

OPINION

SEEKING GOD BUT FINDING ALLAH | 

By Ayaan Hirsi Ali

ABC RELIGION AND ETHICS | 30 JUL 2010

Islam claims to be the fastest-growing religion in the world today. This expansion is achieved partly through the relatively high birth rate of Muslim societies but also through *dawa*, by which people are persuaded to adopt its values and outlook.

Millions of Muslims now live in the West; clearly it's not enough to assume that the allure of the material plenty around them will sway these Muslims to relax into a Western value system of tolerance and individual rights. Some of them may, but the evidence is all around us that many will remain sympathetic to a worldview that is steeped in conspiracy theories and blames all Muslim failures on outsiders. Moreover some non-Muslims in the West will be attracted to that worldview and become converts.

Some Westerners have a vision of Muslims as a mass of unbending, irrational, unthinking beings, incapable of calmly examining new ideas on their merit. But a Muslim's mind is just like anyone else's and is capable of absorbing new information.

If Muslims can be helped to re-examine the bedrock ideas of Islam, they may then admit that the Prophet Muhammad's example is fallible, that not everything in the Quran is perfect or true, and that this doctrine can be adjusted so that the mental pain that comes of trying to apply it in the modern world is diminished.

I have a theory that most Muslims are in search of a redemptive God. They believe that there is a higher power and that this higher power is the provider of morality, giving them a compass to help them distinguish between good and bad.

Many Muslims are seeking a God or a concept of God that in my view meets the description of the Christian God. Instead they are finding Allah. They find Allah mainly because many are born in Muslim families where Allah has been the reigning deity for generations; others are converts to Islam or the children of converts.

The Muslims who say that Allah is peaceful and compassionate simply do not know about other concepts of God, or the concepts they do have are wrong.

They have been told that Christians have misunderstood the real God, Allah, that they are guilty of *shirk* (an unforgivable sin) by associating the one true God with the Holy Ghost and Jesus, a mere prophet, they argue, whom Christians wrongly put on the throne as the son of God.

The Muslims who hear all this (and worse) about Christianity hardly ever make an attempt to find out more. Meanwhile Christians have stopped teaching people in Muslim countries because the bitter resistance from the local Muslim clergy and political elites made it harder and harder to do so.

In short, the Muslim masses are insulated from all alternative religions.

To change this, I have in mind a kind of spiritual competition. If Saudi Arabia invests millions of dollars in madrassas and a



AYAAN HIRSI ALI CALLS FOR A STRATEGIC ALLIANCE BETWEEN SECULAR PEOPLE AND CHRISTIANS, INCLUDING THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH

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 | We must not take freedom of speech for granted

AYAAN HIRSI ALI, CIS

"The right to speak freely and without fear or censure is being gradually and insidiously eroded by the rising threats of terrorism and political correctness."

systematic campaign of *dawa*, taking advantage of all the institutions of freedom in the West, why should the Catholic Church, with its financial resources and its millions of steadfast followers, not do the same?

I hope my friends Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens - the esteemed trinity of atheist activists in Britain and the United States - will not be dismayed by the idea of a strategic alliance between secular people and Christians, including the Roman Catholic Church.

I concede that the idea is a little paradoxical. For centuries the proponents of the scientific revolution and the Enlightenment saw the Vatican as their archenemy. The Church persecuted and in some cases executed those it condemned as heretics. My atheist friends are right to point out that many Christians have abandoned biblical literalism only because of the constant criticism by such free-thinkers.

It is also true that there is no shortage of misogyny in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Contempt for women is inscribed in the works of Saint Paul.

But the modern Catholic Church is a very different and more tolerant institution. Christians in more recent times must be given some credit for heeding at least some of the critiques advanced by the thinkers of the Enlightenment.

That very openness to criticism is what makes Christianity different from Islam.

