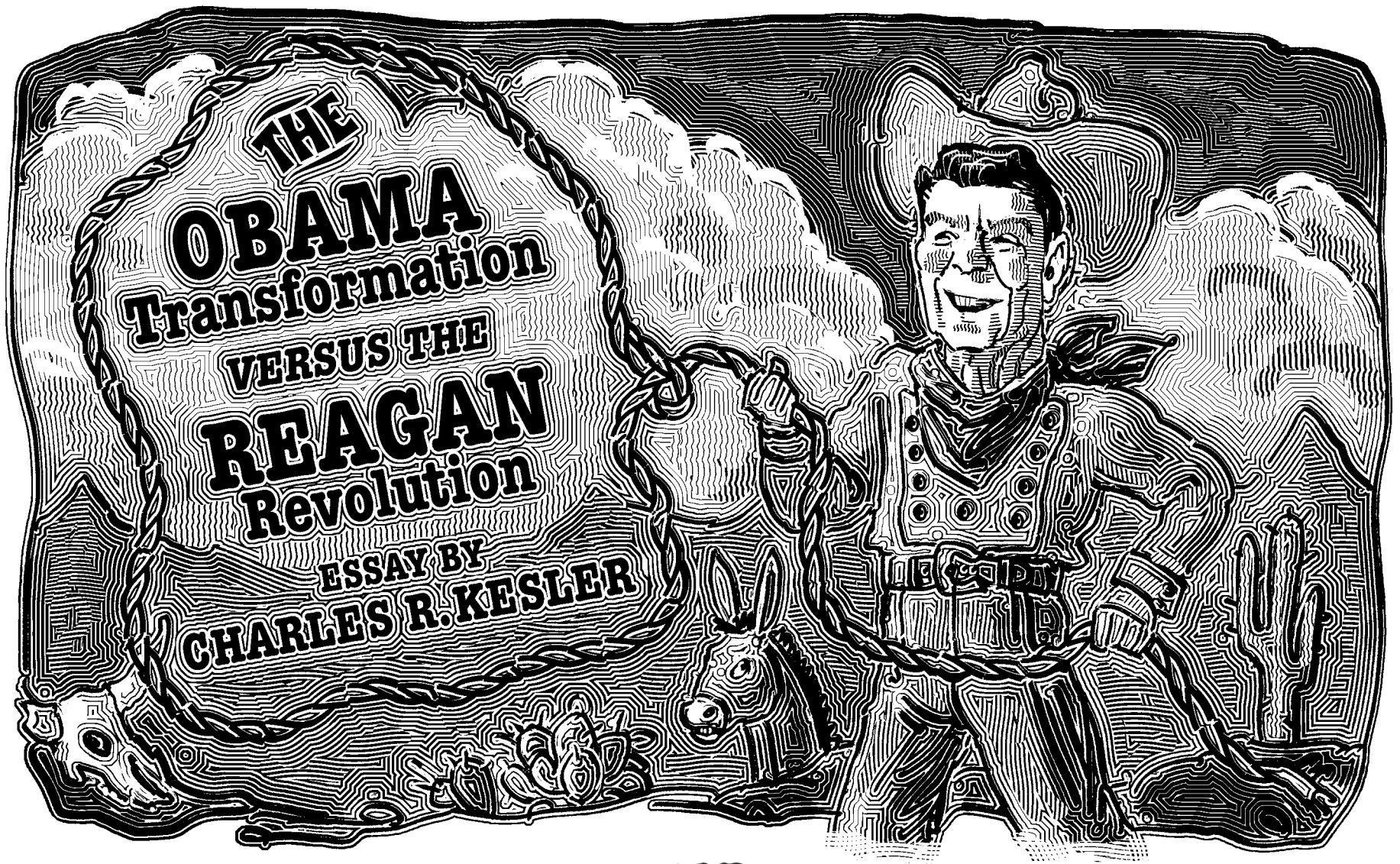


VOLUME XV, NUMBER 3, SUMMER 2015

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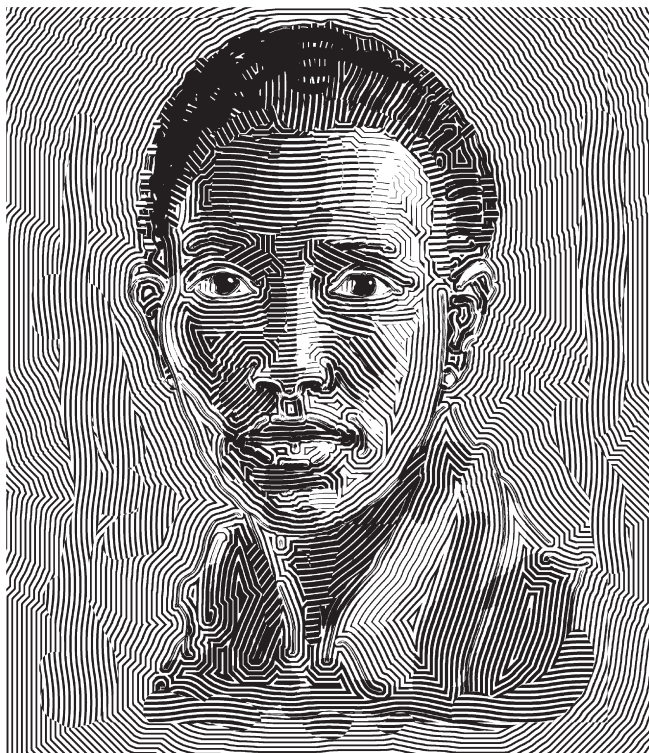
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Book Review by Peter Skerry

## IMAGINE NO RELIGION

*Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now*, by Ayaan Hirsi Ali.  
HarperCollins, 288 pages, \$27.99



Ayaan Hirsi Ali

**I**N HER INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER *Inferdel* (2007), Ayaan Hirsi Ali renounced the Islamic faith in which she was raised, and declared herself an atheist. In her new book, *Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now*, she identifies as a Muslim—albeit a dissenting one—who seeks a reformation of her ancestors' faith.

A former member of the Dutch parliament, the Somali-born Hirsi Ali is an exotically beautiful woman and mesmerizing speaker. (I once heard an eminent political scientist gush in her presence that she should run for high public office in the United States.) Fleeing the Netherlands after her film collaborator, Theo van Gogh, was murdered for denouncing Islam and after Dutch authorities revoked her citizenship on a technicality, in 2006 she found refuge at the American Enterprise Institute, where then-president Christopher DeMuth welcomed her as a resident fellow. She is currently a fellow at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

Despite her compelling personal story and distinguished sponsors, Hirsi Ali's call for a reformation of Islam is not very promising.

Her claims are simultaneously too sweeping and too slippery. She boldly asserts that "violence is inherent in Islam," but also that she has "no objection whatever to millions of other people from the Muslim world coming to America to seek a better life for themselves and their families." Her "concern is with the attitudes many of these new Muslim Americans will bring with them." Yet because immigration officials have limited means, and authority, to assess the attitudes or religious views of new arrivals, she would appear to be compelled, logically, to want limited migration from Muslim-majority societies—the very opposite of what she claims.

**S**HE IS ALSO QUITE SUSPICIOUS OF, EVEN hostile to, religious faith, at least as most Americans—and certainly most Muslims—think of it. Citing Voltaire more than Martin Luther, she clearly envisions an Enlightenment-inspired, reconstructed Islam to be regulated and disciplined by the state.

