

Ayaan's Long Walk to the Enlightenment

BOOK REVIEW BY BRENDA WALKER

Sometimes it takes an newcomer's fresh eye to recognize what's really valuable in a society. We born-and-raised folks can be oblivious to what is best about our culture because it is so normal, as unnoticed as the air. We may not see the good until it is gone, as in the expression, "You don't miss the water till the well runs dry."

Ayaan Hirsi Ali has been a woman with a searchlight focused on human progress, reminding us in the western Judeo-Christian world of the advancement we have attained. When utopian leftists shriek with disgust that poverty, racism and inequality still exist on earth, Ayaan suggests to westerners that those disaffections have been tackled more honestly and with better results here than in cultures that remain shackled by Islam. From women's rights and safety to the use of law to achieve equality, the west has done better in an admittedly imperfect world. She has been called an "Enlightenment fundamentalist" as both a condemnation and a compliment.

Her personal journey from a childhood in Somalia, one of the most repressive of Muslim societies, to becoming a feminist critic of Islam is an interesting illustration of the late Garrett Hardin's belief that it takes five years to change a willing mind. In the late 1980s, the teenage Ayaan went to earnest meetings of young fundamentalist Muslims in

Nairobi, who desired perfection under Islam including "a global Islamic government, for everyone." But she was ready for a change by 1992 when her father arranged a marriage with a Canadian-Somali Muslim, and the 22-year-old Ayaan made an escape mid-route at the Frankfurt airport.

She was then advised by Somali acquaintances living in Germany that the Netherlands was easy on asylum, so she made her decision on where to go in Europe, and her new life path was set. Starting from a refugee camp in Zeewolde, she quickly threw herself into learning Dutch and becoming familiar with the new world she had chosen. Even during her initial few days in Germany she had been fascinated by the

well kept shops, after being "used to heaps of stinking rubbish" in Africa. The cleverness of having street signs at every corner impressed her, since it made navigation so much easier than having to quiz locals for directions. The fact of weekly trash pick-up, including recycling, was a revelation. Unlike many of her fellow refugees who remained resentful yet full of belief in their entitlement, she felt fortunate indeed to live in a civilized country.

In the refugee camp, Ayaan replaced her long modest skirt with trousers in order to ride a bicycle along with the more free-spirited Ethiopian girls. She cringed when she first appeared at the camp swimming pool with both women and men present. But ever game for new experiences, she wore a normal swimsuit and noted that men did not go immediately insane with sexual desire, as she had been taught as a proper Muslim girl. It was another step in unlearning her Muslim education.

After receiving official asylum based on a made-up story, she was able to enter Dutch society

Infidel

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even more. In 1993, she rented an apartment with the help of a government allowance. From that base, she began to work at factory jobs and pursued a western education, where she was particularly fascinated by history and political science. She remarked at one point, “Drinking wine and wearing trousers were nothing compared to reading the history of ideas.”

Later employment as a Somali-Dutch translator showed her a hidden substrata of violence and abuse toward women among Muslim refugees. The job sometimes required her to translate in crime investigations, where she would have to visit prisons, hospitals and women’s shelters. The cases often entailed the brutalization of women. Commonly, a woman would get beaten up after her husband spent the family’s money on qat (a popular drug among Somalis) and she responded by hiding money so the kids could eat. Ayaan concluded that the Dutch multicultural strategy of leaving Muslims alone to develop their self-esteem wasn’t working.

A local culture clash in 2001 thrust her into the public eye where she has remained ever since. She was outraged by an imam who appeared on television saying that homosexuality was a contagious disease after some Moroccan boys had attacked a gay teacher. She wrote an article in response that was printed in a shortened form in the NRC Handelsblad, arguing that Islam was a totalitarian belief system fundamentally hostile to personal freedom. So when 9/11 happened, her political views about her religion were largely formed. She criticized Islam for never going through a period of modernization and reform where it embraced the values of the Enlightenment, such as scientific inquiry, reason and individual rights.

The terrorist attacks against New York and Washington were all about Islam, she began to explain in media interviews, contrary to the more gentle reaction of many Dutch that only a lunatic fringe was responsible. Islam is not a “religion of

peace” now, nor has it ever been. A few such appearances turned her into persona non grata among many Muslims living in the Netherlands, a situation which soon made personal security necessary. Even so, she did not retreat from her positions and ran successfully for the Dutch Parliament.

The short film *Submission*, made with Theo Van Gogh, was Ayaan’s attempt to approach Islam’s anti-woman ideology from a different viewpoint, but it only inflamed her enemies into a fury.

On Nov. 2, 2004, Van Gogh was shot and stabbed to death in broad daylight in Amsterdam by a Muslim angered by the film’s imagined insult to Islam. The killer left a knife buried in Van Gogh’s chest that attached a letter addressed to Ayaan, written in the form of a fatwa and threat. The murder was a shock to the Dutch, perhaps an even greater one than the 9/11 attacks. The idea that an artist could be brutally killed in the Netherlands, where peace and compromise are highly valued, was truly a body blow to Dutch belief in multiculturalism.

The years since the murder have been accompanied with the danger from other Muslims who would like to kill her. Yet Ayaan’s sense that it is important to tell the truth about Islam—that it is a formidable threat to all the west has built—has kept her from shrinking back in fear. She has criticized liberals for taking freedom for granted, particularly the silly pacifism that is so in vogue among the smug literary left. In spite of having opinions that don’t fall into easy categories, she has made an impression. In 2005, *Time* magazine named her as one of the “100 Most Influential People of the World.” *Infidel* is her second book after publishing *The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam* in 2006. She is now a Resident Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington after leaving the Netherlands last year.

“Infidel” is a fine explanation of a brave woman’s life and ideas. We readers have to wonder what she will write next. ■

