

# DO POSTMODERNISM, CULTURAL RELATIVISM AND MULTICULTURALISM MAKE US DEFENCELESS AGAINST JIHAD?

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*Those who speak about the importance of “multiculturalism” in their own case should not forget it when it comes to others.*

Christopher Hitchens<sup>1</sup>

*I have fought against communal politics all my adult life. The Labour Party in Britain would do well to look at the consequences of Indian politicians’ willingness to play the communalist card, and consider whether some Labour politicians’ apparent willingness to do the same in Britain, for the same reason (votes) is entirely wise.*

Salman Rushdie<sup>2</sup>

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The French author Pierre-André Taguieff writes: “Concernant la critique de l’islam, le déclin de la liberté d’expression, en France comme ailleurs, est un fait bien établi.”<sup>3</sup> Not only is his book *L’islamisme et nous* (2017) a splendid analysis of the political ideology that makes the claims of one specific religion supreme, but the author also gives due attention to the psychological processes that explain the popularity of Islamism. After *Charlie Hebdo* (2015),<sup>4</sup> the Rushdie fatwa (1989),<sup>5</sup> the murder of Theo van Gogh (2004)<sup>6</sup> and many other ‘incidents’, his observation that criticism of Islam, of Islamic

1 C. Hitchens, *The Quotable Hitchens: From Alcohol to Zionism*, Edited by Windsor Mann, Foreword by Martin Amis, Da Capo Press, Cambridge, MA, 2011, p. 195.

2 S. Rushdie, “In Good Faith”, 1990, in S. Rushdie (ed.), *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991*, Vintage Books, London, 2010 (1991), pp. 393-414, at p. 404.

3 P. Taguieff, *L’islamisme et nous. Penser l’ennemi imprévu*, CNRS Éditions, Paris, 2017, p. 116.

4 See W. Laes, *Een jaar na Charlie Hebdo: een pamflet*, met een voorwoord van Paul Cliteur, Houtekiet, Antwerpen en Utrecht, 2016 (2015); D. Benhabib, *Après Charlie: laïques de tous les pays, mobilisez-vous!*, H&O éditions, Paris, 2016; P. Val, *C’Était Charlie*, Grasset, Paris, 2015.

5 See D. van der Blom, *Verdamping van de Nederlandse democratie*, Uitgeverij Aspekt, Soesterberg, 2019, p. 54. After the retreat of the Russian army from Afghanistan in 1989, radical Islam was the main source of theoterrorist threat.

6 See T. Holman, *Theo is dood*, Met een voorwoord van Gijs van de Westelaken, Mets en Schilt, Amsterdam, 2006.

culture, or even Islamism, is very controversial cannot come as a surprise. The twenty-first century started with what one may call an act of Islamist ‘theoterrorism’.<sup>7</sup> But on 11 September 2001 no one could have expected that what Malise Ruthven called ‘a fury for God’ or, as the subtitle of his book runs, ‘the Islamist attack on America’,<sup>8</sup> would produce such a devastating impact on the state of *civil liberties* or *fundamental rights* in this world – everywhere in the world, not only in the West. Islamist theoterrorism is a challenge not only to our security but also to the most sacred values of liberal democracy, *i.e.*, freedom of speech, freedom of worship and freedom of religion.

Taguieff, who is clear on this point, makes another observation. He draws our attention to a bewildering paradox.

On a souvent relevé le paradoxe tragi-comique: plus le terrorisme islamiste tue en Occident, et plus l’on dénonce l’islamophobie des Occidentaux.<sup>9</sup>

This is indeed a perplexing situation. One would expect that the more attacks occur on freedom of speech, on religious satire, on cartoonists and literary authors, the more they would raise the consciousness of the dangers that beset us. But the contrary is true. The more attacks take place, the more complaints are voiced about ‘Islamophobia’, complaints about discrimination of religious minorities and not about the outrageous violence perpetrated by religiously motivated murderers. The aim of this article is to reflect on this most intriguing situation.

Taguieff is right that this is a strange paradox. He is wrong only when he claims that this paradox has often been noted (‘*relevé*’). The problem is that it is so often *ignored*. The concept of ‘Islamophobia’ is used to stifle any criticism and critical research into Islam.<sup>10</sup>

## 2 ISLAMOPHOBIA

We cannot pay too much attention to the history of the concept of ‘islamophobia’. I refer to Emma Webb’s *Islamophobia: An Anthology of Concerns* (2019).<sup>11</sup> For this contribution, it is essential that recently, in my own country, in the Netherlands, the mesmerizing effect of the concept was rudely violated when an expert in terrorism studies bluntly declared that the concept was introduced by the Muslim Brotherhood for instrumental reasons. During a hearing by the parliamentary committee doing

7 P. Cliteur, *Theoterrorism v. Freedom of Speech: From Incident to Precedent*, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2019.

8 M. Ruthven, *A Fury for God: The Islamist Attack on America*, Granta Books, London and New York, 2002.

9 See Taguieff, *Ibid.*, 2017, p. 116.

10 R. Hasan, “Runnymede Trust’s Report on Islamophobia, 1997”, in E. Webb, ed., *Islamophobia: An Anthology of Concerns*, Civitas, London, 2019, pp. 13-20.

11 E. Webb, ed., *Islamophobia: An Anthology of Concerns*, Civitas, London, 2019.

research into the financial links between the Middle East and mosques in the Netherlands, terrorism expert Ronald Sandee said:<sup>12</sup>

Islamophobia is a concept introduced in the media by the Muslim Brotherhood. By doing this, they earn respectability as partners in Brussels. They get access to all kinds of EU-institutions with their high profile in the islamophobia-business.<sup>13</sup>

The word 'islamophobia-business' is not politically correct language. This smacks of the popular quip "Islamophobia, a word created by fascists, used by cowards, to manipulate morons", often attributed to the late Christopher Hitchens. And during the hearings of the Dutch parliamentary committee researching financial links between oil states and Dutch mosques, there were many moments when views were voiced that were unheard of in the preceding years. Nevertheless, the forces that try to subdue open discussion on religious terrorism are also still strong, especially in the United Kingdom.<sup>14</sup> The struggle against religious terrorism is still hampered by taboos. This contribution focuses on the *cultural inhibitions* in the battle against terror. It seems the force and success of the terrorists is largely due to the weakness of the societies that are targeted. That those societies are not exclusively Western secularized societies is quite clear. Most of the victims are to be found in Muslim majority countries. This makes it all the more necessary to conquer this contemporary malaise. Governments have so far skirted the cultural factor.

### 3 THE TREASON OF THE INTELLECTUALS

Especially the attitude of 'intellectuals' is baffling. Their defence of free speech (if at all) is lukewarm and often downright hostile to people like Rushdie, Westergaard (Danish cartoonist), Carrell (Dutch showmaster, early satirist of Khomeini), Stéphane Charbonnier (French cartoonist, killed in 2015), Lars Vilks and others who incurred

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12 Author of: "Asleep at the wheel in Amsterdam: Police and city ignore a terror problem" (2019), [investigativejournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Dutch-Report.pdf](https://investigativejournal.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Dutch-Report.pdf).

13 On 10 February 2020: "Islamofobie is iets dat in de media wordt gebracht en gehouden door organisaties als het Moslim Broederschap. Ze worden ermee serieus genomen als partners in bijvoorbeeld Brussel. Ze krijgen toegang tot allerlei EU-organen, omdat ze zich zo sterk profileren met de islamofobie-industrie," [tweedekamer.nl/sites/default/files/atoms/files/verhoorschema\\_openbare\\_verhoren\\_parlementaire\\_ondervragingscommissie\\_6\\_februari\\_2020.pdf](https://tweedekamer.nl/sites/default/files/atoms/files/verhoorschema_openbare_verhoren_parlementaire_ondervragingscommissie_6_februari_2020.pdf).

14 See e.g. [data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/home-affairs-committee/islamophobia/oral/103379.pdf](https://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/home-affairs-committee/islamophobia/oral/103379.pdf).

the wrath of the Islamist radicals.<sup>15</sup> What Julien Benda (1867-1956) called the ‘treason of the intellectuals’ (*la trahison des clercs*) gets a new confirmation in this sorry state of affairs.<sup>16</sup> The central question of this contribution is how to explain this. How is it possible that a fundamental value of democratic regimes, *i.e.*, freedom of expression, gets such an unfavourable reception with people who are the most qualified and the most gifted to defend it? How does one explain, for instance, that an ex-president of the United States (*i.e.*, Jimmy Carter, who held office from 1977 to 1981), a country that has the first amendment as the foundational principle of its Constitution,<sup>17</sup> simply disavowed the liberal tradition of his own country and Constitution by taking sides with the dictator Khomeini in 1989, whose regime had proved nightmarish to the US during the hostage crisis (1979-1980) and caused a humiliating defeat for Carter personally? Is not this, after all, what Carter did when he described the Rushdie *fatwa* in the following words, “Rushdie’s book is an insult”?<sup>18</sup> How is it possible that in the Netherlands, the country of Spinoza<sup>19</sup> and Erasmus,<sup>20</sup> a country where Enlightenment thinkers published their iconoclastic works in the seventeenth century,<sup>21</sup> it was accepted that a minister of foreign affairs openly advocated self-censorship on television without causing a stir in Parliament?<sup>22</sup> How does one explain that a prominent philosopher like Charles Taylor, commenting on the Rushdie *fatwa*, in 1989,<sup>23</sup> speaks with so much condescension on ‘the liberal western mind’?<sup>24</sup> (Taylor’s case is all the more striking because on 8 January 2015, one day after the massacre in Paris, on 7 January 2015, Taylor said: “I would not say this

15 See for another analysis of this paradox: J. Glazov, *United in Hate: The Left’s Romance with Tyranny and Terror*, WND Books, Los Angeles, 2009; J. Birnbaum, *La religion des faibles: ce que le djihadisme dit de nous*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 2018.

16 J. Benda, *La trahison des clercs*, Bernard Grasset, Paris, 1975 (1927).

17 See on the background: J. Madison, *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments*, 1785, in J. Madison, ed., *Writings*, The Library of America, New York, 1999, pp. 29-39; T. Jefferson, “To Messrs. Nehemiah Dodge and Others, a Committee of the Danbury Baptist Association, in the State of Connecticut”, 1 January 1802, in T. Jefferson, ed., *Writings*, The Library of America, New York, 1984, p. 510.

18 J. Carter, “Rushdie’s Book is an Insult”, in: *The New York Times*, 5 March 1989, also in: L. Appignanesi and S. Maitland, eds., *The Rushdie File*, Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, NY, 1990, pp. 236-237.

19 J. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750*, Oxford University Press, Oxford/New York, 2001; J. Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ and Oxford, 2010.

20 S. Zweig, *Triumph und Tragik des Erasmus von Rotterdam*, Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, Frankfurt am Main, 1981 (1938).

21 P. Blom, *A Wicked Company: Forgotten Radicalism of the European Enlightenment*, Basic Books, New York, 2010; P. Blom, *Encyclopédie: The Triumph of Reason in an Unreasonable Age*, Fourth Estate, London and New York, 2004.

22 This was in 1987 when showmaster Rudi Carrell got into trouble as a result of a spoof on Khomeini. See P. Cliteur, “The Rudi Carrell Affair and Its Significance for the Tension between Theoterrorism and Religious Satire”, *Ancilla Iuris* (2013), pp. 15-41, at p. 15.

23 C. Taylor, “The Rushdie Controversy”, *iPublic Culture*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (Fall 1989), pp. 118-122.