Yet even if her aggressive secularism does not sit well with America's dynamic religious pluralism, aspects of Hirsi Ali's argument are

undeniably appealing. She rejects the fatuous slogan that "Islam is a religion of peace"—though she neglects to mention that this formulation was originally George W. Bush's, preferring instead to associate it exclusively with President Obama. She similarly rejects such ill-conceived formulations as "countering violent extremism" (which is more fairly and directly identified with Obama), arguing persuasively that political elites on both sides of the Atlantic have been alienating broad sectors of their societies by refusing to associate contemporary terrorist threats directly with Islam. She quotes a Moroccan television evangelist and former Muslim who urges President Obama to abandon his "political correctness" and face up to the challenge: "ISIL, Al Qaeda, Boko Haram, Al-Shabab in Somalia, the Taliban, and their sister brand names, are all made in Islam." As she concludes, "the claims that the 'extremists' have nothing to do with the 'religion of peace' simply cease to be credible."

But again, she pushes her argument too far. Elaborating on the Moroccan's criticism of Obama, she denounces overly tolerant Western liberals and "cultural relativists" who in the



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face of Islamist terrorism urge the rest of us to “be nonjudgmental about the religious practices of others.” Yet whom does she have in mind here? After all, the same individuals, private organizations, and governmental agencies that take care not to offend Muslims with politically incorrect terms also push aggressively for women’s and gay rights around the globe. Promoted as “human rights,” these hardly come across as cultural relativism to Muslims, never mind to many other Americans.

Commenting on the stoning of women and homosexuals in various Muslim societies, she writes:

The ancient Aztecs and other peoples practiced human sacrifice...but we don’t condone it.... So why do we condone the “sacrifice” of women or homosexuals or lapsed Muslims for “crimes” such as apostasy, adultery, blasphemy, marrying outside of their faith, or simply wishing to marry the partner of their choice?

Again, who exactly is condoning such practices? And what would she have the United States do to stop them?

LIKE MANY OTHER CRITICS OF ISLAM, Hirsi Ali is, ironically, herself a fundamentalist. Certainly, for her, Islam is reducible to a core of teachings and texts, and the Koran becomes the single most important, often the only, key to understanding Muslims. Thus, she gently but firmly rejects the view of her Harvard colleague, terrorism expert Jessica Stern, that history, politics, culture, economics, and national identity all play a role in how faith is received and lived. Hirsi Ali doesn’t puzzle over why “Palestinians have been the most frequent proponents and practitioners of suicide bombing.” For her, this is explained not by their particular history, their relations with Israel and Israelis, their prolonged consignment to refugee camps, or their corrupt leadership, but simply by what all Muslims are taught—that “[y]ou can be redeemed, you can salvage whatever you have lost, not by devoting yourself to improving your life in the here and now, but by following religious dictates and achieving entry into paradise.”

Instead, she wants imams “to make explicit that what we do in this life is more important than anything that could conceivably happen to us after we die.” Contrasting life in Africa with what she experienced in the Netherlands, she marvels that in Holland “no one talked about death, let alone life after death.” And she enthusiastically relates the way she’s “heard Westerners in their eighties talking confident-

ly as if they have decades still to live.” Her reformed Islam would apparently de-emphasize not simply the notion of an afterlife but the inevitability of death.

Modern clerics, she insists, must also disabuse their fellow Muslims of the centuries-old teaching that the Koran is the last, immutable word of God. “Human life, human freedom, human dignity—they all matter more than any sacred text,” she writes. The Muslim Reformation she champions must acknowledge “that the right to think, to speak, and to write in freedom and without fear is ultimately a more sacred thing than any religion.”

WHICH RAISES THE QUESTION: HOW does she propose to bring about the secularized Islam she advocates? She immediately rules out any notion of military force, reminding us that we are facing a “culture war” that must be fought “with better ideas, with positive ideas.” She cites the Cold War and the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which supported intellectuals and writers defending Western democratic principles and mores against the Communist Left. And because she regards Islam and Muslims here in the United States, as well as overseas, as part of the same ideological threat, she envisions a war of ideas on two fronts.

