



Murder in Amsterdam: The Death of Theo Van Gogh and the Limits of Tolerance

Ian Buruma , Joanne J. Myers

November 20, 2006



Murder in Amsterdam

- [Introduction](#)
- [Remarks](#)
- [Questions and Answers](#)

Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: When Americans think or write about the challenges of Islamic extremism in Europe, they often focus on countries such as Germany, France, or England. So when the provocateur filmmaker and polemicist [Theo van Gogh](#) was brutally murdered in Amsterdam, it was shocking that a country known for its stability and tolerantly pragmatic responses to social problems was suddenly thrust into the forefront of the apocalypse, facing its own clash of civilizations.

The murderer was a Dutch Muslim of Moroccan descent who became incensed over a film about the treatment of women under the Qur'an that von Gogh had directed with the Somali-born feminist and politician [Ayaan Hirsi Ali](#). The murder not only horrified quiet, prosperous Holland, but also sent shock waves across Europe and around the world. This killing became the emblematic crime of the moment and very much the story of our times.

Shortly thereafter, Mr. Buruma returned to the place of his birth in order to try and make sense of, not only this incident, but of an earlier murder of charismatic politician [Pim Fortuyn](#), who was an opponent of immigration. Professor Buruma wanted to see what larger meaning could be drawn from this dramatic series of events.

The initial result of his inquiry was a *New Yorker* article, published in January 2005, which has now been expanded into this book. [Murder in Amsterdam](#) is the exploration of the event, its context, and subsequent fallout. It is a work that addresses questions of political philosophy, moral accountability, and mass psychology. It also deals with clashing ideologies, the prejudices, and the doubts cast on the workability of a country that was once home to the Enlightenment and was known as a bastion of tolerance but was now experiencing an act of moral intolerance.

Our speaker is one of the most well regarded journalists and thinkers of our time. He is uniquely placed to explain the Dutch situation to the rest of the world, as he lived the first half of his life in Holland and knows this country's history well. But he has also lived in many other places, as a result of which he is able to see his own country with the eye of an outsider while telling the story with an insider's voice, by picking up on the nuances and historical threads that other writers might easily overlook.

Yet the country to which he returns in this book is virtually unrecognizable to him, transformed by large numbers of Muslim immigrants from Turkey and Morocco. Despite the government's liberal immigration policies and lavish social services, all has not gone well, and Mr. Buruma wants to find out why.

Although the Netherlands is but one case of what can happen when political Islam collides with the secular West, there is what Professor Buruma's subtitle indicates, an example of what happens when tolerance finds its limits.

Currently our speaker is the Henry R. Luce Professor at Bard College, where he holds the chair in Democracy, Human Rights, and Journalism. Among his nonfiction works are *God's Dust: A Modern Asian Journey*; *The Wages of Guilt: Memories of War in Germany and Japan*; *Anglomania*; and *Bad Elements*. He writes frequently for the *New York Review of Books*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Financial Times*.

Please join me in welcoming back someone who is a master at stimulating us to think about issues in ways we have not done before. Ian Buruma, thank you for being here.

Remarks

IAN BURUMA: Thank you very much for those kind words, and all of you for turning up for this early-morning talk.

For those who haven't read the book, I'd just like to sketch the three characters who really make the story of this book.

I was attracted to the story partly because it was the country I grew up in, partly because the murder and its aftermath say so much about the problems facing Europe at the moment, and partly because the characters involved are so compelling. It's almost a novel.

Two of the three characters I knew and know personally. I knew Theo van Gogh a little bit, not very well, not well enough to feel the lash of his tongue. Ayaan Hirsi Ali I know a little better. The only one I don't know is the killer, [Mohammed Bouyeri](#). I would love to have been a kind of Truman Capote, but I don't think this is possible. He is very isolated, in a maximum-security prison, in the company of the Qur'an and headphones that blast *suras* into his ear almost full-time.

Theo van Gogh, a distant descendant of the painter, grew up in more or less the same place I did, which is to say the more snobbish parts of The Hague. He did much in his life to downplay his background, there was a kind of *nostalgie de la bou* about his behavior, and he was always somebody who liked to outrage.