24 See P. Cliteur, “Taylor and Dummett on the Rushdie Affair”, *Journal of Religion and Society*, Vol. 18 (2016), pp. 1-25.

in Paris today, but *Charlie Hebdo* helped contribute to a situation”.<sup>25</sup> That means that between 1989, his comment on the Rushdie *fatwa*, and 2015, his comment on the Paris massacre, Taylor’s ideas had not changed one bit.) How does one explain that so many of Rushdie’s fellow writers, who were intimately connected with (and professionally, as writers, dependent on) a culture of freedom, so easily took the side of religious obscurantism in a period when support was so much in need?<sup>26</sup>

#### 4 OIKOPHOBIA

Some commentators tried to offer explanations for this. Roger Scruton (1944-2020) coined the term ‘oikophobia’.<sup>27</sup> The word ‘oikophobia’ is used in psychiatry to denote an aversion to home surroundings. Scruton, however, gave it a broader meaning. Xenophobia is fear of the alien; oikophobia is fear of the familiar. As Scruton says, it is the “disposition, in any conflict, to side with ‘them’ against ‘us’”, the inclination to “denigrate the customs, culture and institutions that are identifiably ‘ours.’”

Scruton’s analysis is somewhat reminiscent of what Irving Kristol (1920-2009), long ago, characterized as the ‘adversary culture of intellectuals’ (1979).<sup>28</sup>

But although we have names to identify the sickness, we still have insufficient insight into the scope and the roots of the phenomenon. Explaining this is perhaps the hardest part of a coherent strategy of cultural counterterrorism. And yet it is necessary to understand how theoterrorists could make headway in the world. In this contribution, I will try to present three cultural trends, three ideological positions, three ways of thinking that are widely dispersed among intellectuals that – hopefully – shed some light on the paradoxical phenomenon Taguieff presents, namely our cultural weakness in confronting the ideology of those who attack us. They are self-conscious. We are not. Our self-esteem is undermined by the ideologies we cherish. This gives our enemies a superb advantage over us.

In the pages that follow, I will try to give an explanation of Taguieff’s paradox by showing that the West, since the 1960s and 1970s, is in the grip of three cultural and intellectual trends: (i) cultural relativism, (ii) multiculturalism, and (iii) postmodernism. It is difficult to say which of the three is foundational for the other two, but I believe that the combination of the three makes Scruton’s oikophobia more understandable.

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25 Taylor, quoted in: M. Swan, “Charlie Hebdo ‘Part of the Situation’ that Led to Attack, Says Charles Taylor”, *The Catholic Register*, 21 January 2015.

26 Although only covering the early days of the Rushdie Affair, Appignanesi and Maitland, *Ibid.*, gives a good insight into the different positions.

27 R. Scruton, “Oikophobia”, in R. Scruton, ed., *England and the Need for Nations*, Civitas, London, 2004, pp. 33-38.

28 I. Kristol, “The Adversary Culture of Intellectuals”, *Encounter*, October 1979, also in: *Reflections of a Neoconservative*. Looking back, looking ahead, Basic Books, New York, 1983, and in: *Neo-Conservatism*. Selected Essays 1949-1955, pp. 106-123.

## 5 CULTURAL RELATIVISM

The first is cultural relativism. What is cultural relativism? Cultural relativism is the view that an idea, an institution, a point of view may be criticized only ‘from within’.<sup>29</sup> American philosopher James Rachels (1941-2003) defines cultural relativism as a set of ideas with the following claims:

- Different societies have different moral codes;
- The moral code of a society determines what is right within that society; that is, if the moral code of a society says that a certain action is right, then that action is right, at least within that society;
- There is no objective standard that can be used to judge one society’s code as better than another’s. In other words, there is no ‘universal truth’ in ethics; there are no moral truths that hold for all people at all times;
- The moral code of our own society has no special status; it is but one among many;
- It is mere arrogance for us to judge the conduct of other peoples. We should adopt an attitude of ‘tolerance’ towards the practices of other cultures.<sup>30</sup>

The implication of this set of convictions is that a culture can be criticized only from the perspective of the people that are part of that culture. It is, *e.g.*, illegitimate to say that the mural paintings in Lascaux are less developed than the portraits of Rembrandt.<sup>31</sup> It is also problematic to speak of ‘progress’ in culture or arts.<sup>32</sup>

Jack Donnely makes a distinction between radical cultural relativism and a more modest form. Radical cultural relativism takes as its point of departure that “culture is the sole source of the validity of a moral right or rule”.<sup>33</sup>

29 See for a critique of this S. Lukes, *Moral Relativism*, Profile Books, London, 2008; J. R. Searle, “Rationality and Realism, What is at Stake?”, in: *Daedalus, Journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Vol. 122, No. 4 (Fall 1993), pp. 55-83 and for the connection with multiculturalism: I. Leicht, *Multikulturalismus auf dem Prüfstand: Kultur, Identität und Differenz in modernen Einwanderungsgesellschaften*, Metropol, Marburg, 2009, in particular pp. 168-185; R. Hasan, *Multiculturalism: Some Inconvenient Truths*, Politico’s Publishing Ltd, 2010; B. Barry, *Culture & Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism*, Polity, Cambridge, 2001; N. Bissoondath, *Selling Illusions: The Cult of Multiculturalism in Canada*, Penguin Books, London, 1994; J. Blanchet-Gravel, *La face cachée du multiculturalisme*, Préface de Michael Maffesoli, Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris, 2018.

30 J. Rachels, *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, Fifth Edition by Stuart Rachels, McGraw-Hill, Inc., New York etc., 2007 (1986), p. 19. See for some other analyses of cultural relativism M. Gardner, “Beyond Cultural Relativism”, in M. Gardner, ed., *The Night is Large. Collected Essays 1938-1995*, Penguin Books, London, 1996, pp. 149-161; H. Gensler, “Cultural Relativism”, in *Ethics*, Routledge, London and New York, 1998, pp. 11-20.

31 J. Barreau and G. Bigot, *Toute l’histoire du monde: de la préhistoire à nos jours*, Fayard, Paris, 2005, p. 24.

32 See on the notion of progress in general: P. Taguieff, *Le sens du progrès: une approche historique et philosophique*, Flammarion, Paris, 2004; J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Origin and Growth*, Macmillan, St. Martin’s Street, London, 1920.

33 J. Donnely, “Cultural Relativism and Universal Human Rights”, *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 6 (1984), pp. 400-419, at p. 400.

## 6 CRITICS AND DEFENDERS OF CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Cultural relativism has some critics, like W.T. Stace (1886-1967),<sup>34</sup> Alan Bloom (1930-1992),<sup>35</sup> Martin Gardner (1914-2010),<sup>36</sup> Simon Blackburn (b. 1944)<sup>37</sup> and Ernest Gellner (1925-1995),<sup>38</sup> but it also has many staunch defenders. In particular, cultural anthropologists like Ruth Benedict (1887-1948),<sup>39</sup> Franz Boas (1848-1952)<sup>40</sup> and Melville J. Herskovits (1895-1963)<sup>41</sup> were the torchbearers of this view.<sup>42</sup> The defenders have won the day. Cultural relativism may – without exaggeration – be regarded as the default setting of the contemporary intellectual. It suggests a culture of broad-mindedness, tolerance, sophistication and cosmopolitanism. But do the claims of cultural relativism hold water?

Let us see. According to cultural relativists, criticism of cultural practices *from without* is suspicious and to be avoided, at least when this criticism is voiced from what is considered to be a ‘Western point of view’. The reverse, *i.e.*, criticism of the culture of the West from a non-Western point of view, paradoxically, never elicits the reaction that such critique is illegitimate. Here we encounter one of the problems of cultural relativism, *viz.*, inconsistency. The cultural relativist’s ban on critique is always a one-way street. So there is some double morality there.

According to British Labour politician Meghnad Desai (b. 1940), that mentality is ubiquitous in the West, and he does not judge this phenomenon favourably. He writes:

The humanitarian concerns of Western media and intellectuals are very parochial: there is indignation only where Western soldiers are involved in

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34 W. T. Stace, *The Concept of Morals*, Macmillan, London, 1937.

35 A. Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind: How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Soul of Today’s Students*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1987.

36 Gardner, *Ibid.*, 1996, pp. 149-161; M. Gardner, “Goodness: Why I Am Not an Ethical Relativist”, in M. Gardner, ed., *The Whys of a Philosophical Scrivener*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1983, pp. 85-99.

37 S. Blackburn, *Truth: A Guide for the Perplexed*, Penguin Books, London, 2006 (2005); S. Blackburn, “The Professor of Complacency”, *The New Republic*, 20 August 2001, pp. 31-42; S. Blackburn, *Being Good: A Short Introduction to Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001.

38 E. Gellner, *Postmodernism, Reason, and Religion*, Routledge, London and New York, 1992.

39 R. Benedict, “Anthropology and the Abnormal”, *The Journal of General Psychology*, Vol. 10 (1934), pp. 59-82.

40 S. J. Whitfield, “Franz Boas: The Anthropologist as Public Intellectual”, *Society*, Vol. 47, No. 5 (September 2010), pp. 430-438.

41 M. J. Herskovits, “Some Further Comments on Cultural Relativism”, *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 60, No. 2 (April 1958), pp. 266-273.

42 An excellent book on the whole controversy is: R. Sandall, *The Culture Cult: Designer Tribalism and Other Essays*, Westview, Boulder, Co, 2001. See also a criticism of the UDHR avant la lettre by the American anthropologists in: “Statement on Human Rights”, *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 49 (1947), pp. 539-543.



killing or being killed in any part of the world. If ‘natives’ are killing each other somewhere remote, there is total neglect.<sup>43</sup>

The Dutch legal scholar and philosopher Afshin Ellian (*b.* 1966) makes the same criticism in his *Letters from a Persian* (2005). He writes: “We should not misunderstand the anti-Enlightenment thinkers: they are against Enlightenment in the World of Islam, but they are in favor of Enlightenment in Europe.”<sup>44</sup>

Desai and Ellian are right, but for all the rationality that is to be found in their remarks, using different standards for the Western and non-Western world is still a common phenomenon. It is even considered to be polite, civilized and the hallmark of a progressive intellectual. Jeremy Waldron (*b.* 1953) formulates the question that cultural relativism confronts us with, in the following words:

We know that Iran imprisons, tortures, and kills its own dissident writers (...). Should we condemn that, or is that the imperious imposition of our values on a culture we do not understand?<sup>45</sup>

Waldron writes that the ‘relativist approach’ is of no use in the Rushdie affair. In fact, that ‘their’ ways are not our ways is now the problem, not the solution. He writes:

The question is whether we shall have free expression in the world or not – whether some of the inhabitants of the world are to be threatened with deaths by others for what they write. No doubt, different cultures, different faiths bring their disparate perspectives to that question. But it needs one answer. Liberals cannot say open-mindedly that the killing of Rushdie by a Shiite Muslim would be as valid for the Muslim as literary hubris is for Rushdie. We cannot agree or afford to differ on who has the right to live. This is the place where we have to abandon our relativism and stand and fight for what matters.<sup>46</sup>

Abandon our relativism, Waldron says. But these words, written in 1989, are not universally shared in our time. And this is an understatement.

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43 M. Desai, *Rethinking Islamism: The Ideology of the New Terror*, L.B. Taurus, London/New York 2007, p. 51. Steyn writes about “the enervated state of the Western world, the sense of civilizational ennui, of nations too mired in cultural relativism to understand what’s at stake.” See M. Steyn, *America Alone: The End of the World as We Know It*, Regnery Publishing, Inc., Washington, DC, 2006, p. xx.