But now things get complicated. Hirsi Ali glides past lingering controversies over such Cold War programs, which were generally funded covertly by the government, typically through the CIA. More to the point, while Communism may have been a surrogate religion for some, Islam—whatever variant, and whether or not she approves—is the real thing. Government-funded ideological combat with Muslims overseas is one thing (though even then First Amendment issues get raised); any such engagement with Islam here at home would face much greater constitutional hurdles—a point completely lost on her.

Though she never actually mentions Otto von Bismarck’s *Kulturkampf* against Prussian Catholics during the 1870s, she clearly envisions relying on the full force of the state to forge her reformed Islam. Commenting on an Urdu-language radio program in the United Kingdom on which marriage between Muslims and Christians was condemned outright, she remarks ominously: “For these comments, the radio station was fined £4000 (around \$6000), but there was no move to suspend its broadcasting license.” Lest there be any doubt as to what she has in mind here, she invokes John Locke’s argument for religious toleration, only to emphasize how he restricted freedom of religion to various Protestant denominations and excluded the Catholic

Church. “The central question for Western civilization,” she concludes, “remains what it was in Locke’s day: What exactly can we *not* tolerate.” Yet, in the United States, religious liberty is not something merely to be *tolerated* but has been recognized as an inalienable natural *right*.

IN FACT, HIRSI ALI FAILS TO DRAW ANY distinctions among the United States, Western Europe, and Muslim-majority societies. As far as she is concerned, these are merely different fronts in the same battle of ideas. She pays no attention to the distinctive histories, social and cultural dynamics, or political systems and institutions of the very different societies about which she is writing.

It is striking, for example, that in a book that begins with her account of being invited and then disinvited to receive an honorary degree from Brandeis University in 2014, she never mentions the First Amendment. To be sure, she challenges those who would seek to “[w]ithdraw my right to speak freely.” Yet in a volume full of impressive citations to obscure but relevant scholarly works on Islam, she is surprisingly incurious about how religious liberty in America has resulted in a bustling, often conflictual pluralist ferment. Instead, her account consists almost exclusively of examples of reactionary Muslims from around the world being indulged by politically correct elites.

For example, highlighting the alarming appeal of violent jihad to young Muslims in Western Europe, she asks, “Why should the United States be any different?” Her response is almost shocking. She cites some genuinely alarming and neglected Pew survey data from 2007, which found that 7% of American Muslims between the ages of 18 and 29 had a “favorable” view of al-Qaeda. (She fails to point out that in 2011, Pew replicated this survey but neglected to ask these questions!) Yet she has nothing to say about how the First Amendment has meant that Muslims here have benefitted from the opportunity—indeed, the necessity—of organizing, managing, and supporting their own religious institutions, while their co-religionists in Western Europe have not. Just as importantly, our tradition of competitive but generally tolerant religious pluralism, fostered by First Amendment freedoms of speech and press, helps explain why we have had no polarizing episodes such as the *fatwa* that forced Salman Rushdie into hiding in the United Kingdom, or the violence over cartoon depictions of the prophet Mohammed in Denmark and France.

She fails to consider that Muslims here might be different because she fails to understand that America is different. Toward the



end of her book, she mentions the work of the Quilliam Foundation, a respected British think tank established by reform-oriented Muslims. Ghaffar Hussein, Quilliam's managing director, argues that "the jihad narrative" has become "the default anti-establishment politics of today. It is a means of expressing solidarity and asserting a bold new identity while being a vehicle for seeking the restoration of pride and self-dignity." The romance of alienation from, and of violent resistance to, Western society at the core of this "jihad narrative" is undoubtedly a major concern in the U.K. Though also evident in the United States, it hardly constitutes the "default anti-establishment narrative" here that Hirsi Ali suggests. To make that case, she raises the specter of honor killings in the U.S. as if they were frequent occurrences that somehow get ignored by law enforcement authorities. To illustrate the virulent presence of the "cult of death" among Muslims here, she cites an obscure Islamist author whose overheated text was published a quarter-century ago—and for which a Google search produces links only to Hirsi Ali and other contemporary critics of Islam.