Nor is Christianity riven as it used to be by bitter sectarian conflicts dating back to the Reformation. Today the relationship between the Catholic Church and the mainstream Protestant denominations, the Anglicans and Episcopalians, the Presbyterians, Unitarians, and Universalists, is peaceful.

In most of the Western world these churches and their congregations either leave one another alone or have good ecumenical relations. Finally, the Christian churches have put behind them the centuries of anti-Semitism that so stained their reputation.

It is true that on a wide range of issues the Roman Catholic Church takes positions with which I, along with most liberals, disagree. On questions such as abortion, birth control and women priests there are deep divisions within the Western world. Many American Protestants as well as Catholics are deeply opposed to abortion, a polarizing issue particularly in the United States.

But all these differences are matters of debate and not matters of war. Debate, however bitter, takes place within Western societies in a peaceful if sometimes heated exchange of words. The occasional madman who blows up an abortion clinic or murders physicians who provide legal treatments to women whose pregnancies are unwanted is the exception that proves the rule.

The clash between Islam and the West is different. All possible means are used by the agents of radical Islam to defeat the West. Even though most of our attention is consumed by those Muslims who are willing to blow themselves up in the name of their religion, we cannot ignore the more subtle campaign of conversion and radicalization.

For too long the West has sat back and allowed Islam to make a run at people who are susceptible to conversion. Sometimes I feel as if the only people in the West who really get this are Jews, who are far more exposed to the workings of radical Islam because of their contacts with the state of Israel.

Take a look at the institutions of the Enlightenment, the schools and universities established throughout the Western world on secular principles. To defend the values of the Enlightenment from the encroachment of Islamist thought they must wake up and see how effectively they have been infiltrated.

Their resources are limited, and large donations from Saudi princes and Qatari sultans come with strings attached. Their curricula are increasingly politicized, and they tolerate and even encourage the rise of all kinds of anti-Enlightenment movements based on feelings of group grievance and victimhood.

Some teachers even encourage their classes to wallow in self-flagellation over the misdeeds of Western history. Eastern, Middle Eastern and African cultures that see compromise and conciliation as manifestations of weakness interpret all this as a sign of their own impending victory: it emboldens them.

In this clash of civilizations the West needs to criticize the cultures of men of colour too. We need to drop the ethos of relativist respect for non-Western religions and cultures if respect is simply a euphemism for appeasement.

But we need to do more than criticize. We need - urgently - to offer an alternative message that is superior to the message of submission.

When I'm told to be careful not to impose Western values on people who don't want them, I beg to differ.

I was not born in the West and I did not grow up in the West. But the delight of being able once I came to the West to let my imagination run free, the pleasure of choosing whom I want to associate with, the joy of reading what I want, and the thrill of being in control of my life - in short, my freedom - is something I feel intensely as I manage to extricate myself from all the shackles and obstacles that my bloodline and my religion imposed.

[Gillard bid to win back Christians](#)

BARNEY ZWARTZ, THE AGE

"Julia Gillard has agreed to be interviewed by the Australian Christian Lobby today in an attempt to recover ground with churchgoers."

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PETER HITCHENS, MAIL ONLINE

"There is a strong chance that we will soon lose Turkey to the Islamic world, much as we lost Iran to the ayatollahs 30 years ago. And there is not much we can do about it - least of all the daft scheme to include this nation in the EU."

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Scott Stephens



Scott Stephens is the Religion and Ethics editor for ABC Online. Before joining the ABC he taught theology for many years, and even did a stint as a parish minister with the Uniting Church in Australia. He has written extensively on the intersections among philosophy, theology, ethics and politics, as well as on modern atheism's dependence on the Christian legacy.

He is a regular contributor to *The Drum*, *Eureka Street* and the *Times Literary Supplement*. He has edited and translated (with Rex Butler) two volumes of the *Selected Works* of the highly influential philosopher and cultural critic, Slavoj Zizek - including *The Universal Exception*, which was named by The Guardian newspaper one of its "Books of the Year" in 2007.