44 A. Ellian, *Brieven van een Pers: Over Nederlands en islamitisch kannibalisme*, J.M. Meulenhoff, Amsterdam, 2005, p. 13.

45 J. Waldron, “Rushdie and Religion”, *The Times Literary Supplement*, 10 March 1989, pp. 248 and 260, also in: J. Waldron, *Liberal Rights*, Collected Papers 1981-1991, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge/New York, 1993, pp. 134-143, at p. 135.

46 Waldron, *Ibid.*, 1993, p. 136.



7 THE QUEST FOR UNIVERSALS

What has happened to the idea of universality? In *Joseph Anton* (2012), Salman Rushdie tries to make a case for universal values when he writes an imaginary letter to 'Religion'. He says to 'Religion':

This may confuse you, in cultural matters I am not a relativist and I do believe in universals. Human rights, for example, human freedoms, human nature and what it wants and deserves.<sup>47</sup>

He continues: "The need for liberty, like the inevitability of death, is universal."<sup>48</sup>

In 1948 this was the conviction behind the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. Two years later the Council of Europe presented the *European Convention on Human Rights* (1950). Sixteen years later the United Nations developed the *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights* (1966). The UDHR, ECHR and ICCPR were all predicated on the notion that certain fundamental rights were the common property of mankind. As John Charvet and Elisa Kaczynska-Nay write in *The Liberal Project and Human Rights* (2008): "[H]uman beings possess these rights whether or not the rights are recognized in the politico-legal system of which they are members and to which they are subject."<sup>49</sup> But the notion of universal values has run into heavy weather, so it seems. An influential author who is rumoured to have broken with universalism is Samuel Huntington. Salman Rushdie takes Samuel Huntington (1927-2008) to task when he says: "Consequently I do not agree with Professor S. Huntington's notion that reason belongs to the West and obscurantism to the East."<sup>50</sup> But on the basis of Huntington's famous essay (1993)<sup>51</sup> and subsequent book (1996),<sup>52</sup> it is difficult to say what Huntington's position was in this matter. It may be the case that he, in principle, subscribes to the position that all men, regardless of their culture, have certain basic rights (normative universalism), yet at the same time is sceptical about the chances of seeing those rights acknowledged because of the prevalence of oppressive cultures (ineradicable diversity, in fact). 'When in Rome do as the Romans do' can be interpreted as a piece of practical advice for the traveller on how to avoid social friction in another country or in another culture. It becomes hardcore relativism, however, when

47 S. Rushdie, *Joseph Anton: A Memoir*, Jonathan Cape, London, 2012, p. 315.

48 Ibid. See also B. Lévy, *Avec Salman Rushdie: Questions de principe six*, Le Livre de Poche, Librairie Générale Française, Paris, 1999, p. 63, where both authors state that they subscribe to the notion of universal values.

49 J. Charvet and E. Kaczynska, *The Liberal Project of Human Rights: The Theory and Practice of a New World Order*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 4.

50 Rushdie, Ibid., p. 315.

51 S. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?", in: *Foreign Affairs*, Summer, 1993, pp. 22-49.

52 S. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*, Simon & Schuster, New York, 1996.

the one who gives this advice really believes that there are no universal values in the normative sense. If female circumcision in Egypt is standard practice there,<sup>53</sup> then female circumcision is really the right approach in Egypt.<sup>54</sup> If female circumcision is shunned in the Netherlands, then in the Netherlands it is really morally wrong. If criticism of the Prophet is beyond the pale in Saudi Arabia, then there is no moral ground for making a plea for freedom of speech in that country. If atheism is not what is widely practised in that country, then atheism is wrong – at least *there*.<sup>55</sup> While transgressing the border to a European country, this suddenly brings a new right into being, *namely* the right to believe but also the right not to believe, the right to adopt a religion but also the right to reject a religion. Freedom of speech, non-existent on this side of the border, a universal human right on the other side. This is the essence of cultural relativism.

Cultural relativism is often presented as a sophisticated but, paradoxically, also commonsensical view. But that sophistication is debatable to say the least. Cultural relativism is very likely not to stimulate ‘tolerance’ and ‘respect’, as is so often claimed, but moral nihilism. What characterizes advocates of free speech such as Rushdie, Westergaard, Val,<sup>56</sup> Charbonnier,<sup>57</sup> Fourest<sup>58</sup> and others is that they think that by proclaiming the *right* to free speech they can make a contribution to *stimulate respect* for free speech. In other words, by proclaiming moral universalism one may make a contribution to the factual universality of certain values. Cultural relativists often lack that faith.

## 8 THE PREVALENCE OF CULTURAL RELATIVISM

It is difficult to overestimate the influence of cultural relativist ideas on contemporary Western intellectuals and policymakers, according to Alan Bloom in *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987), partly because it has been more or less self-evident in the schools and universities.<sup>59</sup>

Relativism also has a significant influence on the discussion of the limits of free speech. Think also of the conversation between the Dutch minister Hans van den Broek and a journalist in what I have called ‘The Rudi Carrell Affair’.<sup>60</sup> This was about a spoof the Dutch showmaster Rudi Carrell (1934-2006) had made on the Iranian

53 See for some disturbing facts about the prevalence of this practice A. Kanko, *Parce que tu es une fille: histoire d'une vie excisée*, Renaissance du livre, Waterloo, 2014.

54 See Stace, *Ibid*.

55 B. Whitaker, *Arabs without God: Atheism and Freedom of belief in the Middle East*, Charleston, SC, 2014.

56 P. Val, *Malaise dans l'inculture*, Bernard Grasset, Paris, 2015.

57 Charb, *Lettre aux escrocs de l'islamophobie qui font le jeu des racistes*, Les Échappés, Paris, 2015.

58 C. Fourest, *Éloge du blasphème*, Bernard Grasset, Paris, 2015.

59 Bloom, *Ibid.*, 1987, p. 19.

60 See Cliteur, *Ibid.*, 2019, pp. 39-65.

dictator Khomeini and that was announced to be broadcast on Dutch television. But a Dutch minister, member of the Cabinet, objected to this. As a reason for self-censorship, he argued: "Don't forget that in the Netherlands we are used to being tolerant of one another, of our different ways of thinking and our convictions, among other things." So giving in to the demands of the dictator Khomeini (no criticism of his theocratic dictatorship in the Dutch press) is presented as 'tolerance' by the Dutch minister. The Dutch minister would probably be surprised if he were told that his view was that of a 'cultural relativist'. He has probably never heard of the word. But that does not alter the fact that his convictions are what James Rachels and Jack Donnelly have presented as the essence of cultural relativism.

In the reaction by the Dutch minister, we see that strange mixture of humility (presented as tolerance and respect) but also that of arrogance that is so characteristic of cultural relativism. On the one hand, cultural relativism vehemently rejects all pretence that 'the West' is superior to a non-Western culture.<sup>61</sup> But at the same time there is that implicit understanding between the minister and the journalist that there, in Iran, people live in a way that 'so much differs' from our way of life that ordinary notions of freedom of speech and tolerance do not apply there. So, basically, the Western 'tolerant' people deliver the rest of the world to backwardness. But is *that* tolerance? Or is it sheer arrogance? (See what has been quoted from Desai and Ellian in the previous paragraphs).

## 9 DEATH OF A PRINCESS

Another example of that intriguing combination of arrogance masked as tolerance is found in the figure of Elsa Gruber in the film *Death of a Princess* (1980),<sup>62</sup> a documentary based on the true story of Princess Masha'il Bint Fahd Al Saud (1958-1977), a 19-year-old Saudi princess, who, together with her lover, was publicly executed on the ground of adultery, which was (and still is) a capital offence in Saudi Arabia.<sup>63</sup>

This requires further explanation. The princess was the granddaughter of Prince Mohammed bin Abdulaziz (1910-1988), an elder brother of the Saudi king. She was executed, together with her boyfriend, at the instigation of her grandfather. So the story may also be construed as what has come to be known as 'honour killing', although it took place in the most prestigious circles.

61 Challenged by: Ibn Warraq, *Why the West is Best: A Muslim's Apostate's Defense of Liberal Democracy*, Encounter Books, New York, London, 2012.

62 See P. Cliteur, L. Houben and M. Slimmen, "Death of a Princess", in P. Cliteur and T. Herrenberg, eds., *The Fall and Rise of Blasphemy Law*, with a foreword by Flemming Rose, Leiden University Press, Leiden, 2016, pp. 111-137.

63 See T. White and G. Ganley, "The 'Death of a Princess' Controversy", Program on Information Resources Policy, Center for Information Research, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, 1983; J. Goodman, "The Death of a Princess Cases: Television Programming by State-Owned Public Broadcasters and Viewers' First Amendment Rights", *University of Miami Law Review*, Vol. 36 (1982), pp. 779-805.

The film is based on interviews by Antony Thomas (b. 1940), but soon Thomas realized that he could not make the film because those contributing to the project wanted to remain anonymous. So he decided to make a fictionalized version ('docu-drama') or rather a 'film on the film' that he had wanted to make. The characters in the film are played by actors, not by the real people who provided input and information for the film.

Thomas himself is played by actor Paul Freeman (b. 1943), who is presented in the film under the name of Christopher Ryder.<sup>64</sup> Another important character in the film is Elsa Gruber (played by Judy Parfitt), who stands for Rosemarie Buschow, a German teacher who worked for the royal family and who wrote a book on her experiences herself.<sup>65</sup>

The film stirred up controversy all over the world. In the US, Mobil Oil tried to prevent the broadcasting of the film. The same happened in other countries. When the film was aired in England, much discussion immediately ensued.<sup>66</sup>

The film is important for several reasons. First, it gives us an idea of the roots of the controversy that is central to this article: the tension between Islamism on the one hand, the ideology that motivates the terrorists and freedom of thought and freedom of speech on the other. But, second, the film also provides a good idea about the variety of convictions people express about this tension. What interests me within the context of the cultural weakness of liberal democracies in the face of religious terrorism is a reaction that Ryder gets from Elsa Gruber (a character based on the 'real' nanny Buschow),<sup>67</sup> who says: "Why do you keep picking on those people? Their only crime is that they are living centuries behind us. They have different things, and we have different things."

As in the case of the Dutch minister, what makes this commentary intriguing is the curious combination of cultural relativism and universalism. On the one hand, Gruber rejects the moralistic comment of Ryder on the execution of the princess. Ryder is emphatic: killing a young girl for no other reason than that she had fallen in love with a boy of her age is abhorrent. And (here universalism comes in) this is abhorrent not only in Saudi Arabia, but also in Afghanistan, or the Netherlands or on the Antarctic. It is simply wrong *everywhere*. But the relativist objects: Why pick on those people? Is their culture inferior to ours? Nevertheless, Gruber's relativism is very difficult to practise

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64 Why did Thomas choose the name 'Ryder'? Does he want to suggest an analogy with Charles Ryder, the main character in Evelyn Waugh's epic *Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder*, Penguin Books, London, 2008 (1945)? Atheist Charles Ryder becomes intimately involved with the super-rich Catholic family that owns the Brideshead Castle. There he is witness to countless objectionable (from his perspective) cultural-religious practices, mainly an all-devouring Catholic sense of guilt that ruins the life of all those concerned. Christopher Ryder (or Antony Lewis) is a similar observer of the Saudi ways.

65 R. Buschow, *The Prince & I*, Futura Publications Limited, London, 1979.

66 See on this: A. Brouwer and M. Fogteloo, "Het imago van Nederland geschaad?", *De Groene Amsterdammer*, 24 maart 2010.

