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Taming the Gods: Religion and Democracy on Three Continents

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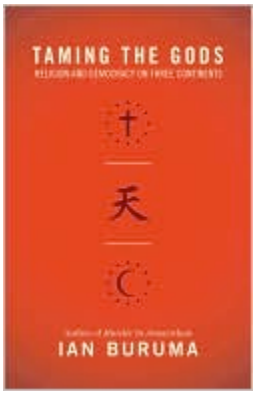

Taming the Gods: Religion and Democracy on Three Continents

Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good afternoon. I'm Joanne Myers, Director of Public Affairs Programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council, I would like to welcome you all and thank you for joining us.

I am delighted to welcome back a speaker who is always welcome on East 64th Street. We look forward to hosting Ian Buruma. Professor Buruma is a versatile and critical thinker whose cosmopolitan and historical perspective is what distinguishes his writings from any others writing on religion and politics today. I am pleased to say that he has spoken here often, and the transcripts of his talks, including his prize-winning book, *Murder in Amsterdam*, as well as his presentations on *Occidentalism and Bad Elements*, can all be found by visiting our website.

This afternoon he will be discussing *Taming the Gods: Democracy and Religion on Three Continents*, which is based on the Stafford Little Lectures which he gave at Princeton in 2008. *Taming the Gods* consists of three parts: one on church and state relations in Europe and the United States, one on religious authority in China and Japan, and one on the challenges of Islam in contemporary Europe.

It is well-known that countless innocent lives have been lost because of a fundamental lack of respect for freedom of religion and an intolerance of people with different beliefs. Ten years into the 21st century, it seems unfortunately clear that democracy continues to face multiple challenges, and religion remains a central factor in many of the world's conflicts. The transformation of religion from a justification for war or for a state's existence into an object of political liberty and individual conscience is one of the most important stories of modern history. It is a story that is still unfolding, and it has been at the heart of the development of liberal democracy. Where it remains incomplete, political life is often defined by dictatorship or terrorism.

In *Taming the Gods*, Professor Buruma reminds us how religion has played an influential role in various nations at various times. For example, he writes about how support of values identified with the Enlightenment can suddenly evaporate when people are confronted by new circumstances, such as the rise of Islam in some European countries. By examining the tensions between religion and secular authority in different cultures, he looks at the ingredients to ensure that liberal democracy and organized religion will be compatible with one another.

In doing so, Professor Buruma asks a wide range of questions, but, most importantly, he wants to know what is needed, apart from freedom of speech and the right to vote, to hold democratic societies

together. He wonders whether the rule of law is enough, or do we need common values, ethics, and mores? And what is the role of religion in all of this?

To find out what his research revealed, please join me in welcoming a citizen of the world, our speaker, Ian Buruma.

Thank you so much for joining us today.

Remarks

IAN BURUMA: Thank you. Thank you very much for coming. It's very flattering to see you all here.

Religion is really something that we, at least in Europe, after the 1960s, thought of as a problem that we had licked. Most Europeans like to feel slightly superior to the United States in describing their own continent as a thoroughly secular one now, whereas the Americans are still bogged down by primitive forms of Christianity. I would not, myself, ever think that this was a permanent condition, either in the case of the United States or Europe. I don't think religion is something that goes away. It gets displaced in various ways and can come back, either to bite you or not.

But in any case, it was something that we thought was no longer a problem. And here we are, in my native country, the Netherlands, with a new political party whose sole agenda, really, is to fight Islam and Muslim immigrants, threatening in June to become the biggest party in the Netherlands, which would be the first time in postwar Europe that a far-right anti-immigrant party would actually be right in the middle of the mainstream. This kind of populism is always around, but it tends always to hover around 10, at most 15 percent of the votes. Now, for the first time, possibly, there may be a fundamental shift.

I myself—I should put my cards on the table—don't have any particular axes to grind with any religion. My own background was thoroughly secular. I come from a double-lapsed family. My father was the son of a Mennonite minister. The Mennonites in the Netherlands are a very different breed from the ones you find in the United States. It's the most ecumenical, most liberal, even left-wing form of Protestantism in Holland, which caused some embarrassment when American brethren would visit my grandfather with beards and black suits. But anyway, that's where my grandfather was. My father, like most children of men of the cloth, reacted by becoming a confirmed atheist.