**C**ONTRARY TO WHAT SHE SUGGESTS, here in the U.S. "default anti-establishment politics" is all about Muslims (especially second- and third-generation, native-born Muslims) challenging counter-terrorism policies as unwarranted infringements on their rights as American citizens. Indeed, they do so with a zeal and energy quite unlike the ambivalence and alienation their immigrant parents have often displayed. Hirsi Ali may be oblivious to the Bill of Rights, but Muslim American youth clearly are not.

To be sure, such rights-obsessed politics poses new challenges. Caught up in self-centered identity issues, Muslim American youth too readily and persistently refuse to acknowledge the legitimate concerns about Islam that millions of Americans continue to have. Nor do these youth face up to the real

dangers and difficult trade-offs confronting our leaders in the post-9/11 era.

*Heretic* also overlooks how Muslim Americans are increasingly mindful of themselves as a minority that shares interests with other minorities, non-religious as well as religious. After enthusiastically supporting George Bush's presidential candidacy in 2000, Muslim Americans reacted negatively to the invasion of Afghanistan and especially of Iraq, and to the vitriol heaped on them by many conservatives. As a result, over the past decade Muslim Americans have decisively thrown in their lot politically with Democrats.

This hardly means that Muslims in America have come to see themselves as liberals. Yet their self-image as a minority group allied with other minorities in a coalition with Democrats has definitely begun to affect not only how they define their interests but also, apparently, their values. This is most striking with regard to toleration of homosexuality, which Muslims everywhere have difficulty accepting and about which Hirsi Ali is particularly insistent.

Yet on this most intractable topic, Muslim Americans have shifted dramatically. According to highly reliable Pew surveys, 27% of Muslim Americans in 2007 agreed that "homosexuality should be accepted by society." In 2011, 39% did. Though Americans are on the whole more tolerant of homosexuality, they did not register as much change over this period (51% to 58%) as Muslims did. And while among Muslims those with the least religious commitment were the most accepting of homosexuality (57% in 2011), Muslim Americans of all levels of religious commitment shifted dramatically toward toleration.

Various Muslim American leaders and even some imams—including those with Islamist origins or ties to the Muslim Brotherhood—have urged believers to be more tolerant of gays. But rather than formal changes in doctrine, these represent tactical shifts in orientation. As I heard one elderly imam from India, educated in Saudi Arabia, respond to the earnest

puzzlement of young Muslim Americans eager to support Democrats but troubled by their support of gay rights: "No one is forcing you to be a homosexual.... If you think... Democrats are the best candidates, then vote for them."

**H**IRSI ALI'S RIGID, FUNDAMENTALIST focus on Islam's doctrines cannot account for such changes evident among Muslims here, or anywhere. Of course, political accommodation and expediency can shift Muslims in intolerant as well as tolerant directions. But in America, at least, the overall dynamic in our history has been fierce competition among religious and ethnic groups accompanied by specific accommodations. Initially, these typically did not emerge out of tolerance or even respect, but were, as Cornell historian R. Laurence Moore notes, "the product of uneasy arrangements made between groups that did not much like one another." Genuine respect and tolerance came much later, undoubtedly after religious attachments weakened.

None of this is to suggest that Americans do not face serious challenges ahead. We will continue to struggle to balance First (and Fourth) Amendment rights with counter-terrorism and public safety in the face of violent, extremist Islam. Not the least of these challenges is, as Hirsi Ali emphasizes, a small but nontrivial level of sympathy and even support for Islamist terrorism among Muslims here in the United States.

But despite its well-placed criticisms of P.C. formulations about Islam and Muslims, *Heretic* is profoundly misguided and unhelpful. Ayaan Hirsi Ali is a cosmopolitan secularist who lacks any insight into the nature of religious faith and any understanding of the American experience with religious pluralism. Her views are perhaps better suited to where she came from—the Netherlands!

*Peter Skerry is professor of political science at Boston College.*



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