67 See on her: E. Hahn, "A Nanny in Arabia", in: *The New York Times*, 8 February 1981.

consistently because the relativist Gruber also says that Saudi Arabia is 'behind us'. That last remark betrays that she is not a *consistent* cultural relativist. She thinks that 'the West' is *ahead* and the Islamists in Saudi Arabia are 'backward'. But moral progress is clearly impossible within the relativist frame of mind. Why? Because a judgment on who is ahead and who is backward presupposes a standard, a yardstick to measure progress; in other words, Gruber cannot be a *consistent* relativist.

That inconsistency, however, has not hampered the success of relativism. 'When in Rome, do as the Romans do' became the default setting for many people to choose their moral position. Who are *we* to criticize *their* values?

## 10 MULTICULTURALISM

Now let us leave cultural relativism for a moment and examine a second cultural and intellectual trend. This second cultural and intellectual trend is also significant in order to understand the lukewarm defence of free speech by so many contemporary intellectuals. It is also intimately connected with cultural relativism. It may be understood as an attempt to practise the principle 'When in Rome, do as the Romans' as a consistent philosophy of living together: multiculturalism.

Multiculturalism became hugely popular among intellectuals and policymakers in the 1980s, and critical scrutiny of its central presuppositions was possible only on pain of excommunication from enlightened circles. As Neil Bissoondath (*b.* 1955), a critic of Canadian state multiculturalism, wrote: "I was the devil debating an apostle on the merits of God before an assemblage of angels."<sup>68</sup>

The British social theorist Rumi Hasan (*b.* 1959), also a critic of multiculturalism, starts his excellent monograph *Multiculturalism: Some Inconvenient Truths* (2010) with the Runnymede report, *The Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain* (2000).<sup>69</sup> This is also named 'The Parekh-report' after its main contributor. That report characterizes Britain as a 'multicultural society'. Or rather, it advised the government to *declare* that the United Kingdom had become a 'multicultural society'. Hasan comments: "It seemed that 'multiculturalism' had taken very deep roots and was a fact of British life and society."<sup>70</sup> But in the years following the publication of this report, Hasan tells us, this proved to be far from reality; the report masked profound tensions in society.

As a defining moment for a growing unease with multiculturalism, he refers to the 7 July 2005 suicide bombings in London. After that, the Chair of the Commission for

<sup>68</sup> Bissoondath, *Ibid.*, p. x.

<sup>69</sup> Hasan, *Ibid.*, 2010. See also R. Hasan, "We Need a 21<sup>st</sup> Century Voltaire to Fight the Growing Power of Censorship Around the World", *The Independent*, 23 October 2012; P. Cliteur, "Multiculturalism: Some Inconvenient Truths", Review of Rumi Hasan, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (2012), pp. 331-333.

<sup>70</sup> Hasan 2010, *Ibid.*, p. 1.

Radical Equality, Trevor Phillips (*b.* 1953), delivered his well-publicized speech on 22 September 2005 with the robust characterization that we are ‘sleepwalking our way to segregation’. Hasan sympathizes with Phillips and indicates that his book aims to rethink the debate on multiculturalism. He seeks to critique the theoretical and philosophical basis of multiculturalism and to highlight some of its effects in Britain.

Multiculturalists mean well, as Hasan makes clear. At the same time, it may be surmised that the multiculturalists inflicted considerable harm on migrant communities (*see* the motto of Hitchens at the beginning of this article). The conclusion that is drawn after reading Hasan’s meticulous analysis is compelling: multiculturalism is a grave mistake.<sup>71</sup> Nevertheless, it is a mistake that has deep roots in Western thinking.

We have seen, the roots of cultural relativism go back to an early critique of the human rights tradition by American anthropologists.<sup>72</sup> What are the origins of multiculturalism?

## 11 THE PREHISTORY OF MULTICULTURALISM

It is the exceptional merit of Arthur Herman’s (*b.* 1956) book *The Idea of Decline in Western History* (1997) that makes us realize that the roots of multiculturalism go back beyond the 1980s, when it became prevalent in Europe. Multiculturalism, in the version in which it became fashionable at European universities and in circles of policymakers, derives from American sources. In fact, European multiculturalism is a watered-down version of an American version that is much more radical.

In Herman’s book, multiculturalism is analysed as the offspring of ‘declinism’, or the idea of the ‘decline of the West’. By the 1970s the idea of ‘decline of the West’, as had been developed by Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975) and Oswald Spengler (1880-1936), Herman writes, had no longer held the attention of the intellectuals. That did not mean, however, that the idea had been abandoned. The French cultural pessimists reveal how declinism moved “from being an explicit issue, as it still was for Toynbee and Spengler, to an implicit one in modern critical thinking”.<sup>73</sup>

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71 Nazir-Ali claims that multiculturalism still has supporters “even though in recent years its failings have been manifest and it has been repudiated by the very ‘establishment’ that gave it birth”. *See* Nazir-Ali, *Triple Jeopardy for the West: Aggressive Secularism, Radical Islamism and Multiculturalism*, Bloomsbury, London, 2012, p. ix.

72 *See* “Statement on Human Rights”, *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 49 (1947), pp. 539-543. *See* on the history of cultural relativism: P. Cliteur and A. Ellian, “The Universality of Values and Principles”, in P. Cliteur and A. Ellian, eds., *A New Introduction to Jurisprudence: Legality, Legitimacy, and the Foundations of the Law*, Routledge, London and New York, 2019, pp. 114-165.

73 A. Herman, *The Idea of Decline in Western History*, The Free Press/Simon & Schuster, New York, London Toronto Sydney Singapore, 1997, p. 364.

Sartre, Foucault, Fanon, and their ideological offspring, such as Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-François Lyotard, were teaching that Western institutions, Western-style rationality, language, and “discourse,” and even the Western image of man himself were all a cultural dead end. And genuine freedom came from denying or transgressing against those Western boundaries, they proclaimed. Humanity had to look beyond the limits modern European civilization set on the authentic self.<sup>74</sup>

These criticisms, as well as those of Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) and the Frankfurt School, Herman writes, served as a springboard of a new wave of anti-Western and also anti-European ideologies: “One of these became multiculturalism.”<sup>75</sup> Multiculturalism derives its inspiration from thinkers like W.E.B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Adorno, Marcuse, the Frankfurt School,<sup>76</sup> as well as Sartre, Foucault and Franz Fanon. It teaches that Western rationality tramples out vitality and totalizes political institutions and manifests racism, imperialism, Darwinian nationalism and fascism. The West is a malign force in history. “For the multiculturalist, Western civilization is entirely *Zivilisation*; there is no *Kultur* at its heart.”<sup>77</sup>

Herman makes a *tour d’horizon* of such thinkers as C. Wright Mills (1916-1962), Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) and Noam Chomsky (b. 1928), who compared the United States with the Soviet Union, claiming that they were virtually indistinguishable.<sup>78</sup> Enslavement, racial brutality, discrimination and exploitation are all the real face of American society. W.E.B. Du Bois (1868-1963) thus comes to the following conclusion:

All white people, I think, are implicated in these things so long as we participate in American life in a normal way and attempt to go on leading normal lives.<sup>79</sup>

Reading this brings us to the realization that the sort of multiculturalism that we meet in the work of Charles Taylor, generally recognized to be the founding father of multiculturalism, is an innocuous and soft version. Here, with W.E.B. Du Bois, we have a more energizing tonic.

74 Herman, *Ibid.*, p. 364.

75 *Ibid.*.

76 See also M. Walsh, *The Devil’s Pleasure Palace: the Culture of Critical Theory and the Subversion of the West*, With a New Preface by the Author, Encounter Books, New York, London, 2017 (2015); S. Lukkassen, “De drang om te deugen”, in Paul Cliteur and Perry Pierik, red., *Diversiteit, identiteit en de culture wars*, Aspekt, Soesterberg, 2019, pp. 15-36.

77 Herman, *Ibid.*, p. 365.

78 *Ibid.*, p. 367.

79 Du Bois, quoted in Herman, *Ibid.*, p. 368.



Significant for the anti-western views that were to become part of multiculturalism's philosophical basis were also the ideas by Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), who had embraced Franz Fanon's (1925-1961) wretched of the earth as the new humanity of the future.<sup>80</sup> As Herman says, "Orientalism's noble savage reemerged as the Third World peasant or the ghetto dweller."<sup>81</sup>

The seventies saw the birth of the 'radical chic' as 'political pilgrims'<sup>82</sup> who travelled from Europe and America to Cuba, Nicaragua, China and Angola to discover the virtues that Du Bois had professed to see in Ghana's Kwame Nkrumah (1909-1972).<sup>83</sup> Fidel Castro (b. 1926) and Che Guevara (1928-1967) became cult heroes in Saint Germain des Pres.<sup>84</sup>

It is against this background, Herman writes, that the proponents of multiculturalism inveighed against the traditional idea of the melting pot.<sup>85</sup> American sociologists like Will Herberg (1901-1977), in *Protestant Catholic Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (1955), argued that immigrants must retain some form of 'social identification' with their ethnic group as a matter of self-preservation.<sup>86</sup> Jonathan Kozol (b. 1936) argued that mainstream American education for negroes meant a 'sentence to death' and it was implicitly 'racist' to conform to the standard of the majority.

Pessimism about American culture was rampant. James Baldwin (1924-1987) thought that Whites would never be able to admit Blacks to true equality because that would destroy their (the White's) identity, which was, after all, constructed on the myth of racial superiority.<sup>87</sup> The most formative influence of Black identity was W.E.B. Du Bois's longing for a lost community in Africa.<sup>88</sup> Martin Luther King (1929-1968) was despised as an Uncle Tom.<sup>89</sup>

Not infrequently, this attitude leads to condonation or even admiration of violence. And this is very important for our topic, religious terrorism. In a notorious passage in *Advertisements for Myself* (1959), Norman Mailer (1923-2007) praises the vitality and courage of hoodlums when they murder a neighbourhood store owner. How can you legitimize murder? The reason is simple: "For one murders not only a weak fifty-year-

80 See on Sartre also B. Lévy, *Le siècle de Sartre : Enquête philosophique*, Grasset, Paris, 2000.

81 Herman, *Ibid.*, p. 370.

82 P. Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Travels of Western Intellectuals to the Soviet Union, China and Cuba*, Oxford University Press, New York and Oxford, 1981; P. Hollander, *From Benito Mussolini to Hugo Chavez: Intellectuals and a Century of Political Hero Worship*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2017.

83 See Glazov, *Ibid.*, 2009.

84 J. Sévillia, *Le terrorisme intellectuel de 1945 à nos jours*, Perrin, Paris, 2004 (2000), pp. 60-61; R. R. Wolin, *The Wind from the East: French Intellectuals, the Cultural Revolution, and the Legacy of the 1960's*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ and Oxford, 2010.

85 Herman, *Ibid.*, p. 371.

86 *Ibid.*, p. 373.

87 *Ibid.*, p. 375.

88 *Ibid.*, p. 376.

89 See also K. Malik, *Multiculturalism and Its Discontents*, Seagull Books, Calcutta, 2013, p. 38 ff.

old man but an institution as well.”<sup>90</sup> Which one? Private property! Therefore, the murder would not be ‘altogether cowardly’.

Outrageous though these ideas might now seem, they were fairly common at that time. Western culture was inherently objectionable. Or, as Edward Said (1935-2003) proclaimed in his influential *Orientalism* (1978), Western culture is a culture of imperialism.<sup>91</sup> This negative attitude towards Western culture brings us to contemporary multiculturalism, which is, unfortunately, infected by many of the ideas of the older American multiculturalism.