He came from an unusual family, in that during the German Occupation of World War II, several of his relatives, his grandfather and his uncles specifically, were active members of the Resistance. This was somewhat unusual, since most people deeply resented the German occupation, but the number of people who actively resisted was relatively small, as was true in most European occupied countries. I mean it took a great deal to stick your neck out. The same was true of active collaborators. These percentages are roughly the same all over Europe.

His family was unusual, as I said, because there was a lot of resistance. The family background, a mixture of socialism and Calvinism, may explain this to some extent. They were a family of believers, in one way or another.

What happened in Holland after the war—and I need to sketch this a little bit to make sense of his personality—is that, because most people did not actively resist, there is quite a lot of—how shall I put it?—let's say guilt—about the fact that people were not particularly brave and a very large percentage of the Jewish population was deported. The only country that had a higher percentage was Poland. There were many reasons for this. Anti-Semitism is not necessarily one of them. We don't need to go into that. But it is a painful fact.

Partly because of that, in the Holland that I grew up— and perhaps this can also be explained partly through a Protestant background— there was a very strong insistence on who had been "good" and who had been "bad." I remember, for example, we wouldn't buy candy at a particular tobacconist because the woman behind the counter had had a German boyfriend during the war. Or we knew perfectly well where not to buy meat because that person had been "bad." Theo had this view really all his life; he divided people into "good" and "bad" in a very dogmatic manner.

He was also, as I said, somebody who loved to cause outrage. This began when he was in primary school and he produced a paper as a primary school kid called *The Shit Paper*. Now, this is an age that most young boys are interested in such matters, but few will actually produce a paper about it. He did, with an aristocratic young man called Quirlus von Erfurt [phonetic], which sort of tells you something about the social background.

His first film, which he made, I think, with money borrowed from wealthy friends of the family in The Hague, showed a cat being stuffed into the spin dryer of a washing machine and it showed somebody smashing somebody's eyes by pushing a broken glass in it. I mean he liked to provoke, he liked to outrage.

And he was very democratic in his outrageousness. He became notorious, and in the end got killed, because of the alleged insults to Islam. He was actually much more insulting to Jews and Christians. He habitually referred to Jesus Christ as "the rotten fish from Nazareth" and so on. So he was by no means simply anti-Muslim.

Nor was he necessarily a racist. What is interesting about him is that he is, as far as I know, the only Dutch filmmaker who actually made films about Dutch Moroccans and used Dutch Moroccan and Turkish Dutch actors. So he did seek a certain bridge to these troubled minorities in a way that most artists in Holland did not.

In any case, as a provocateur and as somebody who saw things in terms of good and bad, he saw dogmatic or radical Islam, and more and more Islam per se, really as sort of the new fascism facing Europe, and those who sought to find some kind of accommodation with it were accused as collaborators, just as bad as the people who collaborated with the Nazis. This language, which is not at all unique to him, is something that you hear more often in Holland, and it again shows how dark the shadow of World War II still is in my native country, where most contemporary debates very quickly are couched in terms of "collaborators," "Nazis," and "fascists," partly because World War II is perhaps the only really dramatic event that happened to the country since Napoleon invaded. But it is there nonetheless in an unhealthy way.

Now, he found common cause, first of all, with Pim Fortuyn, the populist, more about whom I will say later, but also with Ayaan Hirsi Ali. Ayaan Hirsi Ali comes from an equally privileged background, although from a very different one. The daughter of an American-educated opposition politician in Somalia, she didn't see her father very much. He was in and out of exile and prisons. She grew up partly in Somalia but mostly in Kenya and Saudi Arabia.

As a young woman, she was herself a fierce Muslim believer. She wanted to join the [Muslim Brotherhood](#). She demonstrated against Salman Rushdie's book, *The Satanic Verses*. It was really only when she escaped to Europe, to Holland, in order to flee from an enforced marriage to somebody she barely knew that she gradually turned against her former belief and became an equally zealous atheist.

