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French philosopher **Pascal Bruckner** accused **Ian Buruma** of propagating a form of multiculturalism that amounts to **legal apartheid**. Here, the Dutch journalist and historian defends his position. By now Timothy Garton Ash, Necla Kelek and Paul Cliteur have also stepped into the ring. Read their contributions here.

29/01/2007

Freedom cannot be decreed

There are many reasons why it would be desirable for Muslims, or anybody else, to feel free to reinterpret their religious texts. But this surely is not the business of the state, for that opens the way to authoritarianism. By Ian Buruma

I cannot answer for Timothy Garton Ash, or "the Anglo-Saxons," so I shall speak only for myself. If Mr Bruckner has been kind enough to read my book, I'm not sure how he came to the conclusion that it was an attack on Ayaan Hirsi Ali. The last two sentences of "Murder in Amsterdam" are: "And Ayaan Hirsi Ali has had to leave the scene [The Netherlands]. My country seems smaller without her."

I admire **Ayaan Hirsi Ali**, and agree with most of what she stands for. Liberal democracy must be defended against violent extremism, and women should be protected from abuse. There can be no religious justification for it. My skepticism is about her analysis of the social problems in European societies caused by the influx of large numbers of non-Western refugees and immigrants. Revolutionary Islamism, emanating from the Middle-East, is indeed a threat to all free societies. Where I differ from Hirsi Ali is perhaps a matter of emphasis. Having turned from devout Islamism to atheism, she tends to see religion, and Islam in particular, as the root of all evils, especially of the abuse of women. Cultural traditions, tribal customs, historical antecedents, all of which are highly diverse, even inside the Muslim world, are flattened into a monolithic threat. Islam, as practised in Java, is not the same as in a Moroccan village, or the Sudan, or Rotterdam. In her autobiography, Hirsi Ali herself describes the considerable differences between her native Somalia and Saudi Arabia.

In Europe, even the issue of **headscarves** cannot be treated simply as a symbol of religious bigotry. Some women wear them to ward off male aggression, others because their parents insist on it, and some by their own choice, as a defiant badge of identity, even rebellion. Bruckner admires rebels. Should we only side with rebels whose views and practices we like? Or does living in a free society also imply that people should be able to choose the way they look, or speak, or worship, even if we don't like it, as long as they don't harm others? A free-spirited citizen does not tolerate different customs or cultures because he thinks they are wonderful, but because he believes in freedom.

To be tolerant is not to be indiscriminate. I would not dream of defending dictatorship in the name of tolerance for other cultures. Violence against women, or indeed men, is intolerable, and should be punished by law. I would not defend the genital mutilation of children, let alone wife-beating, no matter how it is rationalized. Honour killings are murders, and must be treated as such. But these are matters of law enforcement. Figuring out how to stop violent ideologies from infecting mainstream Muslims, and

thus threatening free societies, is trickier. I'm not convinced that public statements, such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali has made, that Islam in general is "backward" and its prophet "perverse", are helpful.

She has the perfect right to say these things, of course, just as Mr Bruckner has the right to describe Muslims as "brutes". I am not in the slightest bit "embarrassed" by her critique of Islam, nor have I ever denied her the right "to refer to Voltaire." But if Islamic reform is the goal, then such denunciations are not the best way to achieve it, especially if they come from an avowed atheist. Condemning Islam, without taking the many variations into account, is too indiscriminate. Not every Muslim, not even every orthodox Muslim, is a holy warrior in spe. Isolating the jihadis and fighting their dangerous dogmas is too important to be dealt with by crude polemics.

Mr Bruckner is an important French intellectual, so I'm sure he doesn't have to be told this, just as I don't need to be lectured by him on the **perils of cultural relativism**. But he appears to be less interested in a subtle argument than in easy rhetorical tricks. One is the use of the strawman, or tainting by association. Take the example of Ayaan Hirsi Ali being compared to fascists or even Nazis. I, for one, have never accused her of being either. The example, quoted by Bruckner, of a Dutch critic "calling her a Nazi," is from my own book. In fact, the Dutch writer Geert Mak never called her a Nazi. He compared the tone of her film "Submission" to Nazi propaganda, and I criticized him for it. But Bruckner uses this isolated example to suggest that I, and other "armchair philosophers" brand "the defenders of liberty" as fascists, while portraying the fanatics as victims.