## 12 CONTEMPORARY MULTICULTURALISM

Contemporary multiculturalism starts with an essay by the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition” (1994).<sup>92</sup> Taylor’s central thesis is that our identity is considerably determined by our ‘recognition’ or ‘non-recognition’ by others. He writes:

The thesis is that our identity is partly shaped by the recognition or its absence, often by the misrecognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being.<sup>93</sup>

‘Non-recognition’ by others not only results in ‘lack of due respect’, but can also cause a crippling self-hatred (“saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred”).<sup>94</sup> This would serve as the basis of a ‘politics of recognition’ or ‘identity politics’.

90 N. Mailer, *Advertisements for Myself*, New American Library, New York, 1960, p. 504.

91 E. W. Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, With a new Afterword, Penguin Books, London, 1995 (1978). See on Said: Ibn Warraq, *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said’s Orientalism*, Prometheus Books, Amherst, NY, 2007. Nazir-Ali warns us not to let postcolonial guilt ‘dominate the policies of today’s Britain’. See Nazir-Ali, *Ibid.*, p. xiv. The sharpest rejection of Said’s *Orientalism* stems from Robert Irwin, an author who tries to salvage the reputation of orientalist that had been wrecked by Said. Irwin writes: “To set my cards out on the table (...) that book seems to me to be a work of malignant charlatany in which it is hard to distinguish honest mistakes from willful misrepresentations.” See R. Irwin, *Dangerous Knowledge: Orientalism and Its Discontents*, The Overlook Press, Woodstock and New York, 2006.

92 C. Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition”, in C. Taylor, ed., *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, Edited and introduced by Amy Gutman, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1994, pp. 25-75.

93 Taylor, *Ibid.*, 1994, p. 25.

94 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

There are at least four reasons why **this** view is problematic.<sup>95</sup>

*First*, we may raise the question of whether it is true that every human being is in need of ‘recognition’ in the sense in which it is interpreted by the multiculturalists? *Prima facie*, this may not be such a strange statement. Not only ‘minority groups’, as Taylor seems to be concerned with, but *people in general*, require ‘recognition’, one may surmise. On the other hand, this ‘recognition’ must have something to do with what can uplift a human being, something he, or she, can be proud of. Being a member of an ethnic group, or adhering to a particular religion, as the primary reasons why individuals seek ‘recognition’, according to multiculturalists, is not something to be proud of. It is not something to be ashamed of either, of course, but being proud of your ethnic group, or your religion, is not based on some sort of choice. It is a fact of life. And being proud of something you have not accomplished yourself, seems silly. It is not an achievement to be a member of an ethnic group. One may even say that defending otherwise comes dangerously close to racism (although generally judged to be, and misjudged to be, of an innocuous or rather benign sort).

With their focus on ethnic background and religion, the multiculturalists – let me repeat: unwillingly and unconsciously, in good faith, so to say – introduced something that enlightened liberalism (or ‘egalitarian universalism’, to use Hasan’s phrase) had expelled from European culture. Now, it is back.

Francis Fukuyama, in his recent book *Identity* (2018), diagnoses the same problem with ‘identity politics’, multiculturalism’s bastard child. Fukuyama says we abandoned our focus on the human individual and favoured the collective rights of ethnic and religious minority groups, and “such sentiments have paved the way for the emergence of right-wing identity politics that, at its most extreme, takes the form of racist white nationalism”.<sup>96</sup> The White majority now says ‘roots too’.<sup>97</sup>

With their rejection of what Taylor called ‘the liberal western mind’ multiculturalists played a dangerous game. The new identity politics, unfortunately, empowered identities that Taylor (and I) would rather not see gain dominance.

*Secondly*, multiculturalists did not stimulate people from minority cultures to ‘make something of themselves’. If your ethnicity or religion is enough, why make something of yourself as a human individual? Why make something of yourself as a ‘person’? Although multiculturalism was meant to be a boost to the self-esteem of members of migrant

<sup>95</sup> See chapter 1, “The Multiculturalist Ideology”, in M. Zee, ed., *Choosing Sharia: Multiculturalism, Islamic Fundamentalism & British Sharia Councils*, Eleven, The Hague, 2015, pp. 1-51; E. Manea, *Women and Shari’a Law: the Impact of Legal Pluralism in the UK*, I.B. Tauris, London and New York, 2016, pp. 54-90; T. Murray, “Multiculturalism and the Illusion of Diversity”, in T. Murray, ed., *Identity, Islam and the Twilight of Liberal Values*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, Cambridge, 2018, pp. 20-31.

<sup>96</sup> F. Fukuyama, “Against Identity Politics. The New Tribalism and the Crisis of Democracy”, *Foreign Affairs*, 2018, afl. 97, p. 90-114, p. 102; F. Fukuyama, *Identity. The Demand for Dignity and the Politics of Resentment*, Profile Books, London, 2018, p. 118.

<sup>97</sup> M. F. Jacobson, *Roots Too: White Ethnic Revival in Post-Civil Rights America*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, London and England, 2006.

communities, it is, in fact, something that lets them down. It did not 'empower' them but made them weaker. That brings me to a third problem with multiculturalism.

*Thirdly*, multiculturalism (and its attendant cultural relativism) can lead to a situation where culturally based (and religiously sanctioned) injustices are condoned because people think they lack transcultural yardsticks to reject harmful cultural practices. When Joseph Raz (the analytical philosopher who also became enthralled by multiculturalism) says that "even oppressive cultures can give people quite a lot",<sup>98</sup> this can hardly be seen as an incentive to liberate cultures from harsh elements. On the contrary, the likely effect is to soothe people with their cultural destinies. The point of view expressed in that quote is terrible news for Soraya M., accused of adultery and sentenced to death by stoning.<sup>99</sup> It is terrible news for women who have to follow their deceased husband on the funeral pyre.<sup>100</sup> But it is also bad news for the women whose genitals are mutilated because that is the cultural habit in their region.<sup>101</sup> As Christopher Hitchens quipped in the quotation at the beginning of this chapter: "Those who speak about the importance of 'multiculturalism' in their own case should not forget it when it comes to others."<sup>102</sup>

*Fourthly*, the focus on the importance of the culture of groups (and not individuals) necessitates the question: who is the ultimate guardian of that culture? Who can authoritatively state what the culture prescribes? Essential for the multiculturalist ideology is that the national state (run by members of the majority group) lacks all credibility in this regard. And so this is considered to be the province of the 'community leaders' or the 'family elders', and those are mainly traditionalist people, who, in Hasan's words, "actively seek to deny autonomy to their flock, especially to girls and women".<sup>103</sup> Or it leaves ethnic minorities, especially women, "at the mercy of dominant, invariably male, group leaders".<sup>104</sup>

98 See J. Raz, "Multiculturalism: A Liberal Perspective", in J. Raz, ed., *Ethics in the Public Domain*. Essays in the Morality of Law and Politics, Revised Edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001 (1994), pp. 170-191; J. Raz, *Value, Respect and Detachment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001. For an endorsement of this idea: K. Tan, *Toleration, Diversity, and Global Justice*, The Pennsylvania University Press, University Park, PA, 2000, p. 132. For criticism: Cliteur, *Ibid.*, 2012, pp. 331-333.

99 See on this: F. Sahebjam, *La Femme Lapidée*, Bernard Grasset, Paris, 1990, a French book that became more well known in translation: F. Sahebjam, *The Stoning of Soraya M.: A Story of Injustice in Iran*, Translated from the French by Richard Seaver, Arcade Publishing, New York, 2011 (1994), the basis of a film directed by Cyrus Nowrasteh, released on 7 September 2008 with the same title.

100 N. G. Cassels, "Humanitarian and Imperialist – The Abolition of Sutte", *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (November 1965), pp. 77-87; D. Stein, "Burning Widows, Burning Brides: The Perils of Daughterhood in India", *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 61, No. 3 (Autumn 1988), pp. 465-485.

101 C. Zabus, ed., *Fearful Symmetries: Essays and Testimonies around Excision and Circumcision*, Matatu, Journal for African Culture and Society, Rodopi, Amsterdam/New York, 2008.

102 Hitchens, *Ibid.*, p. 195.

103 Hasan 2010, *Ibid.*

104 Hasan 2010, *Ibid.*

Apart from Hasan's book, already mentioned, the most sustained critique of multiculturalism is perhaps Brian Barry's *Culture and Equality: An Egalitarian Critique of Multiculturalism* (2001),<sup>105</sup> while many elements of the new criticism of multiculturalism applied to the Rushdie case are also present in Kenan Malik's *From Fatwa to Jihad* (2009).<sup>106</sup>

What will be the future of multiculturalism? Multiculturalism has for some decades been the default setting of many progressive intellectuals, but now there seems to be a bit of a change. Even the thinkers who coined the concept, like Taylor, do not, it appears, explicitly present themselves as fervent adherents to the doctrine. Unfortunately, that does not mean they have abandoned the general ideas infusing this perspective. Usually, you see that they try to give new interpretations to other concepts, like secularism, trying to redefine (and, unfortunately, also distort) these concepts in such a way that they are compatible with multiculturalist ideology (although the term 'multiculturalism' is shunned).<sup>107</sup>

There are also a growing number of intellectuals, however, who have become impatient with multiculturalism, even with its watered-down versions. Vocal critics are Christopher Hitchens, Irving Kristol, Anthony Grayling, Nick Cohen, H.E. Baber, John Searle, Terry Eagleton, Stanley Fish, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Dinesh D'Souza, Susan Moller Okin, Necla Kelek, Seyran Ates, Afshin Ellian, Amos Guiora, Machteld Zee, Terri Murray and Caroline Fourest. They have all criticized multiculturalism as an ideology, in essays and articles in scholarly and popular journals. Political leaders like Sarkozy,<sup>108</sup> Merkel<sup>109</sup> and Cameron<sup>110</sup> have pledged to change their government policies and reject multiculturalism as a failed approach in the field of integration. But, on the other hand, it is still hugely influential in scholarly circles, although, as I indicated, not always under the same name.

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105 Barry, *Ibid.*

106 K. Malik, *From Fatwa to Jihad: The Rushdie Affair and Its Legacy*, Atlantic Books, London, 2009. See also Malik, *Ibid.*, 2013.

107 This seems to happen in: J. Maclure and C. Taylor, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 2011, a translation of: J. Maclure and C. Taylor, *Laïcité et liberté de conscience*, La Découverte, Paris, 2010.

108 "Le multiculturalisme est 'un échec', affirme Nicolas Sarkozy", *Le Point*, 10 Février 2011.

109 "Merkel erklärt Multikulti für gescheitert", *Spiegelonline*, 16 Oktober 2010.

110 "State multiculturalism has failed, says David Cameron", in: *BBC News*, 5 February 2011.

## 13 THE MULTICULTURALISM BACKLASH IN LITERARY THEORY: HAROLD BLOOM

Multiculturalism (and cultural relativism) blossomed, especially in the humanities faculties, *e.g.*, in literary theory and also in philosophy.<sup>111</sup> Yet here it has also come under some of its most severe criticism. I will highlight two critics in particular: the literary theorist Harold Bloom (*b.* 1930) and the philosopher John Searle (*b.* 1932). The criticism made by Bloom and Searle is compelling and convincing, although in the following paragraphs I will also try to clarify that in their vocabulary they made some slight concessions to multiculturalism they would have done better to avoid. Let me begin with Bloom.

Bloom began teaching at Yale in 1955 and taught later at New York University from 1988 to 2004. In one of his best-known books, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1994), he rejects the multiculturalism prevalent in late twentieth-century academia.<sup>112</sup> *Prima facie*, this might seem strange, but Bloom's work in literary theory may fruitfully be compared with that of the founding fathers of the human rights idea. In 1948 the world community decided that not all rights are the same. There are fundamental, more important rights, rights with an elevated status compared with ordinary law. We call these rights 'human rights'. Examples are freedom of speech, freedom of religion, the right not to be tortured, etc.<sup>113</sup> Although cultural relativists hate this view, it is consistent with this idea to say that a country where those human rights are respected is a better place to live than a country where they are trampled upon by dictators and intolerant majorities.<sup>114</sup> Also, a culture that respects those rights is a better culture than one where they are rejected or neglected. *Pace* the cultural relativist "Statement on Human Rights"<sup>115</sup> by the American anthropologists, *not all cultures are equal*. Freedom-loving cultures are better than cultures where the human individual has no freedom.

Bloom has similar ideas about books as the advocates of universal human rights have about rights. Not all books are of equal value. The whole idea of a literary canon is based on the presumption that some books are better than other books, not as a matter of taste, but objectively. Tolstoy's *War and Peace* is a better book than *Harry Potter*.

111 See B. Bawer, *The Victim's Revolution: The xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxw of Identity Studies and the Closing of the Liberal Mind*, Broadside Books, New York, 2012; R. Kimball, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education*, Revised Edition, with a New Introduction by the Author, Elephant Paperbacks, Ivan R. Dee Publisher, Chicago, 1998 (1991).

112 H. Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, Riverhead Books, New York, 1994.

113 Charvet and Kaczynska, *Ibid.*; P. Cliteur, "Theism and Human Rights", in A. J. Menuge, ed., *Legitimizing Human Rights: Secular and Religious Perspectives*, Ashgate, Farnham, 2013, pp. 33-57.

114 See for the view that intolerant majorities can be just as dangerous for the human individual as dictators the classic essay by J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, 1859, in: J.S. Mill, *On Liberty and Other Writings*, Edited by Stefan Collini, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2004 (1989), pp. 5-115.

115 "Statement on Human Rights", *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 49 (1947), pp. 539-543.

Some people do not like that idea. They want to proclaim the difference between *War and Peace* and *Harry Potter* as a matter of taste, especially when they see that the canon has too many authors they consider to be White, dead men. Fukuyama refers to a controversy around ‘Stanford University’s Western Culture core course’ in 1987. Jesse Jackson was the leader of a group of students shouting, “Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western Culture’s got to go.” The reason was that the curriculum was centred around fifteen core texts, *i.e.*, the Hebrew Bible, Homer, St. Augustine, Machiavelli, Galileo, Marx, Darwin and Freud. Where were the non-White authors? The feminist authors?<sup>116</sup> Was not the curriculum insulting to ethnic and religious minorities? And therefore ‘hurting people’?<sup>117</sup>

This whole approach may be in accordance with Charles Taylor’s ideas about the ‘recognition’ of minorities, but Fukuyama is not impressed. And rightly so. He cites the difference between a university and a hospital. “The therapist is simply interested in making his or her patients feel better about themselves, which requires raising their sense of self-worth.”<sup>118</sup> A university is something different.

Bloom is on the side of Fukuyama. One of his often quoted remarks is that multiculturalism “means fifth-rate work by people full of resentment”. This contested phrase occurs in an interview published in 1995, in which Bloom reflected on the great authors of the Western world and stated:

We have to read Shakespeare, and we have to study Shakespeare. We have to study Dante. We have to read Chaucer. We have to read Cervantes. We have to read the Bible, at least the King James Bible. We have to read certain authors (...). They provide an intellectual, I dare say, a spiritual value which has nothing to do with organized religion or the history of institutional belief. They remind us in every sense of re-minding us. They not only tell us things that we have forgotten, but they tell us things we couldn’t possibly know without them, and they reform our minds. They make our minds stronger. They make us more vital.<sup>119</sup>

Bloom’s words are a reaction to the anti-Western bias in multiculturalist writing, especially when it comes to the academic curriculum. Bloom fears what it means for the core curriculum when great writers are disparaged for the sole reason they do not belong to minority cultures. He also said:

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<sup>116</sup> Fukuyama, *Identity*, p. 102.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 103.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>119</sup> Bloom quoted in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, lemma “Harold Bloom”.



Unfortunately what is called ‘multiculturalism’ in the United States never means Cervantes. It doesn’t mean replacing a writer in English by Cervantes (...). It means fifth-rate work by people full of resentment, who happen to be women, or who happen to be Chicano or Puerto-Rican, or who happen to be African-American, and they are by no means the best writers who are African-American, or women, or so on. They are simply the most resentful and the most ideological. The function of an education is not to make people feel good about themselves, or to confirm their sense of division, of being in one group rather than another.<sup>120</sup>

But in multicultural circles, this attitude is often rejected as ‘euro-centric’, ‘arrogant’, and ‘disrespectful’ towards ethnic and religious minorities.

#### 14 IS THE CANON RACIST?

Is there any truth in this accusation? Is the Canon ‘disrespectful’ towards ethnic and religious minorities? Or, in the more aggressive jargon of our own time, is the Canon *racist*, perhaps?

It all depends on your definition of ‘racism’, of course, but if we reserve the word racism for the despicable doctrine espoused by the Nazis, this is certainly not racism.<sup>121</sup> Nonetheless, Bloom’s vocabulary is vulnerable to this type of criticism because he does not make it sufficiently clear what he means by the word ‘Western’ in the title of his main book. *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (1994)<sup>122</sup> is, in fact, a ‘universal’ canon, not a canon restricted to the Western world. That is precisely the point: great literature is universal. It deals with the human predicament *as such* as the human rights tradition deals with the human individual *as such*.

So critics of Bloom may have a point when they say that the title of his book is misleading, *i.e.*, the *Western* canon. It would have been better, perhaps, had he titled his book *The Universal Canon* or *The Universal Significance of some Books within the Western Canon*. It would have been better to say that Shakespeare, Chaucer, Cervantes, Montaigne, Dante, Goethe, Jane Austen, Walt Whitman, George Eliot, Proust, Freud and Tolstoy, among others, have *universal* significance. The concerns they address, the characters they expose, the problems they wrestle with are human problems, problems all men and women,

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120 “Harold Bloom Interviewed by Eleanor Wachtel”, *Queen’s Quarterly*, Vol. 102, No. 3 (Fall 1995), pp. 609-619.

121 See L. Poliakov, *The Aryan Myth: A History of Racist and Nationalist Ideas in Europe*, New American Library, New York, 1974 (1971); P. Taguieff, “Race”: *un mot de trop?* Science, politique et morale, CNRS Éditions, Paris, 2018. P. Taguieff, *Le Racisme*, Archives Karéline, Paris, 2013.

122 Bloom, *Ibid.*, 1994.

through the ages, in all cultures, have struggled with. It may be the case that they were born and wrote in the Western tradition, but that does not make them less universal. In that case, the word 'Western' is misleading and bound to cause deep-seated trouble with advocates of non-Western traditions. It may have been better to speak of the *Human Canon*.<sup>123</sup>

As I will try to explain later, John Searle falls into the same trap.

## 15 THE INFLUENCE OF IDEOLOGICAL MULTICULTURALISM

Now, if multiculturalism is such a weak position from a scholarly perspective, how can we explain its huge popularity?

It is not easy to understand the deeper causes of the popularity of identity politics and the negative attitude towards freedom of speech and freedom of conscience as enshrined in human rights treaties, but a part of this can be clarified by explaining the agenda of ideological multiculturalism.

I use the phrase 'ideological multiculturalism' because many uses of the word 'multiculturalism' are quite harmless. It is important to emphasize this now and then because people are under the spell of language, almost bewitched by it. Once a word has a positive ring for them, they can hardly free themselves from the practice of condoning the nasty elements connected to the word. And there are many innocent elements to certain versions of multiculturalism, of course.

One of the authors who stressed this point is the American literary theorist and legal scholar Stanley Fish (*b.* 1938), who says that multiculturalism comes in several varieties. One of those is what he calls 'boutique multiculturalism'.<sup>124</sup>

This *boutique multiculturalism* is the multiculturalism of ethnic restaurants, weekend festivals and "high profile flirtations with the other in the manner satirized by Tom Wolfe under the rubric of 'radical chic'."<sup>125</sup> This multiculturalism is sympathetic, sometimes comical, but it, in any case, does not cause the problems of the different forms of multiculturalism that Fish identifies as 'strong multiculturalism' and that I would like to call 'ideological multiculturalism'. This non-ideological use of the term 'multiculturalism' is dominant in common parlance, *e.g.*, when Sydney is characterized as a city where multiculturalism is prevalent. The reporter who says this does not want to comment on the ideological policies of the governors of the city of Sydney. He only wants to draw our attention to the fact that in Sydney many people live and work with different religious and cultural backgrounds. Multiculturalism is a posh word for cultural diversity.

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123 Or perhaps *Humanist Canon*. See B. Cooke, *A Wealth of Insights: Humanist Thought Since the Enlightenment*, Prometheus, Amherst, NY, 2011.

124 S. Fish, "Boutique Multiculturalism, or Why Liberals Are Incapable of Thinking about Hate Speech", *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (1997), pp. 378-395, at p. 378.

125 Fish, *Ibid.*, p. 378.

We have to distinguish *this* use of the word ‘multiculturalism’ sharply from the type of multiculturalism that I criticize in this essay (*i.e.* ideological multiculturalism).

*Ideological multiculturalism* is the ideology that surmises not only that cultural differences are prevalent and important, but that groups should be protected from criticism of their cultural beliefs. This is the sort of multiculturalism that is intimately connected with cultural relativism, in particular with the fifth element of cultural relativism in the definition of James Rachels, discussed previously. Multiculturalism tries to create a taboo around criticism coming from outside the culture of the group. It is, therefore, very similar to cultural relativism.

How does one justify this, at first sight, somewhat strange conviction? Presupposed to this conviction is the idea that culture is good and something to be protected, at least, if it is non-Western culture. One may put it this way: ideological multiculturalism tries to defend and preserve what they see as non-Western enclaves in the Western world.

If those non-Western cultural patterns are an improvement or a necessary correction to mainstream culture, this can only be applauded, of course. But the problem is that this critical evaluation is often lacking. Non-Western customs and cultural practices are welcomed simply *because they are non-Western*. From a liberal, or otherwise critical perspective, there is no justification for this attitude.<sup>126</sup>

This multiculturalist stance also has negative consequences for freedom of thought and expression. After all, those civil liberties tend to create cultural diversity in the sense that the human individual is stimulated to critically evaluate his cultural background. As such, those who want to protect the cultural practices of non-Western cultural groups within Western societies tend to take a dismissive attitude towards those civil liberties. So there seems to be a tendency: the *more multiculturalist* influences are prevalent, the *less respect* there is for individual human rights or civil liberties.

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126 Multiculturalism, as an ideology that favours the protection of cultural identities, no matter *what those cultural identities are*, is criticized by: S. Moller Okin, “Feminism and Multiculturalism: Some Tensions”, *Ethics*, Vol. 108 (July 1998), pp. 661-684; S. Moller Okin, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* With Respondents, Edited by Joshua Cohen, Matthew Howard, and Martha Nussbaum, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1999; Hasan 2010, *Ibid.*; Barry, *Ibid.*; C. Hitchens, “Multiculturalism and the Threat of Conformity”, in A. Bellow, ed., *New Threats to Freedom*, Templeton Press, Westconshocken, PA, 2010, pp. 110-119; Ibn Warraq, *Virgins? What Virgins? And Other Essays*, Prometheus Books, Amherst, NY, 2010, pp. 15-39; A. Guiora, “Multiculturalism and Religious Extremism: Whose Human Rights Do We Protect?”, in G. Molier, A. Ellian, and D. Suurland, eds., *Terrorism, Ideology, Law, and Policy*, Republic of Letters Publishing, Dordrecht, 2011, pp. 337-361; T. Baudet, *The Significance of Borders: Why Representative Government and the Rule of Law Require Nation States*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 2012, part II, pp. 81-93; W. van Rooy, *De malaise van de multiculturaliteit*, Acco, Leuven/Voorburg, 2008.

## 16 POSTMODERNISM

The third trend I like to highlight (after multiculturalism and cultural relativism) is postmodernism. Postmodernism is the most general, but also the most elusive intellectual trend we have to analyse. Postmodernism, an academic direction that arose in universities in the late 1960s, exercised a considerable influence until the mid-1990s.<sup>127</sup> It is difficult to give a coherent account of postmodernism. Postmodernists themselves consider their movement incapable of definition.

Nonetheless, Zygmunt Bauman, an author not unsympathetic towards the movement, says it is a “state of mind marked above all by its all-deriding, all-eroding, all-dissolving destructiveness”.<sup>128</sup> Mario Bunge, a philosopher in the Enlightenment tradition and definitely no postmodernist himself, discerns the following traits shared by most postmodernists:

1. Mistrust of reason and science
2. Subjectivism (the world is but our representation)
3. Relativism (all truth is relative to one’s culture, gender, class)
4. Obsession with myth, symbol and metaphor
5. Pessimism and the denial of the possibility of all knowledge.<sup>129</sup>

Philosopher A.C. Grayling, in *Ideas that Matter* (2009), writes:

If you are a relativist about values, if you are skeptical about Enlightenment ideals of liberal humanism, if you are a pessimist about progress, if you lack confidence in the idea of a “grand narrative” premised on the belief that liberty and knowledge can be made to increase by the endeavor of mankind while human suffering and tribulation concomitantly diminish, then you are paid-up “postmodernist.”<sup>130</sup>

Those who have a positive attitude towards postmodernism usually refer to French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard (1924-1998), whose *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979)<sup>131</sup> claimed that the ‘grand narratives’ of modernism (progress, science, rationality) had lost their credibility. Another philosopher usually associated with the postmodern turn is Michel Foucault (1926-1984). Foucault – like

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127 B. Cooke, “Postmodernism”, in B. Cooke, ed., *Dictionary of Atheism, Skepticism, & Humanism*, Prometheus Books, Amherst, NY, 2006, pp. 408-409, at p. 408.

128 Quoted in Cooke, *Ibid.*, p. 409.

129 *Ibid.*

130 A. C. Grayling, “Postmodernism”, in A. C. Grayling, ed., *Ideas that Matter: A Personal Guide for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London, 2009, pp. 275-279, at p. 275.

131 J. F. Lyotard, *La condition postmoderne*, Rapport sur le savoir, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1979; J. F. Lyotard, *Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants*, Éditions Galilée, Paris, 1988.

Sartre before him with communism – made a name for himself as a fellow traveller with Islamism. In 1978-1979 in Iran, the regime of Muhammed Reza Shah Pahlavi (1941-1979) was toppled. Although initially the work of secular nationalists, liberals and leftists of all stripes and colours, the revolution was soon hijacked by the Islamists under the leadership of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (1902-1989). Soon Islamists controlled the slogans and the organization of the protests, as Janet Afary and Kevin Anderson write in their *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism* (2005).<sup>132</sup> When in February 1979 the Shah had fled, Khomeini assumed “nearly absolute power, a reign of terror ensued”.<sup>133</sup> One would expect an intellectual so much concerned about power to be in the protest league against these developments, but this proved different. Foucault visited Iran twice and wrote enthusiastically and uncritically on the revolution,<sup>134</sup> lauding the new style of politics in Iran as ‘political spirituality’. And he recommended this not only for the Middle East but also for Europe. Now many scholars of Foucault view these writings as aberrant or the product of a political mistake. Afary and Anderson beg to differ: “We suggest that Foucault’s writings on Iran were closely related to his general theoretical writings on the discourses of power and the hazards of modernity,”<sup>135</sup> and go on to add:

We also argue that Foucault’s experience in Iran left a lasting impact on his subsequent oeuvre and that one cannot understand the sudden turn in Foucault’s writings in the 1980s without recognizing the significance of the Iranian episode and his more general preoccupation with the Orient.<sup>136</sup>

I agree with Afary and Anderson, but with one reservation. This passage is too greatly focused on the internal development of Foucault. I am not interested in his work for its own sake. What disturbs me is that Foucault is a highly influential thinker. He is an icon of the modern French Left. And his popularity and influence are what should give some cause for concern. His philosophy undermines the resistance liberal democracies can muster against totalitarian theocratic dictatorships. Roger Scruton warns us in *Thinkers of the New Left* (1985): “Nowhere has the outlook of the left entered more firmly into the national culture than in France, the motherland of revolution.”<sup>137</sup> He singles out Michel Foucault as a highly influential representative of the French intellectual left, one of the

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132 J. Afary and K. B. Anderson, *Foucault and the Iranian Revolution: Gender and the Seductions of Islamism*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2005, p. 1. In an extensive Appendix (pp. 181-277) this book also presents the most important writings of Foucault himself on the Islamist revolution and also those of his critics.

133 Afary and Anderson, *Ibid.*, p. 2.

134 *Ibid.*

135 *Ibid.*, p. 3.

136 *Ibid.*, p. 4.

137 R. Scruton, *Thinkers of the New Left*, Longman, Burnt Mill, 1985, p. 31.

most powerful and most ambitious of those who aim to ‘unmask’ the bourgeoisie.<sup>138</sup> In his *Histoire de la folie à l’âge Classique* (1961), Foucault traces the confinement of madmen to its origins in the seventeenth century. He associates this confinement with the ethic of work and the rise of the middle classes. The madman is the ‘other’ who must be brought to order. In *Naissance de la Clinique: Une archéologie du regard médical* (1963), he tries to show that his ideas about the confinement of madman also apply to the sick. In *Surveiller et punir* (1975), Foucault presents his ideas on Bentham’s ‘panopticon’, a correction machine that made it possible to observe prisoners from one single post. Needless to say, Foucault is against all these attempts to bring order into the world. They are all manifestations of the dictatorial attempt to discipline. He calls for a radical elimination of the judicial apparatus. He also wants to get rid of courts, adjudication in general and all ‘power’. What characterizes Foucault’s work is an extremely gloomy view on Western modernization in combination with an extremely naïve view on non-Western culture as it expresses itself in the theocratic opposition against the West.

Fortunately, in France too Foucault’s work has come under increasing criticism. Jeanette Bougrab in *Lettre aux femmes violées et à ceux qui les soutiennent* (2019) writes about the Islamist revolution of the theocratic dictator Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979.<sup>139</sup> In 1983 the Iranian Penal Code prescribed that women had to wear the veil in public. Not complying with this prescription would imply a punishment of two months’ prison annex, 74 strokes of the whip, all on the basis of sharia law.<sup>140</sup> One would expect French intellectuals to be horrified, but that was not the case, Bougrab notes. Philosopher Michel Foucault, one of the icons of the French cultural establishment, founding father of both postmodernism and structuralism, called Khomeini a ‘holy man’ (*saint homme*).<sup>141</sup> In a series of reports that he wrote for the *Corriere della sera*, he was remarkably mild and even laudatory about the new dictatorship. Foucault denied the theocratic character of the new regime. It is simply false to claim that the clergy has such an elevated position, he tells us.<sup>142</sup> The ‘political will’ of the government had made a great impression on Foucault, he confided to his readers (*il m’a impressionné*). It had impressed him that politics in Iran had acquired a ‘spiritual dimension’ (*dimension*

138 Scruton 1985, *Ibid.*, p. 34.

139 J. Bougrab, *Lettre aux femmes violées et à ceux qui les soutiennent*, Les éditions du Cerf, Paris, 2019.

140 See also van der Blom, *Ibid.*, pp. 49-50.

141 Bougrab, *Ibid.*, p. 40.

142 Foucault quoted in Bougrab, *Ibid.*, p. 40: “Personne, en Iran, n’entend [par gouvernement islamique] un régime politique dans lequel le clergé jouerait un rôle de direction ou d’encadrement.” This is clearly false. See van der Blom, *Ibid.*, p. 55, who rightly claims that the religious leaders are the political elite in Iran.

*spirituelle*').<sup>143</sup> Jean Birnbaum, in *Un silence religieux* (2016)<sup>144</sup> and *La religion des faibles* (2018),<sup>145</sup> also tries to understand this blind spot of the French intellectual.

Fortunately, many other critics support Birnbaum's criticism of Foucault. Jean-Paul Brighelli, in *Voltaire ou le Jihad* (2015), gives a similar interpretation to the recent events in France as Birnbaum does.<sup>146</sup> The core of the problem is that Western culture has entered a phase of self-effacement ('*un processus d'autoeffacement*'), Brighelli notes.<sup>147</sup>

Éric Zemmour stresses the same point in his highly successful *Le suicide français* (2014).<sup>148</sup> In former wars it was all about territory, Brighelli notes. Nowadays it is in the field of culture we have to battle ('*dans le champ culturel*'). The real adversary is ourselves.<sup>149</sup> We have become weakened by what the Americans call *French Theory*, the deconstruction of certainties, and Brighelli identifies as the high priests of this movement Foucault, Derrida and Deleuze. The West is weakened by postmodern deconstruction, the jihadists are full of religious fervour and dangerously self-confident.<sup>150</sup> While the Western world embraces secular culture ('*culture laïque*'), the critics of the West prefer religious culture. What is needed is a cultural revolution that identifies the enemy.<sup>151</sup>

Brighelli takes Foucault to task for having dissolved that derisory concept of 'man' ('*dérisoire concept l'homme*').<sup>152</sup> The grandfather of contempt for Western culture is Sartre ('*le grand-papa de tous les contempteurs de la culture*'), but Foucault is his successor.<sup>153</sup>

## 17 IAN McEWAN'S SOLAR

In his satirical masterwork *Solar* (2011), British novelist Ian McEwan (b. 1948) gives a compelling portrait of contemporary university culture, influenced by French Theory.<sup>154</sup> The novel is about Nobel prize-winning physicist Michael Beard, whose best work is behind him. McEwan tells about a seminar in Imperial College, Cambridge, where a professor of science studies (a subject that was new to Beard) held a presentation. The professor, Nancy Temple, voiced some views that were deeply shocking to Beard and his

143 Bougrab, *Ibid.*, p. 41.

144 J. Birnbaum, *Un silence religieux : la gauche face au djihadisme*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris, 2016. Birnbaum's book is a confirmation of Van der Blom's claim (*Ibid.*, p. 52) that the Left has become a stubborn defender of orthodox Islam. See also Glazov, *Ibid.*, 2009.

145 Birnbaum, *Ibid.*, 2018.

146 J.-P. Brighelli, *Voltaire ou le Jihad: le suicide de la culture occidentale*, l'Archipel, Paris, 2015.

147 Brighelli, *Ibid.*, p. 10.

148 E. Zemmour, *Le suicide français*, Éditions Albin Michel, Paris, 2014.

149 Brighelli, *Ibid.*, p. 16.

150 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

151 *Ibid.*, p. 20.

152 The phrase comes from Althusser but gained notoriety because of Foucault. Brighelli, *Ibid.*, p. 22.

153 Brighelli, *Ibid.*, p. 91.

154 I. McEwan, *Solar*, Vintage Books, London, 2011.



colleagues. These ideas, however, were common in the humanities, as someone taught him, *viz.* “that science was just one more belief system, no more or less truthful than religion or astrology”.<sup>155</sup>

Beard did not think this view was very cogent. “Who was going to submit to a vaccine designed by a priest?” he asked himself.<sup>156</sup> He had no idea these ideas existed. But a colleague enlightened him: “She’s postmodern, you see, a blankslater, a strong social constructivist.”<sup>157</sup>

Beard tried to engage the audience in a discussion. He asked whether the meeting thought that gravity too was a social construct. Then he was booed. A women in the audience stood up to propose in stern, authoritative tones that he reflect on the ‘hegemonic arrogance’ of his question.<sup>158</sup>

One might think that McEwan’s work is far removed from reality, but the type of conversation that McEwan portrays is something that really occurs in this world. In September 2013 feminist Muslim reformer Ayaan Hirsi Ali (*b.* 1969) was called by the then president of Brandeis University, Frederick M. Lawrence (*b.* 1955).<sup>159</sup> There were plans to offer her an honorary degree in social justice, to be conferred at the university’s commencement ceremony in May 2014. But after protests erupted from the university community, the administrators decided to withdraw their plan. Hirsi Ali was disinvited, and she writes in her book *Heretic: Why Islam needs a Reformation Now* (2015) how she scrolled the list of faculty signatories against the conferral of a honorary degree. She was struck by the ‘strange bedfellows’ she had brought together.<sup>160</sup> She found professors of Women’s, Gender and Sexuality Studies lining up with The Council on American-Islamic Relations. But there was also an authority on Queer/Feminist Narrative Theory.<sup>161</sup> One might think this last qualification had escaped from McEwan’s novel. But, no, it is not the fantasy of McEwan, it is real.

McEwan’s book is fiction, of course, but it is very close to reality. On the pretext of ‘respect’, multiculturalism, postmodernism and cultural relativism have undermined the principles of rationality, universal rights and what are considered to be Western values. Multiculturalism, postmodernism and cultural relativism are very respectful, indeed, but not towards the culture of liberal democracies. As I said before, terrorists are very convinced of the force and legitimate demands of their culture, but liberal democracy seems to be without stable moral and intellectual foundations. It is the combination that is toxic. The strength of the terrorists is our weakness. Undermined by nihilistic and relativizing ideologies, we cannot muster the energy to fight the terrorists in the

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<sup>155</sup> McEwan, *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> McEwan, *Ibid.*, p. 186.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 191.

<sup>159</sup> A. Hirsi Ali, *Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now*, Harper Collins, New York, 2015, p. 4.

<sup>160</sup> Hirsi Ali, *Ibid.*, p. 5.

<sup>161</sup> *Ibid.*

cultural domain. We think that their ideology deserves an equal place under the sun. And, of course, for postmodernists there is no superior and inferior ideology. Under those circumstances the popularity of cultural relativism and postmodern tendencies is a huge problem in our culture. A problem of the same magnitude is that some people have such a firm belief in the legitimacy of their own ideas that they are prepared to kill for those ideas. And also to die for those ideas.

## 18 JOHN SEARLE ON POSTMODERNISM

Now McEwan's work is fiction. But, as I said, it is based on the real situation in contemporary academy.<sup>162</sup> In the early 1990s there was a discussion in the US on the purpose of academic research. A prominent contribution to this discussion was that of American philosopher John Searle (b. 1932).<sup>163</sup> In one of his essays, Searle wrote on rationalism, but also on the presuppositions of sound scholarly work.<sup>164</sup> The context of his article was a discussion on the purposes and aims of higher education and the challenge that some new philosophical currents, especially postmodernism, exerted on the traditional university curriculum.<sup>165</sup> The traditional university claims to cherish knowledge for its own sake<sup>166</sup> and for its practical applications. The scholarly ideal is that of "the *disinterested* inquirer engaged in the quest for *objective* knowledge that will have *universal* validity".<sup>167</sup> It attempts to be apolitical or at least politically neutral. But according to postmodernists, this is all a sham.<sup>168</sup> Rationalism and realism are misguided ideals, according to the postmodernists. It is impossible to be politically neutral.

Searle shows how the postmodern critique is, in a certain way, a further continuation of the Enlightenment critique but that it is also suicidal. The idea of *critique* was always to subject any belief to the most rigorous standards of rationality, evidence and truth. Critique, as such, is an important element of the Western tradition of rationality, Searle contends. But this self-critical element in the Western Rationalistic Tradition has had a peculiar consequence: why should *rationality itself* not be criticized? Why not be sceptical

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162 See A. Kronman, *The Assault on American Excellence*, The Free Press, New York 2019.

163 See J. R. Searle, "The Mission of the University: Intellectual Discovery or Social Transformation?", *Academic Questions*, Vol. 7, No. 1 (Winter 1993/1994), pp. 80-85; J. R. Searle, "Is There a Crisis in American Higher Education?", *Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences*, Vol. 46, No. 4 (January 1993), pp. 24-47; J. R. Searle, "The Storm Over the University", *The New York Review of Books*, 6 December 1990.

164 Searle, *Ibid.*, Fall 1993, pp. 55-83.

165 See also on this P. Berman, ed., *Debating P.C.: The Controversy over Political Correctness on College Campuses*, Bantam, New York, 1992.

166 So eloquently defended in: J. H. Newman, *The Idea of a University*, Edited, with an Introduction and Notes, by Martin J. Svaglic, University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN, 1982 (1852).

167 Searle, *Ibid.*, Fall 1993, p. 69. See also K. Popper, *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach*, Revised Edition, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1981 (1972).

168 Searle, *Ibid.*, Fall 1993, p. 56.

about rationality, logic, evidence, truth and reality themselves?<sup>169</sup> At this point, the Western Rationalistic Tradition becomes not merely self-critical, Searle contends, but self-destructive.

We cannot (and do not have to) agree with everything that Searle writes about the presuppositions of the Western tradition of science and rationalism, but one element is crucial for the discussion on free speech, which is so much targeted by the religious terrorists. An element of the Western conception of science and rationalism is that knowledge is considered to be objective.<sup>170</sup> Truth is considered to be an accurate representation of an independently existing reality.<sup>171</sup> And knowledge does not depend on, nor derive from, the subjective attitudes and feelings of particular investigators. So the objective truth or falsity of the claims that are being made by a serious scholar are seen as totally independent of the motive, the morality or even the gender, the race or the ethnicity of the maker.<sup>172</sup>

Now, according to postmodernists and multiculturalists this is all impossible. And a common argumentative strategy is to challenge some claim they find objectionable by challenging the *maker of the claim* in question. If the *maker* is said to be a racist, sexist, phono-phallo-logocentric person, one is deemed to have refuted his views.

To the adherent of the traditional conception of rationality and scholarly work, this is all irrelevant.<sup>173</sup> Someone can be a sexist or racist but still be right in some things.

Unfortunately, there is an enormous amount of vegetarianism-cannot-be-right-because-Hitler-was-a-vegetarian-thinking around in postmodern circles. According to Peg Tittle, this is the error or fallacy that considers the source of the argument rather than the argument itself. He calls it the 'genetic fallacy', citing the following example for it:

There is no way we should support eugenics. That idea was advocated by the Nazis in Hitler Germany, don't forget.<sup>174</sup>

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169 Ibid., p. 59.

170 Perhaps the most influential nineteenth-century thinker discrediting this idea was Friedrich Nietzsche. See J. Rachels, "Nietzsche and the Objectivity of Morals", in N. Scott Arnold, T. M. Benditt, and G. Graham, eds., *Philosophy Then and Now*, Blackwell, Cambridge, MA, Oxford, 1998, pp. 385-414. In the twentieth-century this type of relativism was made popular by Richard Rorty. See on this: Blackburn, Ibid., 2001, pp. 31-42.

171 See O. Benson and J. Stangroom, *Why Truth Matters*, Continuum, New York, 2010 (2006), passim. See also Blackburn, Ibid., 2006 (2005).

172 Searle, Ibid., Fall 1993, p. 66.

173 See also Benson and Stangroom, Ibid.; Blackburn, Ibid., 2006.

174 P. Tittle, *Critical Thinking: An Appeal to Reason*, Routledge, New York and London, 2011, p. 120.

According to those who challenge the Western conception of rationalism, objectivity and disinterested research is impossible, and this explains the enormous preoccupation with race and gender in postmodernist circles. A person of the 'wrong race' is already suspect.<sup>175</sup>

Here postmodernism transforms into multiculturalism.<sup>176</sup> In the humanities, it is now widely accepted, writes Searle, that the race, gender, class and ethnicity of the student defines his or her identity.<sup>177</sup>

On this view it is no longer one of the purposes of education, as it previously has been, to enable the student to develop an identity as a member of a larger universal human intellectual culture. Rather, the new purpose is to reinforce his or her pride in and self-identification with a particular subgroup.<sup>178</sup>

If there is no such thing as objective truth and validity, Searle writes, you are equally justified in discussing the person making the argument and his motives for making it as you are in discussing its claims to validity and the alleged 'truth' of its conclusions.<sup>179</sup>

## 19 CONCLUSION

Although Searle's analysis is dedicated to the loss of confidence in traditional rationality and the challenge postmodern views pose to the university curriculum, it also sheds light on some of the topics discussed in this article.

There is only one problem with the analyses of both Harold Bloom and John Searle, as I have indicated before: they are insufficiently aware of the ambivalence in the word 'Western'. So when Bloom discerns a 'Western canon' and Searle a 'Western Rationalistic Tradition', this makes them vulnerable to Taylor's critique that their views are 'only' manifestations of the 'Western liberal mind', which do not have any relevance for other cultures outside of the Western sphere of influence. It is important that the sort of literary standards Bloom endorses and the sort of rationality Searle supports are universal: for all people, living in the most diverse situations.<sup>180</sup>

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175 See Dummett's criticism of Rushdie: "Now you are one of us. You have become an honorary white: merely an honorary white intellectual, it is true, but an honorary white all the same". In: M. Dummett, "Open Letter to Rushdie", *The Independent*, 11 February 1990.

176 An ideology analysed by: Barry, *Ibid.*

177 Searle, *Ibid.*, Fall 1993, p. 72.

178 *Ibid.*, p. 72.

179 *Ibid.*, p. 75.

180 See also C. Fourest, *La dernière utopie: menaces sur l'universalisme*, Éditions Grasset, Paris, 2009.

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Let me summarize. France is one of the countries most heavily hit by jihadist terrorism. In 2015 two attacks took place, one on the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* (7 January)<sup>181</sup> and one on a pop concert in the Bataclan (13 November).<sup>182</sup> Both attacks were on the French way of life. It is also in France that the confrontation between a secular, liberal and rational way of life clashes with the world view of religious fundamentalism. This is more than a military confrontation; it is a spiritual battle for the soul of France, yet not for the soul of France alone, but also for liberal democracy in general. Who will win in this confrontation, is dependent on the inherent vitality of the two world views. In this confrontation *French Theory*, the holy trinity of cultural relativism, multiculturalism and postmodernism as espoused by such intellectuals as Foucault, is not much of a help. But perhaps France can get rid of the ideologies of yesterday and develop a new and more fruitful orientation on its rich cultural past. That would not only be helpful, but seems a prerequisite for survival.

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181 See G. Truc, *Sidérations: une sociologie des attentats*, PUF, Paris, 2016.

182 Zineb, 13: *Raconte l'enfer du 13 novembre, avec 13 témoins au cœur des attaques*, Éditions Ring, Paris, 2016.