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Many contemporary Western thinkers have unconsciously imbibed the toxin of appeasement with the ideas of equality and free speech. They give chairs in the most distinguished and best institutions of higher learning to apologists for Islam.

There is no unity, no shared view of how to deal with this threat. Indeed, those of us who clearly see the threat are dismissed as alarmists.

That is why I think we must also appeal to other, more traditional sources of ideological strength in Western society. And that must include the Christian churches. There are people in Europe and America who maintain that it is secularism that has made us defenceless against a Muslim onslaught.

But it is not only leftists who appease Islam. Afflicted with similar pangs of white guilt, many prominent Christian theologians have also become accomplices of jihad.

When I came to the West what I found truly amazing was the fact that believers, agnostics and unbelievers could debate with and even ridicule one another without ever resorting to violence.

It is this right of free expression that is now under attack. And in time of war, internal feuding in the ranks - between atheists and agnostics, Christians and Jews, Protestants and Catholics - serves only to weaken the West.

So long as we atheists and classical liberals have no effective programs of our own to defeat the spread of radical Islam, we should work with enlightened Christians who are willing to devise some. We should bury the hatchet, rearrange our priorities, and fight together against a much more dangerous common enemy.

On 12 September, 2006, at the University of Regensburg, Germany, where he had once taught theology as a professor, Pope Benedict gave a wide-ranging lecture, titled "Faith, Reason, and the University - Memories and Reflections." In it he proclaimed that any faith in God must also obey reason; God cannot ask you to do something unreasonable, because God created reason.

Islam, he pointed out, is not like Catholicism: it is predicated on the idea that God may *overturn* law and human reason. Allah may demand immoral or unreasonable behaviour, for he is all-powerful and demands absolute submission.

In spite of the pope's invitation to dialogue with people in other cultures, his speech unleashed Muslim protests around the world, and several churches were fire-bombed: more evidence of the intolerance of criticism of Islam by Islamists.

The pope also knows that wherever radical Islamists become a majority they oppress other faiths. In Muslim countries there is no equal competition for souls, hearts and minds, because atheists and missionaries and communities of Christians are forced to operate in an atmosphere of physical menace. And although there are plenty of mosques in Rome, not a single church is permitted in Riyadh.

A confrontation between the values held by Islam and those of the West are inevitable. There *is* already a clash, and we *are* in some sense already at war.

That Western civilization is superior is not simply my opinion but a reality I have experienced and continue to appreciate every day. I assume the West will win. The question is how.

Can the various churches of Christianity help stem this rising tide of violent Islam? Can today's Christianity play a role in preserving the values of Western civilization?

Can the Vatican join in this campaign, if not lead the way - or is it doomed to become a decorative relic, like the European royal families and the fish fork?

Can the Established Churches of Europe heed my call - or will the cultural and moral relativists prevail, Christian leaders like the Archbishop of Canterbury, who professes to have an "understanding" attitude toward Shari'a?

*Ayaan Hirsi Ali is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, Washington, D.C. This article is an edited extract from her most recent book, **Nomad** (Fourth Estate, 2010).*

 Comment

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SIUL :

09 AUG 2010 4:48:46PM

This plan on Islam misses the right reading of islam and muslims as a whole.

If you want to exile Islam from muslims minds you should not follow the same way historically taken against christianity.

Islam a religion of self-evidence, full of proof and logic. it is hard to shake it with spent claims.

The writer vainly tries to underestimate the influence of islam and its accelerated grown rate. but that doesnt work. you ought to study how muslim understand Islam and the Islam fundamentals too.