It's interesting that, amongst the immigrants and their children, Muslim men seem to often have a harder time adapting to Western society than the women. Women very often—not always, but very often—see it as a form of liberation. If you look at the universities, you see a large number of women in head scarves working like blazes, largely to get away from the domination of their menfolk. For the men it is harder, because in a sense they are freer, and the temptations of Western society can be deeply confusing to young men, who then often seek the rigid rules of a kind of religion that their parents never really had in

order to anchor them in something that might feel to them like moral quicksand.

She was of the liberated kind and discarded the head scarf, drank her glass of wine, had boyfriends, and so on. She had an almost Margaret Thatcherian disdain for women who didn't do the same thing. She couldn't bear the idea of Muslim women who were often less privileged than herself—many of whom came from Berber villages—who did not do the same thing she did and throw off the shackles and live like liberated Western women. Although she represents their interests as a politician—or did when she was a politician—and feels deeply and genuinely that her activism is to help these women against their oppression, I think one of the reasons that she is not really popular with most Muslims that she purports to represent is this disdain, which has as much to do with class, probably, as with anything else.

Anyway, she also sought to provoke. The film that got Theo van Gogh killed was written by her. He offered technical assistance. He didn't write the film. It wasn't really his responsibility. But she wrote the film, and it was designed to provoke. As she herself has often said, she wanted to really shock people into awareness of women's oppression by Islam as she sees it. She did the most provocative thing really that she could have thought of, which was to—it's a ten-minute film—to have several young women in veils but with very little else, largely undressed, and project text from the Qur'an onto their naked bodies, which had to do with the dominated women's position in the Islamic world.

Now, whether one could really blame the Qur'an itself for the subjugation of women or not is another debate. In any case, rather than open the discussion amongst the Muslims, I think it shocked them to the core. It created enormous antagonism. But it certainly got a lot of applause from a large variety of secular Dutch citizens—some liberals, some former leftists, some people on the right—who were becoming her constituency more and more, rather than these Muslim women, which was a pity.

One of the people who was very shocked and saw it as the final straw and the reason to go and murder the director was Mohammed Bouyeri. Now, again, an interesting figure. Quite educated, but entirely in the Dutch system. Born in Holland. His father was a *gasterbeiter* [guest worker], who came in the late 1960s, worked himself to the bone, and was not a religious fanatic or anything of that sort. Very few, if any, people of that generation are. He raised his family as best he could.

Mohammed Bouyeri seemed like a perfectly well-integrated, nice boy. In his neighborhood he was always very good about neighborhood activities and starting new clubs and so on. He drank beer, he had a girlfriend, and he seemed a well-integrated young Dutch-Moroccan boy.

Then something started to go very wrong. These things that go wrong are probably arbitrary. It could be anything that puts people onto the wrong route. One of the problems had something to do with the nature of Western European welfare societies. Unlike in the United States, where as an immigrant or the child of an immigrant you are forced to participate in the workplace, even if it is to flip hamburgers, because if you don't you sink, one of the results of the welfare society is that there really isn't that push factor, and it is very easy to fall into the trap of dependence on the state in one way or another.

It is very interesting when you look at the life of Mohammed Bouyeri, his young life, that the people from mainstream Dutch society that he most frequently came into contact with were almost all welfare officers, local counselors, people who in one way or another had the job of dispensing state money for various things.

Things, of course, didn't always pan out the way he wanted. He wanted to have money for a youth club; it wasn't forthcoming. He felt these things were an insult to him, then he felt that they were an insult to him because he was a Muslim. His sister came home with a boyfriend, which he didn't like. It was okay for him to have a girlfriend, but his sister's boyfriend was an insult. And so he began to feel more and more that the world was against him.

The problem is that he, like many of these young men born in Europe, really didn't know where he belonged. He felt alienated from the society he was born into and grew up in, but he certainly didn't feel

at home in the Berber village where his father came from either. That's when people reach for a particularly purist, radical kind of Islam—not often through mullahs in a mosque, but usually from like-minded groups.

The Internet plays an enormous role. He got most of his radical ideology by downloading English-language Web sites originally from Saudi Arabia and other countries. It is the purism—the reason that [Wahhabism](#) from Saudi Arabia appeals to so many young Muslims in Europe is precisely because it doesn't have a cultural tradition; it has nothing to do with the villages of Bangladesh or Morocco. It is something much more purist, much more abstract, which is the reason why it appeals. This was taken up by him.

