgressions of the colonial past, and other real or presumed black pages in Western history.

For multiculturalists, European civilization has been fundamentally on the wrong track since the Enlightenment. The Holocaust, Nazism, communism, slavery—these are seen not as deviations from the generally benign development of Western culture but as inevitable products of the European mind, which is inherently oppressive.

Multiculturalists also reject the universality of Enlightenment ideas of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, viewing them instead as isolated preoccupations of no universal appeal. It is preposterous and a manifestation of cultural arrogance, on this view, to invade foreign countries to export democracy and other Western ideals; it is likewise ridiculous to expect that religious and ethnic

minorities in Western societies should be expected to adopt these ideas and integrate into liberal democracy. Minorities should live according to their own customs; and, insofar as national culture is at variance with non-Western ideas, the national culture should adapt itself to new conditions. This attitude has grave consequences for the way liberal society is organized. Think of the principle of free speech. The answer of postmodern cultural relativism is: refrain from criticism. Be reticent to comment on unfamiliar religions. Let reform come from within and avoid provocation and polarization.

The consequences of this approach are far-reaching. It would lead to a bowdlerizing "purification" of the whole Western tradition of literature, art, cinematography, and even science. Postmodernism does not hold the Western tradition of rationality in high esteem, but would it also deny the right of the Western world to defend itself? The whole outlook that advocates the ideals of the Enlightenment, including democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, is to be replaced by the glorification of "otherness," by non-Western cultures, and especially by the conviction that all cultures are equally valuable. Every predilection in favor of Western ideas has to be smashed to excoriate, in Roger Scruton's phrase, the "West" in favor of the "Rest." A good illustration of this outlook on life can be found in the work of Stuart Sim, a professor of critical theory at the University of Sunderland (Great Britain). The core of the problem is fundamentalism, a concept he was inspired to analyze after the attack on the World Trade Center. So far, so good. But, like other postmodern cultural critics, Sim has a very broad definition of fundamentalism. In his book *Fundamentalist World: The New Dark Age of Dogma*, alongside religious fundamentalism, Sim discerns "market fundamentalism," "political fundamentalism," "national fundamentalism," and more. For Sim, every single set of ideas that is not completely relativistic is fundamentalist. So the only way to escape from the indictment of "fundamentalist" and "fundamentalism" is to adopt the postmodern relativistic outlook that Sim himself favors.

What Sim wants to encourage is a kind of skepticism toward all ideas of authority. Sim favors radical skepticism ("the more scepticism the better"). Defending Enlightenment values of democracy, free speech, and the rule of law as "universal principles" is one more kind of fundamentalism that has to be rejected.

Because every commitment to universal values is a kind of fundamentalism, the world is seen as one great clash of "fundamentalisms," with none superior or inferior to any other. For the postmodern relativist, all lifestyles and worldviews are of equal value. Sim's solution is to reject commitment to universal values. But is that sensible advice? This attitude, it seems to me, would make Western societies very vulnerable to the ideological challenge that religious terrorism poses. Liberal democracy, with its institutions of free speech is, not necessarily better than alternatives. The only thing that the postmodernist wants to argue against is evangelical zeal.

What this attitude leads to can also be gauged in *Murder in Amsterdam*, a recent book on the Van Gogh killing written by the Dutch-American journalist and scholar Ian Buruma. Like Sim, Buruma holds a postmodern relativistic outlook. He tries, again like Sim, to apply postmodern relativism to the problem of religious terrorism. He also contends that an orientation toward the ideas and ideals of the Enlightenment is not significantly better or preferable to an orientation toward radical Islamic ideology. Radical Islam is a fundamentalist position, but the same could be said about "radical Enlightenment." Both are to be rejected.

This relativistic stance comes to the fore when Buruma constructs a comparison between the worldview of Mohamed Bouyeri, Van Gogh's murderer, and the people he considers the most outspoken critics of radical Islam in the Netherlands: Ayaan Hirsi Ali and law professor Afshin Ellian. While Bouyeri defends radical Islam, Hirsi Ali and Ellian defend "radical Enlightenment." According to Buruma, they are basically the same. The first point of agreement is that they are all "warriors." Bouyeri is a warrior with the sword and the knife that he used to try to decapitate Van Gogh. Hirsi Ali and Ellian are warriors with the pen. But these differences are less important than the similarities for the postmodern relativist: all are warriors. A second point of agreement is that all are "radical." Islamists are radical in the sense that they do not shy away from radical interpretations of their holy scripture. If scripture calls for the death of unbelievers and apostates, the true believer should not shy away from fulfilling the will of God and killing the unbelievers and apostates, in particular if they have committed the crime of blasphemy. Adherents of what Jonathan Israel called "radical Enlightenment" are "radical" as well. The one is "radically secular, the other radically religious," but both are "radical."

A third point of agreement is that both radical parties believe in universal values. Both parties believe they are struggling for a righteous cause and for that very reason are not relativists. So both are fundamentalists from the perspective of postmodern radical skepticism. After he sketches the tenets of the ideas of the protagonists of radical Enlightenment, Buruma writes: "The same could be said, in a way, of their greatest enemy: the modern holy warrior, like the killer of Theo van Gogh."

With his qualification "in a way," Buruma seems to have hesitated. And, of course, every judicious writer would feel uncomfortable with this silly exercise in semantics. Are these two positions really "the same"? Is someone who is a warrior with the pen really the same as someone who conducts his war by killing people and decapitating them? Both Chamberlain and Hitler had moustaches, but it would be absurd to attribute any significance to this similarity. Of course, both radical Islam and radical Enlightenment are "radical," but that does not make them any more the same than a radical plan to alleviate hunger and suffering in the world is really the same as a radical plan to eradicate the Jews or any other ethnic or religious minority from this world.

Finally, it may be true that radical Islamists believe, as do adherents of the Enlightenment, in "universal values." But so did Immanuel Kant; so did such twentieth-century philosophers as Nicolai Hartmann and R.M. Hare. Most moral philosophers believe in universal values. That does not make Kant, Hartmann, and Hare "fundamentalists." The Universal Declaration of Human Rights presented by the United Nations in 1948 is also a "universal creed." The United Nations proclaims this list of human rights as a "common standard of achievement." That does not make the United Nations an assembly of fundamentalists or dangerous terrorists. Or are they, in the eyes of postmodernist critics of modernity?

The reasonings of Buruma and other postmodern relativists have preposterous consequences, but these consequences logically flow from the postmodern outlook.

Buruma also plays with the word purity. He writes that "the promised purity of Islamism" is not really different from "radical Enlightenment." That would imply that Sayyid Qutb, the ideologue of radical Islam, would not be no different from the godfather of "radical Enlightenment," Baruch de Spinoza.

What worries me about this relativistic—or rather, nihilistic—position is that it makes Western societies easy prey for the ideology of radical Islamism. If Western societies think they have no core values important enough to fight for (by peaceful means), then there is no reason for immigrant minorities to accept them. If the dominant ideology in Western societies is that democracy, the rule of law, and human rights have no specific quality that makes them superior to theocracy, dictatorship, and authoritarianism, there is no need to oppose the radical assault directed at Western democracies by the teachers of hate. Postmodern-value relativists not only deny the superior quality of Western values but even contest that people may defend those values against the assault that is being made on them. Demonizing every criticism on religious mentalities as "polarizing" and "provocation" denies even the right to defend democratic institutions. That would be a suicidal position.

What remains a mystery is why many intelligent people stick to the postmodern frame of mind, even though so many intelligent writers—Terry Eagleton and John Searle, to name just two—have thoroughly deconstructed its tenets. I think this has to do with the postmodernist conviction that an attitude that they see as relativistic and pragmatic would help in the struggle against religious terrorism. They hope that, if we abstain from radical criticism of the terrorist mindset, we can pacify the most radical elements. This is a great delusion, as Buruma himself would have understood had he thought more deeply about the material in his own book. For Buruma profiles not only protagonists of radical Enlightenment but also Amsterdam alderman Ahmed Aboutaleb and the city's mayor, Job Cohen. Buruma writes that he met Aboutaleb—a Moroccan-born Muslim who advocates pluralism—"surrounded by bodyguards. Like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, he needed full-time protection." That should have stimulated Buruma to further reflection on the nature of religious terrorism. As for Cohen, he has a reputation of being much too soft. He never employs strong language against ethnic and religious minorities. He is a man of "dialogue" and "respect," refraining from almost any kind of critique that might disturb the sensitivities of religious minorities. Yet Cohen was criticized by name in the letter that was left on the body of Theo van Gogh.

Buruma thinks he knows why terrorists hate Van Gogh, Ellian, and Hirsi Ali: because religious terrorists have a conflict with "radical Enlightenment." Buruma and many other postmodernists labor under the delusion that once we reject radical Enlightenment, and thereby radical critique of religion and provocation, we can pacify the terrorists. But what would he advise to Aboutaleb and Cohen? What have they done wrong? Apparently, religious terrorism is not a reaction to vehement criticism of Islam. It has other roots. And, of course, in countries like Egypt, Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia, there is no radical Enlightenment, there are no abusive cartoons about the Prophet Muhammad, and there are no books published like Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. Yet, there is religious terrorism.

Only by honestly reflecting on these issues may we be able to move forward in our understanding of an important threat to liberal institutions.

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