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MARK :

02 AUG 2010 7:43:40AM

The need for thinkers, religious or otherwise, in the West to become more aware and active in the face of Islam is one that needs to be heeded by as many as possible. Too often secularism has resulted in a decadent, mindless, and supine attitude towards Islam, as if diversity for diversity's sake is some kind of virtue. But Islam is at core an ideology, and must be assessed accordingly. At heart and in practice Islam is utterly contradictory to the West, to those values which we of goodwill and thought cherish. The West and its faiths are by no means perfect. But at least we are able to disagree and transform each other in the disagreement without widespread resort to violence and death.

Howevr the author needs to be aware of how often the Catholic Church has cunningly allied itself with the extremes of Islam in the public arena, especially in regard to UN sponsored activities for women's rights, and the removal of penalties for homosexuality. Much of Catholicism, and too evangelical Anglicanism, and Pentecostalism, is more qualitatively similar to Islam than to the evolving thought of the wider West.

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FEENSTAR :

01 AUG 2010 11:51:29PM

Self-examination to reveal the truth is seldom within the field of interfaith dialogue. Here Ali proves herself worthy. If we can move past the barbs of small theological errors then we will hear her message. A truth a woman's experience, not bent on harm but on healing. If only all religious institutions had the courage to look inwards

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ZARA :

01 AUG 2010 7:00:04PM

This is the most vitriolic piece of work that I've ever read and that's including Samuel Huntington's Clash of Civilizations. Which this writing seems to be based on.

The so called West has for hundreds of years been guilty of horrendous acts and those who understand history as whole would know this. However this does not mean that they are apologists as Ms. Hirsi suggests. Why can we as people not engage in the call for each others down fall? I'm alarmed by this article as it suggests that Islam is some horrible virus that's going to consume the world until there's nothing left. This is not true. At the core of Islam is the freedom of believe. There's also the respect for the peoples of the book. It is really important for people to take cultural norms for what it is and not confuse it with Islam as Ms. Hirsi is doing in this article.

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GRIZZLE :

02 AUG 2010 10:36:21AM

Whilst I agree this article does place a negative slant on the teaching of Islam, The reality is that many Islamic Nations chose a path of legalism in imposing faith. There is no freedom to believe in these nations. I think what needs to be made clear is the distinction between Islam as a Faith and Islamic nationhood which as we are aware have various outworkings. The Politicisation of Islam is having similar outworkings of the Imposition of Christendom in the middle ages. Rule by imposition of belief and custom is a human rights issue, and this is the discussson we should be seeking.

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AARON :

01 AUG 2010 2:37:37AM

"Contempt for women is inscribed in the works of Saint Paul"?! Ms. Ali, you need to do a little of your own re-examination. Unguarded assertions make it harder for many Christians to listen to what you have to say.

Regards,

Aaron

www.bible-quran.com

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ICEMAN :

30 JUL 2010 2:28:14PM

I'm disagree with the theology within this article. Paul by no means demonstrates a contempt of women. Many leaders of the early church were indeed women and we have every reason to believe Paul did not oppose that.

I also think one of the biggest mistakes the Christian faith made was to allow itself to become so symbiotic with modern culture. So today Christianity is often quite mistakenly associated with certain ideas or movements that in reality aren't part of the Christian faith. This results in a mass misunderstanding (even by Christians) of what orthodox Christianity actually looks like.

However I do agree with the basic principle of the article. Yet my reaction would not be to ally more and more with secular society, but to try and reclaim some of the heritage of the Christian faith.

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GRIZZLE :

30 JUL 2010 11:24:13AM

This article displays a profound misunderstanding of the relationship between western culture and the Christian Faith. The Christian faith at its best is Trans-cultural and not synonymous with western culture. Indeed the thing that prevents many Muslims from exploring christianity is its link with a culture in many ways at odds with its core beliefs. Some sort of amalgum between western churches and secularists would look rather strange, sort of like the Pope marrying Oprah Winfrey!! The Christian faith is at its most effective when it operates apart from the socieatal structures. I do however agree that Muslim cultures should be encouraged to engage ideas and be free to debate and argue their faith without fear of oppression.

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