He became more and more radical. It began with growing a beard, but it ended up with a kind of [Takfiri](#) notion that all infidels and all apostates, and in fact Western society altogether, were so inherently wicked and sinful that they had to be destroyed, the kind of thing that Avishai Margalit and myself described in our book [Occidentalism](#). He was a pure Occidentalist. He wanted to destroy the civilization he had grown up in.

His first target was actually Ayaan Hirsi Ali, but she was already well guarded, but very much on his hit list. So he went for the director, who refused bodyguards and was rather insouciantly bicycling to his work one morning, like so many Amsterdammers, and got gunned down and then had his throat cut.

Now, the reaction, which is really the heart of the book, is very interesting. The Dutch had always regarded themselves, perhaps a bit like the Danish or the British to some extent, as being in the sort of avant-garde of multicultural tolerance. They had a society where that worked. And a bit like in 1939 the Dutch also, I think, probably still had the illusion that the problems of the world would go everywhere but not in Holland. Because it was such a wonderful, tolerant, liberal society, "these things couldn't happen to us."

The flip side of complacency is, of course, very often a sense of panic. I think that is what happened after the murder of Theo van Gogh in particular, but it goes back a little further to Pim Fortuyn, and maybe even earlier than that. But the panic spread suddenly amongst the same people who not long before had been zealous defenders of multiculturalism. They were now suddenly saying, "Multiculturalism is a disaster, it's a catastrophe. We've been too tolerant. Tolerance is really a form of appeasement. It has led straight to the death of a man who was simply exercising his right to free speech."

What has happened now—and I think this is not just Holland, but in Holland you see it in a particularly dramatic form—is that different constituencies have come together in a new kind of populism. Pim Fortuyn is interesting, because he is the first one to really grasp this. He is very different from [Le Pen](#) in France or [Jorg Heider](#) in Austria, in that he is not a straightforward right-winger. Holland doesn't really have a tradition of extreme right-wing thinking or fascism. I mean there was a little Nazi Party in the 1930s, but they were always seen as ridiculous rather than popular.

Fortuyn doesn't really come from that tradition anyway. What he has done is he managed —and this is his genius—to appeal both to the disillusioned leftists and former multiculturalists, who felt that everything had gone wrong, and the usual constituency of right-wing fear mongers and populists, who felt that this was no longer their country, that foreigners were taking away their jobs. He managed to appeal to the former by being an open and flamboyantly gay man, who argued that Muslims were a threat to Dutch liberalism, specifically to the rights of homosexuals and women, which you would never hear either Jorg Heider, whatever his actual sexual preferences may be, say, let alone Jean-Marie Le Pen.

I think a part of this is a form of populism that has become increasingly common. The immigrant issue, the immigrant of Islam, has become a kind of focal point, I believe, of much deeper discontent. This has to do not just with large-scale immigration; it has to do with the European Union, it has to do with economic globalization, it has to do with many trends that make people feel more and more that they have no more grip on the societies they live in, that it is those people above them, those elites in

Brussels, at the UN, these big guys at the top somewhere who are in charge of our destiny and they are not listening to us.

There is an element of truth in this, in that the elites in Holland, the intellectual elites as well as the political elites, never really wanted to take the problem or the potential problem of immigration seriously. When people complained about high crime, for example, in heavily immigrant areas, this was usually dismissed by saying "that's racist talk," "we know what happened during the war; we can't have another minority persecuted," which gave people the feeling that nobody was listening to them.

So the "No" vote against the European Constitution and the 51 percent, according to recent polls, of the Dutch population that says that they disapprove of and are frightened of Islam in my view are very linked. Both of them are really a vote against the elites—the elites that didn't take this seriously, the elites that take European idealism more seriously than national pride.