My mother comes from the kind of assimilated Jewish family that was once described by Adam Gopnik in *The New Yorker*, when he said, "My family's Jewishness was expressed through the lavishness with which we celebrated Christmas." I can entirely identify with that. One had to have a bigger Christmas tree than the goyim to show that one was better, in a way.

I didn't grow up with any religion. Whether this is a curse or a blessing, I don't know. A blessing in that it saved me from a lot of trouble. On the other hand, I also often feel ignorant as a result. Indeed, there isn't anything to rebel against, which can be a disadvantage. Without Catholicism, we wouldn't have had the movies of Buñuel or Fellini or many others. So it can be an advantage.

The question is, how dangerous is religion, really? If you listen to Geert Wilders, the populist in Holland, Islam is a lethal danger and Europe is going to end up as "Eurabia" and we're all going to end up being Islamized.

How dangerous is it? Obviously, if you think of it from the point of view of liberal democracy, any usurpation of secular authority by a religious authority is indeed a danger. Theocracy and democracy are not compatible. You cannot have one source of absolute truth.

But theocratic revolutions, although they exist, as we know, are actually relatively rare, if we exclude secular religions. And I'm not talking now about Stalinism and Maoism, which were religious revolutions of a kind, but real theocracies. It happened in Iran and it happened under the Taliban. But it's not a

common phenomenon. Even in Iran, it's running into all kinds of problems. The clerics are divided. Actually, Khomeini, the ayatollah, behaved in a way that even many Shiites find objectionable. The idea of the ayatollah becoming a kind of political dictator in the way he did is not part of the Shiite tradition. And it is, as I said, rather rare.

Now, religious-inspired violence, political extremism, terrorism in the name of religion, clearly is a danger and it has caused great problems. Although I don't expect Islamic or any other religious revolutions in Europe, a relatively small number of people who commit acts of political violence can severely disrupt liberal democratic society—not destroy it, necessarily, but warp it, often because the reaction can be disproportionate, it makes people fearful, it disrupts public services. It can cause a great deal of harm.

We have seen quite a lot of it in recent years, not only Islamic or Islamist, to distinguish the political variety from the religion, but in Japan, for example, after World War II there has been a proliferation of so-called new religions, most of them entirely benign, but some of them not. The Aum Shinrikyo, a kind of quasi-Buddhist, quasi-Hindu outfit run by a half-blind guru with long hair called Asahara, put sarin gas, poison gas, in the Tokyo subway system, in the hope of bringing down what they saw as the empty materialistic, spiritless society of Japan, after which an apocalypse would come and the Aum Shinrikyo would start heaven on earth.

One of the disturbing aspects of this particular incident, as a consequence of which many people died, is that many of the members were actually highly educated, and usually in the exact sciences—engineers, scientists, biologists, and so on—who clearly felt that liberal democratic society, flawed though it may be in Japan, was empty and needed to be destroyed by some violent religious revolution.

Religious-inspired violence occurs in the United States, too, as we know. People who gun down doctors for performing abortions are no less of a danger to the public order than people who do so in the name of the prophet Muhammad or Allah, even though they tend in the United States to be lone operators, or at least part of such marginal groups that they're not really a political force.

Nonetheless, it's good always to bear in mind when we talk about the dangers of Islam that these acts of violence can come from many different directions, and the Muslims have no monopoly on them.

Summing up the book, which, as you were told in the kind introduction, consists of three parts—one about Europe and the United States, one about Japan and China, and one about Islam and Europe —summing it up in a short talk is impossible, so I'll concentrate on something slightly narrower, and that is this concept of the Muslim challenge in Europe, the idea of Eurabia. How serious is this challenge, really?

The violence is quite real. The filmmaker Theo van Gogh, about whom I wrote a book, was murdered by a Muslim revolutionary because van Gogh's film, *Submission*, was supposed to have been an act of blasphemy insulting the Prophet. We know about the subway bombings in London, the bombing in Madrid, and so on. So the acts of violence are real.

How should we interpret them, though? Some people describe these as symptoms of a real clash of civilizations, of people with completely different and incompatible values and traditions clashing on the European continent. I think this is a very mistaken view. It's the wrong analysis.

The reason for this is that the people who actually commit these acts of violence are not people from village cultures, from cultures that are non-Western or alien to the Western world, who somehow, because of their tradition, clash with an alternative or a different one. They are almost invariably people who are born and raised in Europe and are as alienated from the traditions of their parents' cultures—the village traditions of Pakistan or Morocco or Turkey—as they are from the country in which they grew up. They are the typical examples of people, second-generation immigrants, who feel betwixt and between, not part of one and not part of the other, rejected by one, alienated from the other, and so on.