It is an interesting sensation, by the way, to be called an **armchair philosopher** by Mr Brucker. And here I can also speak for Timothy Garton Ash; while he was spending years with Central European dissidents, and I with Chinese and South Korean rebels, Bruckner, so far as I know, rarely strayed far from the centre of Paris. But this is by the by.

In another typical fit of exaggeration, designed to tar by association, Bruckner mentions the opening of an Islamic hospital in Rotterdam and reserved beaches for Muslim women in Italy. I fail to see why this is so much more terrible than opening kosher restaurants, Catholic hospitals, or reserved beaches for nudists, but to Bruckner these concessions are akin to segregation in the southern states of America, and even Apartheid in South Africa. No wonder, then, that I, among others, am also associated with the Inquisition and medieval witch-hunting. Why? Because Tim Garton Ash pointed out Ayaan Hirsi Ali's undeniable beauty and glamour. Perhaps he shouldn't have pointed this out, but the Inquisition?

The question is what to do about **radical Islamism**. Bruckner, in a strange sleight of hand, believes that Garton Ash and I "fall in" with US and British policies, even as we "disapprove of these policies." I'm not quite sure what he means by this. But then he goes on to attack Bush and Blair for "focussing on military issues to the detriment of intellectual debate." I was indeed against this "focussing", especially in the case of the second Iraq war, while Bruckner was busily writing petitions promoting that war. He is entitled to change his mind, of course, but it is not immediately clear why messrs Blair and Bush were guilty of "starry-eyed naivete," if Bruckner himself was not. Anyway, he now believes that our governments should "strike on the 'terrain of dogma', on the reinterpretation of holy scriptures and religious texts."

Here we may indeed have stumbled on a cultural difference. In a peculiar fit of **Gallic chauvinism**, Bruckner declares "the superiority of the French model." There is

something quaintly old-fashioned, and even refreshing, about this kind of national pride. But what is it that Bruckner finds so superior? *Laïcité*, I suppose, and republicanism. I would immediately concede that there is much to be admired about France, and its "model". However, Bruckner's notion that the state should get involved in dogmas, or the interpretation of holy scriptures, may have some bearing on the history of post-revolutionary France. In any case, I think it is a bad idea. There are many reasons why it would be desirable for Muslims, or anybody else, to feel free to reinterpret their religious texts, and for all of us to challenge dogmas. But this surely is not the business of the state, for that opens the way to authoritarianism.

What, in any case, does Bruckner propose to do about millions of Muslim believers living in Europe? Tell them how to interpret their holy scriptures? Force them to follow Ayaan Hirsi Ali's example and renounce their faith? Perhaps it would be better if they did so of their own free will, but expecting the state to make them do so is not entirely in keeping with Bruckner's self-image of an enlightened freedom-fighter.

A common feature of Bruckner's kind of polemics is the frequent use of the words "**appeasement**" and "**collaborator**". This is rarely done innocently. The idea is to associate people who seek an accommodation with the majority of Muslims with Nazi collaborators. Unless he is simply being vicious, this can only mean that Bruckner sees the rise of Islamism as something on a par with the emergence of the Third Reich. If so, he is not alone. While seeing the dangers of Islamism, I regard this as too alarmist.

But here we get to the final Brucknerian sleight of hand, for after all his huffing and puffing about not giving an inch to the Muslims, about defending Ayaan Hirsi Ali against "the enemies of freedom," such as myself, he suddenly concludes that "there is nothing that resembles the formidable peril of the Third Reich" and even that "the government of Mullahs in Tehran is a paper tiger." Now it is us, the armchair philosophers, who are the panic-stricken alarmists, who have lost the courage to "defend Europe." Now where have we heard that kind of thing before? The need to defend Europe against alien threats; the fatigued, self-doubting, weak-kneed intellectuals... but no, now I am descending to the level of Pascal Bruckner, the rebel king of the Left Bank.

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*This text, published in German in the online magazine **Perlentaucher** is a response to an article by Pascal Bruckner, which appeared on **signandsight.com** on January 24, 1007.*

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