This is a problem. Therefore, I think, to see the problem of Islamic minorities in Europe purely from the perspective of Islam or cultural civilizational clash is wrongheaded. In the first place because, as I say, I think it is linked to other anxieties and the Muslims have become sort of the brunt of it. Also because culture and cultural difference is not really the issue. I think this is a great and dangerous misunderstanding.

Mohammed Bouyeri's father had a different culture, that's for sure; he came from a little village and that's the culture he had. But his son did not come from that culture. The radical Islam espoused by young revolutionaries in Europe and elsewhere does not really have a cultural tradition. That is the appeal, as I said. In some ways, they are more comparable to radical evangelicals in the United States, in that it is a very individualistic experience of religion and it is both a reaction against modernity as well as a very modern reaction. So to blame Islam as such, as Ayaan Hirsi Ali tends to do, coming from that background herself, or to see it in terms of the clash of civilizations, I think is an error.

Finally, unlike in the United States, it is not entirely clear in Europe when people say "immigrants should be made or encouraged to integrate more" what they should be integrating into. In the United States, it is perfectly clear: being an American citizen, which is, in theory, open to all who have an American passport, is a fairly abstract notion. It is based on political institutions, on the Constitution, on law, and so on. It is not becoming a member of some arcane club with quasi-ancient rules that all the members understand, unspoken codes, which are almost impenetrable for outsiders, which is rather the way Europeans see their national identities. France is perhaps a slightly separate case, because you have both a republican revolutionary idea as well as that old European notion of the national club.

The other thing which you still have—I say the collective "you," but not all of you—in the United States is something that after World War II in Europe has become largely taboo, which is an open kind of patriotism, the hand on the heart, the flag waving, which in Europe has bad associations, and therefore has become to many Europeans both absurd and potentially dangerous. This makes it, again, harder I think for immigrants to integrate, because there are not really symbolic things with which to identify either, except for one place. There is one place where all these things still exist with a vengeance in Europe, and that is in the soccer stadiums. They are the last playground for acting out post-World War II taboos, which elsewhere are no longer kosher. So there you have all the flag waving, and the chanting, and the tribal macho, even the admiration for warrior-like qualities, which you don't have in regular society and which in the United States is still rather mainstream.

I am not really arguing for reinstating this kind of nationalism or patriotism, because I think it is too late for that. What I would argue, and what I do think Europeans can learn from the Americans, is that they have to learn to gradually adopt a kind of national identity that is more based on law and respect for the law and on political institutions, and less on culture as it were.

Of course, by the same token, because respect for the law should be the center of national identity, the same goes for the immigrants. I do not think it is right, and I think it is counterproductive, to be inflexible

in things like head scarves and having Arabic spoken in mosques or having Islamic schools. I think one should allow people these cultural expressions as long as they stick to the law, as long as they don't threaten violence or use violence to impose their views.

I think if both sides can abide by this, then assimilation, integration, whatever you wish to call it, will come in the long term. But I think if we see it in terms of a cultural clash, then we are very likely to see a great deal more violence.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: Could you say something about the reaction in the Muslim community? Is there any movement to try to ameliorate this type of behavior or to in some way be a force for more peaceful coexistence?

IAN BURUMA: Yes, there is. Well, there are two problems here. One is that there is no one Muslim community. I mean there are many different communities. The Turks are not like the Moroccans, to speak just of Holland. So there is no one voice. Nor is there anything like in the Catholic Church; I mean there is no Vatican, there is no Pope, to address. So that's one of the problems with Islam perhaps.

But yes there are responsible people who very much condemned—most of them condemned the murder, there is no question of that. But there are those who very openly condemned it and who are trying to do something about it. The problem is that they are always in danger of losing "street cred" amongst the very Muslims they are trying to moderate. If the Dutch have a problem with accusing people of collaboration, the Muslims do too.

A very typical figure is a man called [Ahmed Aboutaleb](#), who is a city councilman in Amsterdam and has been very active in this way. But he is always accused of being sort of a toady and a lackey, somebody who has gone over to the other side, and so on. This is the problem.

When Western European politicians try to talk to the community leaders, they find perfectly reasonable people, but those reasonable people often do not have a lot of traction with the more unruly or more radical types that need to be reined in.