These people, of course, are always vulnerable—some of these people. Many of them, of course, never even dream of throwing a bomb, but some of these people are vulnerable to revolutionary ideas, to acts of political extremism, to belonging to a group that makes them feel power, that gives them a sense of identity, and so on.

To say that Islam is at the source of this kind of behavior I think is to misunderstand the problem. Two of the most interesting figures, I think, and most typical figures are Mohammed Bouyeri, the murderer of Theo van Gogh, and Mohammad Sidique, the leader of the people who bombed the London Underground. Both are very similar in a way, although their parents came from different parts of the world.

Mohammed Bouyeri's father was a guest worker from Morocco, who was religious but not in an extreme way. It was his village culture. Like all guest workers, he had to work far too hard to just provide for his family to even have political ideas, and so was certainly never a threat to anybody. Mohammed Bouyeri himself was not religious when he grew up. He knew a little about Islam. He went to the mosque a few times a year, on appropriate occasions, but was not interested in it. He drank beer, he chased girls, he watched football, and so on.

What happened was that he—probably a vulnerable individual anyway—too many doors, he felt, rightly or wrongly, were slammed in his face. He felt rejected, angry, and, in effect, downloaded his Islamic extremism from the Internet, from Wahhabi sites and so on, in the English language, found like-minded people and wanted to vent his rage about feeling rejected, a loser, a person without meaning, by an act of extreme violence.

Mohammad Sidique, known as "Sid" to his fellow schoolmates, grew up in the Midlands of Britain, played cricket, was an entirely inoffensive young man, not particularly religious either. His parents were from a small community in Pakistan. He fell in love with a girl outside that community, whose parents were from India. He, like Mohammed Bouyeri, was very interested in youth work. He saw the problems encountered by young immigrants, and he was a do-gooder. He fell in with Wahhabi-influenced people, this Saudi-sponsored form of purist Islam, and gradually, like Mohammed Bouyeri, built up an anger at his perceived rejection in British society, or Western society, and wanted to bring the place down.

In neither of these cases can you really say that Islam or a tradition is the source. Islam was a convenient cause, to be sure, because there is a dangerous form of revolutionary Islam out there, and so, unlike many other religions at the moment, it offers a convenient cause. But I would say that to understand the behavior of these kinds of individuals, it's better to read Joseph Conrad than it is to read the Qur'an, because the type that Conrad describes—the anarchist in the beginning of the 20th century, the anonymous figure running around London with a ticking bomb in his pocket—is much closer, actually, to these kinds of young guys than most pious Muslims. Piety isn't really the point. Revolution is the point. Violence is the point.

I think the problem, though, and why people like Wilders and other populists in countries that were known as very liberal countries—Denmark is another—why there is so much resentment and anger, and the Muslim problem has come to the fore, is that different social problems and phenomena are mixed up as though they were all part of the same thing.

On the one hand, you have the social problems that you have with all first waves of immigrants—people stuck in bad neighborhoods, economic prospects not good, high unemployment, street crime. So not surprisingly, if you look at the statistics of petty street crime, you would find in Holland, for example, that people of Moroccan origin are disproportionately represented in the crime figures. There are differences there. Moroccans would score higher, in this sense, in petty crime, whereas Turks, better organized, often a bit more prosperous, tend towards organized crime—smuggling and so on—and not robbing old ladies of their handbags or ATM machine cards.

That's one problem.

The other problem is that the culture of the old countries—the village Islam, if you like, the culture of the Mohammad's and Mohammed's parents—contains many things that are not entirely compatible with the consensus of liberal opinion in the Western world today—ideas about relations between men and women, views on homosexuality, and so on. Not that Muslims, again, have a monopoly on this. There are many Christian groups that are equally out of sync with liberal society. But these people look foreign and their foreign ideas look weird and atavistic, and therefore are seen as a problem.

Which is why populists, especially in Holland, which does not have a real tradition of fascist right-wingery, although there was a fascist party before the war, but it never really was a major force—why in Holland the populists pose as great champions of freedom, great champions of liberalism even, even though they are far from liberal themselves. But the idea is, these foreigners, these Muslims, these immigrants, are a threat to our liberal values.