QUESTION: You talked about the elites of The Hague, and The Hague is the center of the International Court of Justice, which is supposed to bring human rights and all these good things. So what is happening among the elites you mentioned at the beginning and the intellectuals and so forth to help articulate the kind of national character and European character, because after all we are talking about all of or most of Western Europe? What is going on? You are an outsider coming back. How many insiders who are living within the Netherlands and the other countries want to find a way to resolve this national conflict?

IAN BURUMA: Some, perhaps even many, do. But the tendency at the moment—the intellectual elites, as well as the political elites, in Holland were, by and large, the Social Democrats, slightly left of center. Then you have the old Christian Democrats. Those are really the main groups. And then you have the European-style liberals in there as well, who are in fact conservatives—liberal in the European sense, laissez-faire economics and so on.

The liberals have more or less taken up the position that they are the defenders of so-called enlightened values against Islamic intolerance. The Christian Democrats are divided on this, but many of them are inclined to actually say, "Muslims retain something that I wish all Europeans would have, at least they believe in something; all this secularism has gone too far; we should be sympathetic to them," and so on. There is some thinking of that kind, even in the sense that perhaps we should extend blasphemy laws to all religions and tighten it up and so on. So there is that rather conservative reaction.

Then there are the Social Democrats, who are still mainstream, many of them very much on the

defensive because they feel that multiculturalism has been discredited. Some of them have become, again, rather zealous defenders of so-called Enlightenment values against Islam.

I think the split can be seen, not just after the murder of Theo van Gogh, but during the [Salman Rushdie](#) affair. Before the Salman Rushdie affair, almost all people left of center in Europe, in England, were more or less Third World-ist, multicultural, and so on. Suddenly, one of their own was attacked by bigoted people from the Third World, and you had a split on the left. Some persisted in this—"Well, you have to understand them, that's their culture; we have to be more tolerant; after all we're all racists," and so on and so forth. But you had the other left, let's call it the [Christopher Hitchens](#) left, who were also very anti-clericalist, who said, "This is outrageous; we have to crack down on these people; they're a danger to our freedoms," and so on.

My suspicion of those who now—I mean we are all in favor of the Enlightenment and its values—my suspicion of those who use it as a kind of banner of European or Dutch identity, Western identity, is that these very same people fifty years ago probably would have talked in terms of "protecting Christendom against the Muslims" because nobody could say that with a straight face anymore, except possibly the Pope, and even he has to bring in the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment has now become a kind of flag of "our" values. I am very suspicious of that.

QUESTION: Two things. One is I have some problem with the equivocation, or the putting together in this case, of evangelicals and Islamic radicals. The evangelicals in this country are not about to kill civilians and try to overthrow the government or bomb subway cars or anything else. That is, I think, a false comparison.

Second, you deal with culture in Europe, but you are also dealing with numbers. Right now in Holland, in Belgium, in Denmark, and so on, the number of Islamic births far outstrips the number of indigenous Dutch, Belgian, Danish, or other births. So you have an actual numerical thing that is going to be shifting and it is going to have a considerable impact on the cultures of the countries of Western Europe. How are you going to deal with that? It is no longer a question of assimilation; it is a question of adjustment to what has become the more numerous culture or group.

IAN BURUMA: I will take the first point first. Not all radical Islamists or neo-orthodox Islamists, of course, are revolutionaries who throw bombs. Those are two different things. You can be an orthodox believer, a young person who, like an Evangelical, has adopted orthodox Islam, even Wahhabism, without being a violent revolutionary. I think one shouldn't entirely equate those two things.

Secondly, abortion doctors have been killed by evangelical Christians and people have been talking in very violent terms about the Muslim world for Christian reasons. But I agree there is not a serious threat to the government from Christian revolutionaries. There is no question about that.

The birth rate question — yes, this is a staple of people who are frightened of other ethnic groups overwhelming them. I think the fear is based on the assumption that things are static, which of course they are not. I think it is true everywhere, whether it is India or the Netherlands or Japan, when people become more prosperous and more middle class, they have fewer children. It tends to be the poor who produce very large families and who are also religious.

It seems to me that as Muslims, like everybody else in Western European countries, do become more prosperous— and we can only hope that they will—and become more middle class —many of them are, especially in the Turkish community —that the same thing will happen. So I don't think we can assume that in fifty years, just because they are Muslims, they will still be producing families of five children. And if they do, we don't know what those children will be like anyway.

I agree with you, if they are kept in a state of general poverty and exclusion and in their own minds their only anchors are large families and radical religion, then we have a serious problem. But we can only hope that that will not happen. And I think there are economic factors there as much as anything else.

QUESTION: You mentioned the American way of dealing with this, which is just an accident, it's not something anybody intended, as somehow being more successful at integration. So I have a two-part question: (1) would it be more successful if it were adopted also in Europe; and (2) is there any chance of doing that kind of thing in Europe, giving people a better incentive to integrate?

IAN BURUMA: Yes, I think it would be more successful if they did it in Europe. But I don't think they can simply emulate the United States. I mean there wouldn't be the political will, nor would it necessarily be desirable, to simply dismantle the welfare state and have a totally American system. I don't think that will happen.

But one thing that would be much easier to do and absolutely has to be done, especially in countries like France and the Netherlands and Germany, perhaps slightly less in Britain, is to do away with a lot of the bureaucratic obstacles to getting jobs. It is a very inflexible job market. I think a lot can be done to open that up to newcomers and young people without dismantling the welfare state. I think that is probably the way it should be tackled.

But the welfare state is nothing like it was twenty years ago anyway, so it is already being whittled away to some extent. I wouldn't advocate total Americanization, but I think much can be done to make the job market more flexible.

QUESTION: I think you identified all of the de-anchoring mechanisms that are going on in the world—globalization, the European Union, and so forth, and certainly the fall of socialism as well. I have a great deal of sympathy for your notion that there should be some kind of a new solidification of identity through the nation. But when you commented on what you thought that meant, it was only about law—obeying the law and so forth, that's enough. It seems to me that is really only the state, and that is so abstract that there is no emotional appeal to people in that.

In order to form some kind of identity that would be focused on the state, and maybe the nation, you need some kind of an ideology it seems to me. I search in my own mind for what that ideology might be. It is hard to figure it out. I'm wondering if you have any notion of any ideology that could be the factor that would draw people to this kind of identity, because otherwise when people do look for social solidarity and identity, the biggest thing in the world today seems to me to be religion.

IAN BURUMA: It's a valid question. I don't have a clear answer. The dilemma, I think, is that traditionally what made people feel Dutch or German or French does not really depend on ideology; it's something else. If you ask somebody in England what is it to be English or British, they would come up with things like sense of humor or something like that, rather vague. I think attempts by politicians to pump up some new sense of Britishness and so on, which is what [Gordon Brown](#) has tried to do, and people are increasingly trying to do, is doomed to failure, because I don't think it can be done that way.

I have been thinking about this a lot. One of the most national and most provincial institutions in modern life is actually national television, the only exception really being perhaps CNN, which is seen everywhere. But national television figures, personalities, are still totally national. Nobody has ever heard of these people who are wildly celebrated in their own countries.

So there are perhaps ways for people to identify, but again it is very difficult, I think, for immigrants to do this—although, again in Britain, I think there is a sense in which on television minorities are more and more represented, not only in the shape of newsreels, but there has been a very successful comedy show set up by people of sub-continental background watched by everybody, and so on. I think that may be a more fruitful thing to explore than politicians trying to come up with some new form of national identity, which I think is mostly for the birds.

QUESTION: I'd like to push you a little more on what I thought was a tension between two of the arguments you are making. On the one hand, you seem to suggest that a welfare state even more

extensive than the one we have had here was disconnecting young men from the labor force and from the economy more generally. On the other hand, you seem to hope that somehow a Muslim population which remained impoverished and state-dependent would go through a demographic transition and have a radical decline in its birth rate even when the native population has experienced an even more radical decline in its own birth rate. It seems to me that there is a tension between these two arguments, and I'm wondering if you would care to address that?