It's a curious phenomenon that somebody like Geert Wilders, whose voters are, on the whole, people in the provinces, Christian, very conservative, far from urbane, would actually say to an anti-Islamic conference in Jerusalem—and you can imagine the kind of conference that was—that "Amsterdam has this great reputation in the world for being a Mecca for gay tourism. What are these Muslims going to do? They're going to destroy that."

I don't know quite how his audience in Jerusalem took this. But in Holland this makes a kind of weird sense.

So that's the second problem.

The third problem is revolutionary violence. It's a great error and a dangerous error, in my view, to sweep all these things under the same rubric and sort of see it all as one great Islamic threat—the street crime, the illiberal opinions, and the revolutionary violence. If you don't treat these things as separate issues, you do indeed get the impression that there is a kind of monolithic threat to the West, to liberal democracy, to liberal values, and so on.

What makes it worse is that those who warn about Islamophobia and Eurabia and so on tend to do so deliberately with World War II rhetoric. It's always 1938. It's always in the words of one prominent American commentator on these things—Europe's Weimar moment. It's the idea, namely, that if we don't fight back against Islam in Europe, the next wave of fascism will once again occupy the European continent. As a result of this, the debate gets so polarized that anybody who tries to find any accommodation with Muslim Europeans is quickly denounced as an appeaser or even a collaborator.

In fact, it's wrong to think that Europe is gradually turning into Eurabia, for various reasons. One is that, of course, most Muslims are not violent extremists. What is actually, to my mind, more interesting and more hopeful, many of them are trying to combine a profound religious belief, even an orthodox belief, with being democratic European citizens.

One of the things, when I was researching my book on the murder of Theo van Gogh, that gave me, actually, the most hope—and this is just an anecdote, but I think a telling one—was when I interviewed a law professor in Leiden, who himself was born and raised in Iran. He came from the far left in Iran, the Tudeh Party.

After spending some years in Afghanistan when it was still under the Soviets, he found his way to Holland as a political refugee. Now, like many—well, not many; it's a particular type—like others, he has made quite a reputation of sort of waking the Europeans up to the imminent danger of Islam—the decadent liberal Europeans who are too feeble to defend themselves and so on and need people like him to wake us up to this great threat.

I was having lunch with him in the canteen in the law faculty of Leiden University. As he was telling me about the great threat of Islam, I looked around me and I saw all these young women in headscarves. It

turned out that a very large proportion of law students now are religious young Muslim women. Partly it's a way to get away from the authority of their fathers and elder brothers and so on. It's also an attempt to really come to grips with life in European democratic society, while still hanging on to what they find is an important part of their identity.

I don't see this as a threat. I don't see it as a problem. I think it's a solution to the problem—not the only one, but certainly one of them.

I think the great danger of seeing Islam as monolithic and as the source of the problem—and therefore that we all have to sort of fight Islam rather than the particular problem in Islam—is that you alienate the very people who should be on your side, and that includes these kinds of women. Without having these people on our side, we cannot isolate the revolutionary element, and thus defeat it.

The great enemy of people who warn against Eurabia can be summed up in the word "multiculturalism." I was interested to hear the other day, in a description of a Tea Party convention somewhere in the South, that people were ranting against multiculturalism, which I think in America is rather unusual. I think it's a European influence, because Americans, on the whole—it would be absurd in this country to rant against multiculturalism. It is a multicultural society, and I don't think most people in America have a problem with that. So I think it's a bit of rhetoric that has crossed the ocean.

But in Europe you certainly hear it a great deal. Multiculturalism has been strongest, not surprisingly, in Britain and the Netherlands, partly because of their colonial histories. Treating different groups, different religious or ethnic groups, as separate entities was also, of course, the way that the British Empire was run. You divided it into groups and you dealt with their leaders, and you didn't try and encourage anything else.

The other reason that I think multiculturalism, as an ideology—not as a description of reality, which it is in the United States and increasingly in Europe, too, but as an ideology—namely, the idea, the rather dogmatic idea, that you have to actively encourage people to stick to their old cultures and that any attempt to integrate or even assimilate is somehow wrong and neocolonialist, neo-imperialist arrogance. That is the multiculturalist ideology, held for a long time on the Left in Europe, largely out of guilt, partly guilt for colonialism, partly because of what happened in World War II.

But I think this ideology is actually now not even on its hind legs. It's pretty much dead. So kicking against multiculturalism is rather kicking the proverbial dead horse, in my view. It supposes, for the people who are most vehemently against multiculturalism, that somehow liberal democracy can only function if everybody shares exactly the same values, cultural and otherwise, which, of course, was never the case.

I think there is much to be said that—and this is Olivier Roy, to my mind one of the most sensible writers on Islam in the world today, a French scholar—we should not insist that people share the same values. The only thing you can really insist on is that people play by the same rules of the democratic game and abide by the laws of the country. You can't really insist that everybody share the same values. I think this is something that's easier to grasp in the United States, where civic identity or national identity is much more a political question, a question of allegiance to not only the flag, but the Constitution and so on, and it's less, I think, a tribal or cultural identity, based on a shared history and assumed shared values.

But there is perhaps a deeper problem under all this—and this is not just true of the problems of Islam in Europe—which is, to quote a distinction made by my friend and former coauthor Avishai Margalit, that you can distinguish in politics what he calls religious politics and economic politics.

Religious politics are not just politics based on an organized faith. They are politics that are based on an idea of absolute truth and an idea that the political goal is one of redemption, of some ideal state, and that nothing can stop you from arriving there. In other words, it's based on a deep faith, whereas the economic politics is really about interests. That implies horse trading—I give you a little, you give me a

little—it implies compromise, and so on.

No political society is ever based 100 percent on religious politics, though some come close, and no society is based 100 percent on economic politics. But there are emphases, and liberal democracies, of course, veer to the side of economic politics rather than religious politics. But religious politics are very much there.

Of course they are there with the Islamists. There's no question about that. But they are also detectable, I think, in some of those who oppose Islamism or political Islam or Muslims in general in Europe with great zeal. They are the ones who talk about shared values or defending Enlightenment values against the threat of Islam and so on—just as, I think, atheists very often think theologically. It is based on a deep belief. They tend to be intolerant of religion because they have an alternative belief, maybe just as deeply felt, whereas poor agnostic liberals like myself are accused of being wishy-washy nihilists who don't believe in anything. But at least we are, perhaps, a little bit more tolerant.

I think the result of, not a clash of two different civilizations, but a clash of these different kinds of religious politics has caused this *Kulturkampf*, if you like, in Europe today between those who invoke Enlightenment values and the values of Islam. This is what divides the debate and what makes the debate so agonizing, because it's not a debate between two sides who try and find the truth by offering different views; it's dividing people into friends and enemies, collaborators and resistors, the West and Islam, and so on.

The question, I suppose, is—I want to leave time for questions and answers, so I'll conclude rather quickly—is compromise in a liberal democracy possible with religious politics, with the religious view, with that sort of theological view of politics? I would say, yes, it is. One proof of this is that, just as there are Christian democratic parties that are perfectly democratic in the Western world, Islamic parties are not doing badly in the world of majority Muslim populations either.

People, when they talk about the political problems in Islamic countries, they tend to think of the Middle East, and Arab countries in particular, and forget often that the real problem in the Arab Middle East is not actually a theocracy; it's failed secular dictatorships.

But in any case, if you look at countries like Indonesia, even Turkey, with all its problems, they do seem to show that Islamic parties, parties based on Islamic values, can be perfectly compatible with democratic systems. So there is no reason to believe that a religious faith as such in politics, in the public realm, is incompatible with liberal democracy.

I also believe that politics can be informed by religion, but rationally discussed. That's not true of all politics, but certainly there are good examples of this. Martin Luther King's struggle for civil rights was certainly very much informed by his Christian beliefs. But you didn't have to argue with his Christianity in order to have a perfectly rational, lucid debate with him on political positions that came as the result of his religious faith. I think there's no reason to believe that something like that isn't possible with other faiths.

The thing you can't compromise with is, of course, violence or the threat to use violence to impose views. That's where you draw the line. And religion can certainly incite violence, just as soccer can or other forms of tribalism. But to simply call religion irrational is true, but not a helpful way of thinking our way through this problem.

I think the same things that can incite violence can sometimes also contain it. Again here I would use soccer as an analogy. The soccer stadium, in many ways, is a ritualized way—and many forms of sports, of course—to contain violent impulses and tribal impulses that people have and that could be dangerous if they are unleashed, just as a bullfighting is a way—and I wouldn't advocate it everywhere, but in countries where they have that tradition, I don't see any reason for abolishing it, because it is, again, a ritual way for people to deal with things like death and violence without it spilling over and causing

damage in society at large.

I think religion can have the same effect. After all, religion is a ritual way to deal with problems, primarily of death, but also violence. Look at Christian art or indeed some forms of Buddhist art. It shows that very clearly. These are ways of dealing with violence, violent impulses, fear of violence, and so on, and death, that are constrained by giving it a kind of ritual expression.

So allowing Muslims or others to express their faith peacefully in public is not a form of appeasement or a betrayal of Western civilization at all. I would say the contrary.

Now, there is a distinction made by Salman Rushdie between attacking people's faith, the religion itself, and attacking the religious believers. He thinks one is okay and the other is not. It's okay to attack faith; it's not okay to attack believers. And there's a lot to be said for this distinction. It makes a certain sense, except that for the believers, of course, the distinction often doesn't hold. If you attack their faith, you are attacking them, and so the insult is still just as keenly felt.

But attacking religion as such, although it shouldn't be forbidden by law—it should certainly be allowed—I don't think is fruitful. Arguing about God or the existence of God or the symbols of a faith is rather fruitless, because it cannot be rationally discussed, really. After all, it is a faith. You can't rationally argue for the existence of God or Allah or any other god, just as you can't rationally do the opposite, again unless you are a believing atheist.

What you can do, as I just said, is argue on positions taken on the basis of faith. I certainly think that is a legitimate target for criticism, particularly when things are said by religious authorities that are contentious in the political realm. I think, for example, it's entirely legitimate to attack the pope when he denounces birth control, particularly in countries where people can ill afford large families, just as you can attack imams who preach hatred.

But here there's a gray area which is fraught with problems, about which one cannot be glib. I'll give you one example.

Tariq Ramadan, a well-known Muslim activist in Europe, born in Switzerland, the scion of a well-known Egyptian family of Muslim Brothers—he himself claims that he is not a Muslim Brother, but his father certainly was, and his brother. He's a very controversial figure, as I'm sure most of you know. He's only just been granted a visa to come back to the United States again. He was banned for a long time.

He was asked by Nicolas Sarkozy, when Sarkozy was still, I think, interior minister—at least before he was prime minister—on television, he was challenged in a rather aggressive manner. Sarkozy said to Ramadan, "Are you or are you not in favor of stoning adulterous women?"

Ramadan said—and he's often misquoted, and somewhat misunderstood, I think, on this—he literally said, "I myself am against it, and I'm against the death penalty anywhere. I would argue that there should be a moratorium on such practices. But because it's based on sacred texts, you cannot simply say it ought to be banned, because it's something that has to be discussed within the religious context of the Islamic world."

Now, this is often seen as somebody who was being deliberately disingenuous, who really does believe in it, but was trying to dodge the issue, and what he should have done was come out and make a straight statement denouncing stoning of adulterous women.

There is another take on this, which again is Olivier Roy's, which may be, to my mind, perhaps a little too indulgent to religious sensibilities. He says that, actually, the implication of what Ramadan says is that he was de facto separating the secular authority from religious authority and saying that you abide by the secular law, which certainly forbids the stoning of adulterous women, while leaving religious notions to the religious authorities, with whom you can then argue. But you don't treat them as exactly the same

thing.

Whether this is the right response or not, it's something to be considered.

I do believe that in a liberal democracy, wherever it is, when the secular law comes up against religious laws which are incompatible, the secular law should prevail. In other words, I do not think it's right that murders based on some sense of family honor against an adulterous daughter or something of that kind should be condoned simply because it has religious justifications. I think the secular law should prevail.

I'll finish by invoking, to me, in some ways, still the most impressive voice on these issues, and that's of Baruch or Benedict Spinoza, who himself was not a great believing man. He was kicked out of the Sephardic community in Amsterdam for being a blasphemer. But he was not an intolerant man either, and certainly not a zealot. His view was that people should be free to believe or not to believe, and religion is good as long as it makes people behave properly, and it should always be kept under the control of secular authority. Now, of course, he said this at a time when the church was still a powerful political force. But what he understood, I think, very clearly—and it's not something that everybody these days seems to understand—is that you cannot ban God or the gods, but you can only hope to tame them.

Thank you very much.

Questions and Answers

QUESTION: I want to try to draw you out a little more on your assessment of how different European countries are approaching these issues. There obviously are Islamic or Muslim populations in all these countries, but there is a certain approach in France, a certain approach in Germany—you don't seem to hear so much of this violence—the approach you lived through in the Netherlands.

There was the problem in Denmark with the cartoons really agitating Muslims.

I wonder if you could offer just a brief assessment of whether you think one country's approach has been more helpful to taming—to use your phrase—these dynamics vis-à-vis the approaches in other countries.

IAN BURUMA: It's a very good question. Personally, I think no approach so far has shown itself to be vastly superior to another. But I do have more sympathy for some approaches than for others, but that may simply be a question of my experience and background.

I think the French Republic is a good example of where rationalism has sometimes become a dogmatic faith in itself. This already began during the revolution, when the guillotine was working at full force, while people at the Notre Dame were literally worshipping reason. There were quasi-church services in the Notre Dame worshipping reason. I think the zealotry, sometimes, with which laïcité is defended against the supposed religious challenge is a form of religious politics.

This is a very complicated issue. Ever since the revolution, this has been a hotly contested affair in France, and the secularists against those who believe that the Catholic Church should remain the bedrock of moral behavior and so on has been very fraught. The first thing that Marshal Pétain did in Vichy, France was to reinstate the role of the church and to denounce the secularists and so on. So it's a hot issue.

But I don't personally think it helps particularly to treat women in headscarves as though they were a similar threat to the French Republic that the full authority of the Catholic Church once was. And I think there is that tendency a little bit.

On the other hand, there is something attractive about the French notion that we're all equal citizens and

you don't ask what you do in private. Everybody is the same.

I think if you compare it to Britain—this is a point that has often been made about the riots in the *banlieues* [city outskirts] in France, which were not, by the way, Islamic riots. The immigrant population around the French cities is a very mixed one, and the riots were certainly mixed. One interpretation of the riots is that what people want—the immigrants, from Africa, Algeria, and all kinds of places—is to be treated as French citizens who can enjoy all the rights that other French citizens have. They want to be treated as equals, to be more French.

In Britain, and to some extent in Holland and, I think, in Germany, there is a real problem with alienated youths who feel that they are not really British or Dutch, and if they are resentful enough, they want to attack that society.

So there are problems, I think, both ways. I think the British more or less multicultural system is more tolerant of diversity than France's. But as I said earlier, when that becomes dogmatic, then you get this business of actively encouraging people not to integrate.

So I suppose—and this does sound glib—the only conclusion one can draw from these comparisons is that believing too dogmatically in anything is a bad idea.

QUESTION: Muslim populations have not successfully integrated into their European communities. I imagine you would ascribe the reason, to some large extent, to the difference in religion. Would you also comment on the contributions made by ethnic reasons and economic reasons, and maybe touch, by way of comparison, on what you expect of the Eastern European and Russian immigrant populations into Europe?

IAN BURUMA: First of all, of course, many Muslims are successfully integrated in European countries. If you go to hospitals, law courts, universities, you'll find plenty of very integrated Muslims, many of whom, of course, are not particularly pious. I don't know the percentages anymore, but the assumption that all Muslims are very devout is a great error. Many, many—maybe the majority—of European Muslims are not devout, and quite integrated. But there is a problem of a sizable number of people who aren't.

There are ethnic reasons. Clearly there is still quite a lot of discrimination. If you're called Mohammad and wear a beard and you're going for the same job as a white person called DuPont or Smith, you might indeed not have the same chances.

The economic aspect is actually quite interesting. I think maybe it shows that all good things also have their negative consequences. However much one may wish to extol the European welfare state and guaranteed jobs and so on, and compare it favorably to the much harsher American system, there is much to be said for the argument that the American system makes it easier for people to be fairly quickly absorbed into the economy, which is the quickest way—that and, I suppose, the armed forces—for people to integrate into a society, even if it's at a very low level in the beginning. That's much harder in Europe because jobs are much more protected.

Again, the French riots—a perfect illustration of this. They were actually a reaction to a very different kind of demonstration in Paris, which was held by French university students who were protesting against—I think it was still then something that was promised rather than enacted—a law that would make it easier for people who had their first-time employment to be fired by employers. They saw a very cushy arrangement for them, the privileged ones, suddenly being in danger. I think the people in the *banlieues*, who couldn't even get onto that first rung, couldn't get these jobs, saw through this immediately.

So I think if we're serious about integrating immigrants and minorities in Europe, we probably do have to rethink somewhat the economic systems that we have—not abolish them, simply imitating the United States, but I do think there are drawbacks which have to be seriously considered.

QUESTION: I would like your impressions or perhaps additional insight on the recent tirade that Gaddafi has placed on Switzerland because of abandoning new construction on mosques. How much mileage has that gotten?

IAN BURUMA: I would doubt if it has all that much mileage. You mean how much mileage Gaddafi's tirade—I doubt if Gaddafi is taken deeply seriously outside of his own court. But I don't want to say anything categorical because I'm not an expert on Libya.

I myself was rather appalled by the Swiss vote. I don't think it does any good, and I think it's highly intolerant and silly, really, since there are so few mosques anyway, and they are mostly Bosnian mosques. So it had nothing to do with the Middle East.

If people caution against the influence, for example, of Saudi money and Wahhabi promotion in the world, I would endorse that, because I think that is a disturbing force. The mosques in Switzerland—I don't think there was any proof that they were anything of the kind.

But I personally very much doubt whether Gaddafi has huge clout.

QUESTION: I would be the devil's advocate for a moment. You have talked about the various democracies in Western Europe attempting to deal with their Islamic problem, if you will, and different approaches. What would be wrong if the Netherlands, a small liberal democracy, elected a populist party to see how they would deal with this issue?

IAN BURUMA: There would be a lot wrong as far as this particular issue is concerned, because what they are saying in their program is that even Dutch citizens should be stripped of their nationality if they are Muslims and get involved in any kind of crime. It doesn't have to be religious extremism. They talk about taxing people for wearing a headscarf. They talk about deporting people and so on.

Once you start using that kind of language about a sizable majority of your own citizens, I think there is the basis of serious violence. So I think the devil doesn't have a very good argument in that sense.

The more, perhaps, pressing question is, if they do become the biggest political party, which is very likely to happen, do you gang up against that party? In other words, do the other parties—the social democrats, the Christian democrats, the socialists, and so on, the liberals—gang up and form any coalition simply to keep them out? Or do you hobble together some kind of right-of-center coalition which would include them? I think that's unlikely to happen. I think they will gang up.

But my personal feeling is that that may actually be a mistake and that the best way to emasculate a party like that is actually to share political responsibility, because then they can't just bang on about Islam all the time. They have to deal with economics and education and all kinds of issues. And they will be forced to compromise.

Or, if they don't compromise, the government falls and they have shot their wad. If they compromise, they may lose a lot of their support, because that's not what people voted for.

So in some ways, to paraphrase, I think, Lyndon Johnson's famous dictum, it's better to have them pissing inside the tent than at the tent from the outside.

QUESTION: The gods were for a long time—and still are—the custodians of great value systems. Liberal democracies for a long time have been custodians of great procedural and regulatory systems of law. To get these two camps together and to tame the gods and their values, which are running amok at times, do liberal democracies need something other than systems of law that run elections? The gods can win the elections through their adherents. So we are stuck here between the two camps.

I'm proposing a solution which the Europeans embraced with force, and that is a great emphasis on the

values of human rights, which they use constantly, and the ivy is thickening in their yards. But in North America and other parts of the world, we're not doing that as much, this embracing of the value system of human rights, as a way of taming the gods.

So what do you think of this?

IAN BURUMA: I'm all for human rights. I'm not so sure that it's not taken seriously in the United States. Maybe proportionately the Europeans spend more money on it. But it's like all these other good things. Good things, when they become dogmas imposed on others, can suddenly stop being good things.

I do think that the promotion of human rights and the whole industry that it has unleashed all over the world now certainly owes a lot to the missionary tradition, the idea that there are universal values and that they have to be imposed, and if people don't believe them, you even force them to do so. That, after all, is very much the basis of neoconservative American arguments for armed intervention—that the United States is for universal rights and everybody should be free, as we see it, and it's totally legitimate to use armed force to do this.

Now, it doesn't happen often, but it has happened, as we know. It has been one of the arguments used for it. I think there it becomes dangerous, even though the idea of universal freedom and so on is a deeply attractive idea. I wouldn't argue against it. But even human rights can be abused.

I don't think it's an alternative to religion. I think that liberal democracy can take care of itself. It doesn't need an alternative faith. But it can provide space—much more than the French Republic is prepared to do—it can provide space, I think, for religious expression, even in politics, without feeling threatened by it. Jürgen Habermas has actually written very well on that subject and how you do that.

But to promote religion, especially if you yourself don't really believe in any of them, is also an exercise in hypocrisy. That's the idea that I don't need it, but it's good for other people. My attitude would be more that for those who want it, fine, find a space for it, and don't denounce it. I'm not for religion, but I'm not against it either.

I don't think that entirely answers your question, but it's is the best I can do.

JOANNE MYERS: Thank you so much for coming. It was really a pleasure.