IAN BURUMA: I think if the job market is more flexible and people learn to be less discriminatory, which is also a factor—don't underestimate the strain of racial prejudice, which is still there in Europe; I would say it is worse than in this country—then what one would hope is that members of minorities would gradually enter the middle class through jobs and education, and then the birth rate would drop.

Now, a drop in birth rate is, of course, not necessarily a total blessing either. I think the welfare state is a hindrance, in many ways it is a barrier, to entering into the middle class rather than an encouragement. That is my argument. So I'm not sure I see the tension.

QUESTION: [off-microphone - inaudible]

IAN BURUMA: I agree with everything you say. In that sense, I think the Europeans really can take a leaf from the United States. In this sense, I would be in favor of further Americanization of Europe. Maybe that would be the kind of glue of the new ideology, as it were.

But that would mean another great change in Europe, which I have advocated for a long time, which is different immigration rules, European immigration rules. What we have so far is that we allow asylum seekers in, but it's not a legitimate category yet to want to emigrate to Europe for economic reasons, except if you are inside the European Union. Which is why if you want to move to Europe because you cannot make a living where you are, you have to pretend to be an asylum seeker. That leads to all the other prejudices of bogus asylum seekers, shirkers, liars, cheats, and so on.

So I think what Europe should do is have, exactly like the United States, immigration quotas for economic migrants.

QUESTION: In our country, we ourselves are feeling increasing discomfort these days about immigration from our near neighbors. I know that the same is true in Europe. I wanted to ask you if you expect increasingly restrictive immigration policies, and in particular what you thought about the prospects for Turkey joining the European Union now?

IAN BURUMA: I think the prospects of Turkey joining the European Union at the moment look pretty dismal, which I think is a great blunder. Again, I think the problem with the European Union, many good things though it may have done and brought, is that it isn't very democratic as an institution. It has really invited that sort of popular sentiment of "the elites are not listening to us common people."

The issue of Turkey has become one of them. So public opinion more and more is going to be against these things because they feel that the elites have done it over their head. The elites are now on the defensive and listening to this kind of sentiment.

Yes, I fear that immigration policies will become more restrictive, especially because of the new EU countries. There will be a lot of immigration from places like Romania, Bulgaria; there already is from Poland—and often to the good. If you wanted to build a house in London without the Poles, you wouldn't get very far. It is an asset in many ways and there are real forces for energy. But I do think that immigration policies will become more restrictive rather than more open.

QUESTION: Just regarding yourself, what are your own plans for the next five years, this wonderful foundation that you have been working on already? As you are looking at your own trajectory for five years, what do you see yourself doing, or what ideally would you like to be doing?

IAN BURUMA: Well, I'm always in the market for any attractive suggestion. I plan to be in this country. I teach one semester a year at Bard College and the rest of the time I write.

QUESTION: I understood you to say that you were in favor of a kind of permissiveness that is allowing Arabic in the mosques and the schools to continue, and so forth and so on. But when you made that statement, the second part of that statement said "as long as there is no anti-government or any of these other things that were threatening to the society." How do you propose to monitor the "as long as?"

IAN BURUMA: Well no, I didn't propose Arabic in schools. I do think it is important that people learn the language of the country that they grow up in. So education, even in Islamic schools, is in Dutch and not in Arabic. But some proposals went forward on that, saying we should ban Arabic in mosques, which is a bit like saying you are not allowed to use Hebrew in a synagogue. I think that would be going too far.

I don't think it is an insurmountable problem. You can, especially in a small country like Holland, get a pretty shrewd idea of what textbooks are saying and what teachers are saying and so on. I don't think that is all that hard.

And yes, you have to keep a pretty good eye on it, particularly by having the community itself cooperate. Without that, you're nowhere. That would be my other argument for not alienating the majority of Muslims by doing like some of our politicians do, sort of saying, "Now it has to be said Islamic civilization is inferior to ours" and so on.

I think alienating the majority of Muslims, who are not bomb throwers, is very dangerous because then you certainly will not get them to cooperate in monitoring or anything else; and, worse, you will create more and more sympathizers for the violence.

JOANNE MYERS: I want to thank you very much for a fascinating presentation.

Copyright © 2010 Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs