

Murder
in
Amsterdam

The Death
of
Theo van Gogh
and the
Limits of Tolerance

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Contents

ONE

Holy War in Amsterdam

1

TWO

Thank You, Pim

37

THREE

The Healthy Smoker

71

FOUR

A Dutch Tragedy

103

FIVE
Submission

141

SIX
A Promising Boy

187

SEVEN
In Memoriam

225

Postscript 263

Acknowledgments 265

Notes 266

Index 269

ONE

Holy War in Amsterdam

1.

Ton (48), eyewitness to the murder of Theo van Gogh on November 2, 2004: "I heard Theo van Gogh beg for mercy. 'Don't do it! Don't do it!' he cried. I saw him fall onto the bicycle path. His killer was so calm. That really shocked me. How you can murder a person in such cold blood, right there in the street?

"I had sleepless nights for weeks. . . . Every night I see Theo van Gogh fall and Mohammed B. quietly finishing his job. . . . Since then I trust very few people. Mohammed B. could be one's neighbor. If I say 'fucking nigger' to a Surinamese, I'm called a racist, even though he can call me a whitey. You can no longer say what you think these days. No, we've become foreigners in our own country."

NRC HANDELSBLAD, JULY 30, 2005

It was the coolness of his manner, the composure of a person who knew precisely what he was doing, that struck those who saw Mohammed Bouyeri, a twenty-six-year-old Moroccan-Dutchman in a gray raincoat and prayer hat, blast the filmmaker Theo van Gogh off his bicycle on a dreary morning in Amsterdam. He shot him calmly in the stomach, and after the victim had staggered to the other side of the street, shot him several more times, pulled out a curved machete, and cut his throat—“as though slashing a tire,” according to one witness.

Leaving the machete planted firmly in Van Gogh’s chest, he then pulled a smaller knife from a bag, scribbled something on a piece of paper, folded the letter neatly, and pinned it to the body with this second knife.

Van Gogh, a short fat man with blond curls, was dressed in his usual T-shirt and suspenders. Most people in Holland who watch TV or read the papers would have been familiar with this ubiquitous figure, known less for his films than for his provocative statements on radio and television, in newspaper and Internet columns, and in various courts of law, about everything from the alleged exploitation of the Holocaust by Jewish celebrities to the dangerous presence of a Muslim “fifth column” operating in Dutch society. He lay on his back, his hands stretched above his head, two knives sticking out from his chest, slaughtered like a sacrificial ani-

mal. Bouyeri gave the corpse a few hard kicks and walked away, without hurry, easy as could be, as though he had done nothing more dramatic than fillet a fish.

Still calm, he made no serious attempt to escape. While he reloaded his gun, a woman who happened by screamed: "You can't do that!" "Yes, I can," Bouyeri replied, before strolling into a nearby park with several patrol cars rushing to the scene, "and now you know what you people can expect in the future." A shootout began. One bullet struck a policeman in his bulletproof vest. Another hit a passer-by in the leg. But then Bouyeri caught a police bullet in his own leg and was arrested. This was not part of the plan. Bouyeri had wanted to die as a martyr to his faith. We know this from statements he made later, and from the letter on Van Gogh's chest.

The content of Bouyeri's letter was not released to the public for several days. Perhaps it was thought to be too shocking, and likely to provoke further violence. It was in fact a long rambling tract, written in Dutch with a few quotations in Arabic, calling for a holy war against the unbelievers, and the deaths of a number of people mentioned by name. The tone was that of a death cult, composed in a language dripping with the imaginary blood of infidels and holy martyrs. The Dutch is correct but stilted, evidence of the author's lack of literary skill perhaps, but also of several layers of awkward translation. Much of Bouyeri's knowledge of

radical Islamist rhetoric came from English translations of Arabic texts downloaded from the Internet.

The manner of Van Gogh's murder, too, appears to have been inspired by imagery shooting around the world on websites. A CD-ROM disk was found in Bouyeri's apartment with video film of more than twenty-three killings of "the enemies of Allah," including the American reporter Daniel Pearl. These were taken from a Saudi website edited in London. Apart from the detailed images of men of various nationalities being beheaded, the CD contained pictures of a struggling man slowly having his head sawed off, taken from a Dutch porno site.

Bouyeri's "open letter" was not actually addressed to Theo van Gogh himself, but to Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the Somali-born Dutch politician, who had made a short film with Van Gogh, entitled *Submission*, dramatizing what she saw as Islamic abuse of women by projecting quotations from the Koran onto the naked bodies of several young women. The film was first shown in a television program in which Dutch celebrities are asked to select scenes from their favorite films or television shows. Hirsi Ali chose *Submission*. Selecting one's own work was unusual, perhaps even unprecedented, but Hirsi Ali was not a run-of-the-mill celebrity. In the year before Van Gogh's murder she had become the most prominent critic of Islam in the Netherlands, speaking out in meetings with Muslim women, at party conferences, and on TV

talk shows, repeating her message, over and over, that the Koran itself was the source of violent abuse. A delicate African beauty, Hirsi Ali had caught the public imagination by the eloquence and conviction of her public warnings against a religion which already had a sinister reputation. Here was a Muslim, or ex-Muslim, from Africa, telling Europeans that Islam was a serious threat. This was a disturbing message in a society used to public figures preaching multicultural tolerance, but it was also something many people wished to hear, some of the same people who would later turn against her.

Bouyeri's letter was addressed to Hirsi Ali, as a heretic who had rebelled against her childhood faith and become a willing tool of "Zionists and Crusaders." She was called a "soldier of evil" who had "turned her back on the Truth." She was "a liar" who would "smash herself to pieces on Islam." She would be destroyed, along with the United States, Europe, and Holland. For death would "separate Truth from lies," and Islam would be "victorious through the blood of martyrs."

Ayaan Hirsi Ali was the most prominent target of this holy rage, but she was not the only one. Her "masters" were described in the letter as a Jewish cabal that ruled the Netherlands. This cabal included the mayor of Amsterdam, Job Cohen, a secular man who actually tried his best to find common ground with the Muslim communities in his city ("holding things together," as he put it). In a twist of awful

irony, Cohen had also been attacked quite viciously by Theo van Gogh, among others, as an appeaser of Islamic extremism.

The shadow of World War II, the only war to reach the Dutch homeland since Napoleon's invasion, is never far from any Dutch crisis. Van Gogh, with his unfailing instinct for the low blow, compared Cohen to a collaborationist mayor under Nazi occupation. Still, in Bouyeri's jihad, Cohen would have to be annihilated. Another member of the alleged cabal was Jozua van Aartsen, then leader of the conservative VVD,* People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, which Hirsi Ali had recently joined as a member of parliament. The fact that he wasn't Jewish at all was of course irrelevant. In the holy war against "Zionists and Crusaders," ancestry counts for less than association.

Van Aartsen, too, invoked the last war. "These people," he wrote in the *NRC Handelsblad*, the most august of the national newspapers, "don't wish to change our society, they want to *destroy* it. We are their enemy, something we have not seen since 1940." His party colleague, the finance minister, Gerrit Zalm, a personal friend of Van Gogh's, declared that "we" were "at war" with the terrorists, and extra measures would be taken "on all fronts." Matt Herben, leader of the populist LPF** party, founded by the late Pim Fortuyn,

*Volkspartij voor Vrijheid en Democratie

**Lijst Pim Fortuyn, or Pim Fortuyn's List

saw Islamic and Western civilizations at war on Dutch soil. Society, he said, “is being threatened by extremists who spit on our culture. They don’t even speak our language and walk around in funny dresses. They are a fifth column. Theo said this better than anyone.”

First it was a mosque in Huizen—three men tried to torch it with turpentine and gasoline. Then a mosque in Rotterdam was targeted, though only the door got scorched. There was another arson attempt at a mosque in Groningen. And in Eindhoven a bomb exploded in an Islamic school. Jan Peter Balkenende, the prime minister, quickly announced that “we” were not exactly at war; Holland was just “doing battle” against “radicalism.” Three Christian churches were attacked, in Rotterdam, Utrecht, and Amersfoort. Another Muslim school, in Uden, a small town in the south, was set on fire. Someone had written “Theo R.I.P.” on the wall. “The country is burning,” said the announcer on the television news.

In fact, the country wasn’t burning at all. The arsonists in Uden were a bunch of teenagers looking for kicks. The “civil war” that some feared, the pogroms on Muslim areas, the retaliations by newly recruited jihadis, none of this actually happened. Most people kept their cool. But the constant chatter of politicians, newspaper columnists, television pundits, headline writers, and editorialists in the popular

press produced a feverish atmosphere in which the smallest incident, the slightest faux pas, would spark endless rounds of overheated commentary.

An orthodox imam from Tilburg refused to shake the hand of Rita Verdonk, minister for the integration of minorities. With all respect, the Syrian-born cleric said in halting Dutch, she was a woman, and his religion forbade physical contact with strange women. “But surely we are equals,” replied Verdonk a little peevishly, unsure what to do with her outstretched hand. She was right, they were equals, but equality may not have been the point. The imam’s refusal, maladroit no doubt, but not of huge significance, made the front page of every major newspaper. The sturdy figure of Rita Verdonk facing the bearded imam became a prime symbol of the Dutch crisis, of the collapse of multiculturalism, the end of a sweet dream of tolerance and light in the most progressive little enclave of Europe.

2.

Forty Moroccan, Dutch, political, religious, and homosexual organizations from Amsterdam distributed posters with the slogan: “We won’t take this.” People are invited to sign a manifesto on the website www.wewonttakethis.

NRC HANDELSBLAD, NOVEMBER 16, 2004

It was at this point that I decided to spend some time in the Netherlands, where I was born in 1951 and had lived until 1975. I had known Van Gogh slightly. We had mutual friends and did the odd radio show together. He invited me to be on his TV talk show, called *A Friendly Conversation*, which, in fact, it was. Not being a member of Amsterdam café society or the local literary scene, I had escaped the lash of his often venomous polemics. His behavior to me was invariably polite, even though his loud, high-pitched voice, always striving to be heard, could be wearisome.

I arrived with an American magazine assignment in time for Verdonk's attempted handshake, but too late for the memorial party organized by "the Friends of Theo" according to the precise specifications of Van Gogh himself, drawn up while planning a trip to New York a few months earlier (he suffered from a fear of flying). There was a rock band and there were cabaret acts. Pretty cigarette girls in miniskirts plied their wares, as in a prewar movie theater. Female guests wore strings of pearls and twinsets, a style that Theo had found a turn-on. Since one of Theo's favorite terms for Muslims was "goat fuckers," well-known comedians made jokes about fucking goats, and two stuffed goats stood on a makeshift stage, ready for "those who might feel the urge." A large wooden coffin, supposedly containing Theo's corpse, was placed on a revolving platform flanked by magnum bot-

tles of champagne, and large phallic cacti, the trademark of his television chat show. One Friend of Theo, present at this wake for a more frivolous age, predicted to me that if the Muslim radicals weren't crushed soon, there would be a civil war in Holland.

There was something unhinged about the Netherlands in the winter of 2004, and I wanted to understand it better. Hysteria, after all, is the last thing people associate with a country that is usually described by lazy foreign journalists as "phlegmatic." I had always known this to be a caricature, but had still found it too placid for my taste, too reassuringly dull. This, clearly, was no longer the case. Something had changed dramatically in the country of my birth.

One of the first things I read after arriving in Amsterdam was an essay by the great Dutch scholar Johan Huizinga, written in 1934, another time of crisis, when fascism and Nazism were looming close to the Dutch borders. But extremism would not seduce the Dutch, he said, and even if it did, against all the odds, it would surely be a "moderate extremism." Even though Holland was not immune to the dangers of modern propaganda and the crumbling of faith in democratic institutions, the stolid Dutch burghers were simply not given to excesses. As Huizinga saw it, the "mental basis" for collective illusions was a "political sense of inferiority" grounded in centuries of failure and oppression, and a deeply felt loss of ancient glory. Exasperated national-

ism is the usual result, filled with a desire for revenge. Such was not the case in the Netherlands, for “as a nation and a state we are after all *satisfait*, and it is our duty to remain so.”

Huizinga’s view on the national character, though not exactly wrong, did reveal a certain complacency. Bourgeois satisfaction is by no means to be despised; indeed, it is a recipe for peace and orderly contentment. It is also, perhaps, a trifle boring. Heinrich Heine did not mean it as a compliment when he said that he would head for Holland when the end of the world was in sight, since everything in that country happened fifty years later. Like most quips of this sort, it was unfair, yet not totally untrue, especially in the nineteenth century. By the middle of the twentieth century, however, the Netherlands had pretty much caught up with the world, and since then things often happened earlier than elsewhere: tolerance of recreational drugs and pornography; acceptance of gay rights, multiculturalism, euthanasia, and so on. This, too, led to an air of satisfaction, even smugness, a self-congratulatory notion of living in the finest, freest, most progressive, most decent, most perfectly evolved playground of multicultural utopianism.

I had left Amsterdam in the winter of 1975, at the height of its good times, driven by a traditional Dutch wanderlust, a desire to set sail for the wider, larger world, but also by a certain boredom with the Dutch idyll. My restlessness may well have been a sign of growing up in a pampered society,

where there was always enough to eat, and no one had to fear a knock on the door after midnight. Yet there were cracks showing in the national idyll even then, as I was leaving. Seven young Moluccan activists had just seized a train in a province near the German border and held the passengers hostage in an attempt to get Dutch support for the independence of the south Moluccan islands from Indonesia. When the hijackers failed to get their way, the engine driver and two passengers were murdered and, to the horror of millions watching TV, tossed casually onto the tracks. On my way to the airport, we had to make a detour because the Indonesian consulate had been occupied by Moluccan activists shooting off guns.

These acts of violence, or terrorism, have been largely forgotten now. There were no heroes in this story, and the villains were more pathetic than monstrous. It was in fact a typical case of unresolved colonial bad faith. Moluccans, many of them Christians, had fought on the Dutch side in colonial wars. Like minorities in other European empires—the Hmong in Indochina, the Indian Sikhs—they served in colonial armies in exchange for privileges and protection. When the Japanese invaded the Dutch East Indies in 1941, the Moluccans—unlike most Javanese—resisted on behalf of the Dutch, and were treated by the Japanese with special venom. When Indonesia declared independence after the

Japanese defeat, the Moluccans once again fought alongside Dutch troops, in a brutal campaign (“police actions”) to crush the Javanese-led independence movement. It was as bloody as well as a hopeless cause.

The Dutch finally left Indonesia in 1949, and they took the Moluccan soldiers with them. They had no choice, since the Indonesians would not let the “traitors” go home to the Moluccas. But since the Moluccans had no desire to rebuild their lives in the cold and frowsy towns of postwar Holland, and the Dutch had no desire to let them stay, the Moluccans were promised a swift return to an independent homeland. The Dutch would see to that. But of course the Dutch had no intention of creating any more trouble with Indonesia. So the poor Moluccans were shunted off to former Nazi concentration camps, such as Westerbork, from where, less than a decade before, almost a hundred thousand Dutch Jews had been deported, most never to return. Westerbork had been built originally for Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany in the 1930s. That, too, was supposed to have been a temporary solution. They, too, were not expected to stay. By 1975, it was clear that independence for the south Moluccans was an illusion, a deceitful promise of a false dawn. A new generation had grown up with no hope of returning and no life outside the camps. It was not a good start to the new age of multiculturalism.

3.

Amsterdam, December 21: The family of the murdered filmmaker Theo van Gogh is angry with Prime Minister Balkenende for his failure to console the next of kin. The Government Information Agency denied this. Yesterday night in the television program Nova, Van Gogh's mother reproached the prime minister for . . . visiting a mosque as well as an Islamic school, while forgetting about a little boy whose father had been murdered in Amsterdam.

NRC HANDELSBLAD, DECEMBER 21, 2004

Immediately after Van Gogh's murder, the bickering began. Within hours, shock curdled into recrimination. Ministers in The Hague blamed the AIVD, the domestic intelligence service, for its failure to keep a closer eye on Mohammed Bouyeri. The prime minister and the minister of justice were blamed for not tackling hate speech in the mosques. Job Cohen, the Amsterdam mayor, blamed the AIVD for not sharing intelligence with the Amsterdam police. The interior minister, in charge of the AIVD, was blamed for letting terrorists roam free. Ayaan Hirsi Ali was blamed for causing unnecessary offense with her polemical film. Theo van Gogh was blamed for insulting the Muslims. The Friends of Theo, a select band of quotable voices in the national and interna-

tional press, blamed Cohen for being a coward, the government for being careless, the Muslims for being in denial, the prime minister for being unfeeling, and the Netherlands for being a miserable little country that let one of its geniuses die. And the Friends of Theo were accused in turn of being “merchants of fear.” The real rot, yet others opined, set in with a generation of arrogant Social Democrats who had failed to see the emerging “drama of multiculturalism” and denounced those who did as racists.

This is the other side of complacency, of being a little too *satisfait*. When smugness is challenged, panic sets in. There was in the finger-pointing a tone of wounded *amour propre*, of resentment that things had suddenly gone wrong, a sense of pique, of being affronted by one’s own shattered dreams. There is a Dutch word that perfectly expresses this feeling: *verongelijktheid*, to be wronged, not by an individual so much as by the world at large. You could see it in the faces of people who turned up on TV, quarreling in the wake of the murder. You often see it in the way the much-heralded national team plays soccer.

Proud of their superior skills, their multicultural makeup, the almost mocking manner of their free-flowing play, maddening the players of more prosaic teams, like Germany, the stars of Dutch soccer usually start their games with all the swagger of swinging Amsterdam. In their playful individualism, their progressive daringness, they know they are the

best. And sometimes they are. But when things go against them and the plodding Germans, or the bloody-minded Italians, or the cussed English, go up a goal or two, the heads slump, the bickering starts, and the game is lost in a sour mood of *verongelijkheid*: Why did this have to happen to us? What did we do to deserve this? Aren't we the best? Well, fuck you!

In November 2004 things had clearly gone badly in the experimental garden. The mood of peevisish disillusion was articulated most clearly by the writer Max Pam, a prominent Friend of Theo, in a television program broadcast on the day after the murder.

Pam was asked whether he really wished to leave Amsterdam and move to Germany, as had been reported. Well, said Pam, that was an exaggeration. But, as it happens, he had recently bumped into Harry Mulisch, one of Holland's most famous novelists, and Mulisch had said he no longer liked living in Holland either and was considering a move to Germany. Pam sympathized. For he, too, was fed up. What distressed him more than anything was the end of a particular way of life, a kind of "free-spirited anarchism," full of "humor and cabaret," a life where it was possible to make fun of things, to offend people without the fear of violence. "A kind of idyll," he sighed, had come to an end. Watching Pam, I kept thinking of the Dutch soccer team. After Theo's death, things were no fun anymore.

Like Heine's words, Pam's sentiments contained an element of truth. The Netherlands never was a utopia, but the world had indeed changed since 9/11, and that world had caught up with Amsterdam, just as it had with New York, Bali, Madrid, and London. The Moluccan problem was a local tragedy. But Mohammed Bouyeri, a sad loner from an Amsterdam suburb, whose social horizons had progressively narrowed to a small radicalized circle, was part of a violent wider world connected by Internet, CD-ROMs, and MSN.

4.

Amsterdam: On Sunday evening more than a thousand demonstrators remembered the Reichskristallnacht of 1938. They also reflected on recent statements of anti-Semitism. The European Commissioner, Frits Bolkestein, called the comparison of Israel to Nazi Germany "grotesque and slanderous." This is a new form of anti-Semitism which he believes is mostly confined in Western Europe to "ill-informed North African youths."

VOLKSKRANT, NOVEMBER 10, 2003

Violence against Muslims in the Netherlands has strongly decreased. Acts of violence from extreme right-wing groups have also diminished. Remarkably, very few anti-Semitic incidents have been caused by people of foreign origin. This has been re-

vealed by research undertaken by the University of Leiden and the Anne Frank Foundation in 2002.

NRC HANDELSBLAD, JANUARY 12, 2004

Holland, and Amsterdam in particular, has a long history of taking in foreigners. Sephardic Jews arrived from Antwerp and farther south in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, many of them refugees from the Spanish Inquisition. The Dutch Republic in its Golden Age was wealthy and offered religious freedom. This actually prompted many Jews, who had let their traditions lapse or been forced to convert to Catholicism, to revive their faith. A large Portuguese synagogue was built in Amsterdam between 1671 and 1675, and another was built by Polish and German Ashkenazim in 1670. For a long time, Jews, many of them very poor, suffered from all kinds of professional and social restrictions, but they were not persecuted, until the Germans arrived in 1940. This earned Amsterdam the Yiddish name of Mokum, *the City*.

The Huguenots, like the Jews, found refuge in the north from persecution. They escaped to the Dutch Republic after Louis XIV revoked their religious freedom in 1685. Holland enjoyed the fruits of the Enlightenment before most other countries in Europe. It is surely no coincidence that the so-called early Enlightenment of the Dutch Republic was partly

inspired by the ideas of a son of Sephardic refugees in Amsterdam, Benedictus (Baruch) de Spinoza.

Holland's reputation for hospitality is deserved, but immigration in the twentieth century is also a story of horror, opportunism, postcolonial obligations, and an odd combination of charity and indifference. Few Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany—Anne Frank was, for example, one who did not—survived the German occupation. Their fate was certainly not welcomed by most gentiles in Holland, but despite the bravery of many individuals, too little was done to help them. Altogether 71 percent of all Jews in the Netherlands ended up in death camps, the highest percentage in Europe outside Poland. That is the horror that still hangs over Dutch life like a toxic cloud. Largely unmentioned until the 1960s, the shame of it poisons national debates to this day.

The end of empire in the Dutch East Indies, despite the problems with Moluccans, was less traumatic. The violence happened too far away. And those Eurasians and Indonesians who chose to move to the Netherlands in the 1940s and 1950s were relatively small in number, generally well educated, and easily absorbed. The same was true of the first wave of Surinamese from the former colony of Dutch Guiana. Arriving in the 1960s, when the Dutch economy boomed, these mostly middle-class men and women found work as nurses, civil servants, or teachers. The dirty work, in

the boom years, was done by “guest workers” from Turkey and Morocco, single men cooped up in cheap hostels, prepared to do almost anything to provide for their families back home. These men were not expected to stay. One of them was Mohammed Bouyeri’s father.

It was the second wave of Surinamese, arriving around 1972, that began to cause problems. Newly independent Suriname was shedding people, hundreds of thousands of them, mostly the descendants of African slaves. It is said that a sign at Paramaribo airport read: “Will the last Surinamese please turn off the lights.” The oil shock in 1973, when Arab oil producers punished the Netherlands with an embargo for its support of Israel in the Yom Kippur War, had created a crisis in the Dutch economy. There were no longer enough jobs for the guest workers from Turkey or Morocco, let alone more than two hundred thousand newcomers from a Caribbean backwater.

The result was widespread unemployment, dependence on the welfare state, petty crime, and a vicious circle of social discrimination and sporadic violence. There are still many Surinamese without an official job, perhaps as many as 30 percent, but the Surinamese are no longer a “problem.” They always speak Dutch, excel at soccer, and by and large have been moving steadily into the middle class. Like the West Indians in Britain, they are not universally welcomed,

but are still recognized as an exotic yet integral part of the national culture.

The same is not true of the guest workers and their offspring. Like the Moluccans, these men were not regarded as immigrants. Their stay was supposed to have been temporary, to clean out oil tankers, work in steel factories, sweep the streets. When many of them elected to remain, the government took the benevolent view that in that case they should be joined by their wives and children. Slowly, almost without anyone's noticing, old working-class Dutch neighborhoods lost their white populations and were transformed into "dish cities" linked to Morocco, Turkey, and the Middle East by satellite television and the Internet. Gray Dutch streets filled up, not only with satellite dishes, but with Moroccan bakeries, Turkish kebab joints, travel agents offering cheap flights to Istanbul or Casablanca, and coffee-houses filled with sad-eyed men in djellabas whose health had often been wrecked by years of dirty and dangerous labor. Their wives, isolated in cramped modern apartment blocks, usually failed to learn Dutch, had little knowledge of the strange land in which they had been dumped, sometimes to be married to strange men, and had to be helped in the simplest tasks by their children, who learned faster how to cope without necessarily feeling at home.

The Turks, backed by a variety of social and religious in-

stitutions, formed a relatively close-knit community of shopkeepers and professionals. Grocery stores in Amsterdam are often owned by Turks, and so are pizzerias. If Turks turn to crime, it is organized crime, sometimes linked to the old country—financial fraud, illegal immigration, hard drugs. There are links to political violence in Turkey, to do with militant nationalism or the Kurdish question, but not so much with revolutionary Islam. That appears to be more a Moroccan problem.

Moroccans in the Netherlands are mostly Berbers, not Arabs, from remote villages in the Rif mountains. Like Sicilian peasants, they are clannish people, widely distrusted by urban Moroccans, and often, especially the women, illiterate. Less organized, with the narrow horizons of village folk, and awkwardly wedged between the North African and European worlds, Moroccan immigrants lack the kinds of institutional support that give the Turkish immigrants a sense of belonging.

Those who manage, through intelligence, perseverance, and good fortune, to make their way in Dutch society, often do very well indeed. Those who don't, for one reason or another, drift easily into a seedy world without exit of gang violence and petty crime. Most vulnerable of all are those who find their ambitions blocked despite their attempts to fit in with the mainstream of Dutch life. Anything can trigger a

mood of violent resentment and self-destruction: a job offer withdrawn, a grant not given, one too many doors shut in one's face. Such a man was Mohammed Bouyeri, who adopted a brand of Islamic extremism unknown to his father, a broken-backed former guest worker from the Rif mountains, and decided to join a war against the society from which he felt excluded. Unsure of where he belonged, he lost himself in a murderous cause.

During the last few decades, the guest workers and their children were joined by another group of newcomers, many of them scarred by political violence: Tamils from Sri Lanka, Syrians and Iranians, Somali escapees from civil war, Iraqis, Bosnians, Egyptians, Chinese, and many more. Since Holland, like all European countries, almost never accepts immigrants who come for economic reasons, people try to get in as asylum seekers. Some are in genuine danger, some are not, but until recently, most managed, in one way or another, to stay on, legally or otherwise. When an Israeli cargo plane crashed into a poor suburb of Amsterdam in 1992, the number of victims was impossible to calculate, since the housing estates were filled with illegals. Even the official statistics in Amsterdam are remarkable. In 1999, 45 percent of the population was of foreign origin. If projections are right, this will be 52 percent in 2015. And the majority will be Muslim.

5.

Afshin Ellian, rightly, made a name for himself as an expert critic of the Iranian regime, which he knew from the inside. Then something went wrong. He took the role upon himself of the ultra-right-wing critic of the soft multi-culti left: the foreign lapdog of the right. And when he can't find the soft left, he will make it up. In doing so, he adopts a tone that does not exist among Dutch writers.

RONALD PLASTERK IN
VOLKSKRANT, JULY 15, 2005

Does a civilized society need religion? Historian Jonathan Israel wrote Radical Enlightenment about the philosophical current which had no room for God. He says: "Hirsi Ali is an heir to Spinoza."

YORAM STEIN IN TROUW, MAY 6, 2005

I first saw Afshin Ellian at his home, a modern two-story family house in a suburb between Amsterdam and Utrecht. The only sign of anything untoward was the patrol car that passed by every so often to keep an eye on things. Our second meeting was at Leiden University, where he teaches law. A bodyguard guided me to his office and watched while we had lunch in the canteen. I noticed many female students wearing Muslim headscarves. The last time I saw Ellian, a team of bodyguards carefully checked

out the café where we met and kept our table under close surveillance.

And all this because this thirty-nine-year-old scholar, born in Tehran, acquired the “dangerous hobby” of writing a newspaper column that is harshly critical of political Islam. Like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, he is seen by some as a dangerous agitator, and by others as a hero who arrived from the Muslim world to shake the Dutch from their deep sleep. This is what he believes: Citizenship of a democratic state means living by the laws of the country. A liberal democracy cannot survive when part of the population believes that divine laws trump those made by man. The fruits of the European Enlightenment must be defended, with force if necessary. It is time for Muslims to be enlightened too. European intellectuals, in their self-hating nihilism and utopian anti-Americanism, have lost the stomach to fight for Enlightenment values. The multicultural dream is over. The West, except for the U.S., is too afraid to use its power. The European welfare state is a disastrous, patronizing system that treats people like patients. The Dutch government must act to protect those who criticize Islam. No religion or minority should be immune to censure or ridicule. The solution to the Muslim problem is a Muslim Voltaire, a Muslim Nietzsche—that is to say, people like “us, the heretics—me, Salman Rushdie, Ayaan Hirsi Ali.”

The tone of his columns is sometimes strident, even shrill. In person, Ellian is more humorous, but his wit is barbed,

and can be sarcastic in the somewhat heavy manner of a Marxist pamphleteer. Ellian was once a man of the far left, a member of the Tudeh Party in Iran. Even he, a political refugee, who arrived in the Netherlands only in 1989, cannot resist an allusion to World War II. Observing the way Dutch authorities have dealt with the Islamist danger, he told me, made him understand why so many Dutch people had collaborated with the Nazis. He thinks the Dutch are hopelessly weak.

Under the roly-poly demeanor and the dry chuckle runs a hard current of anger. In a television program broadcast hours after the murder of Van Gogh, Ellian couldn't contain himself when a Moroccan-Dutch writer expressed the view that Bouyeri's deed could not be explained by Islam alone, and pointed to the general "polarization" of Dutch society. Jabbing his finger at the man like an interrogator, Ellian shouted that Bouyeri had gone to the mosque, had an imam, had read the Koran—"He murdered in the name of a perverted prophet!"

Afshin Ellian is angry first of all at the Islamist revolutionaries, whose brutality he witnessed as a teenager in Ayatollah Khomeini's Tehran. Like Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who experienced religious fundamentalism in Saudi Arabia and then joined the Muslim Brotherhood in Kenya, Ellian saw the violence of political Islam firsthand. This has shaped—some might say warped—his view of Islamism ever since. When

Ellian sees Mohammed B., he sees a history of torture, prisons, executions, and mass slaughter in holy wars.

Of course, a suburb of Amsterdam, however receptive some of its inhabitants may be to the call of murder and martyrdom, is not Tehran. Things are different in the flat, prosperous land of green polders and dykes, where conflicts are solved through compromise and negotiation. Ellian might be seen as an excitable foreigner, flying off the handle “in a tone that does not exist among Dutch writers.” Then again, that is what people resting in the comfort of liberal democracies said about refugees from the Third Reich and dissidents under Communism. Amsterdam *is* different from Tehran, to be sure, but Ellian is neither a politician nor a diplomat, but a lifelong dissident, for whom compromise spells weakness.

What enraged Ellian was not just the inability of other non-Western immigrants to understand and abide by the laws that guaranteed their liberty but, worse in his eyes, the inability of Europeans to appreciate what they had. Ellian, and others like him, including Ayaan Hirsi Ali, are sometimes called “Enlightenment fundamentalists.” This might sound like a contradiction. Thinkers of the Enlightenment, after all, rejected all dogmas. But Ellian’s penchant for denunciation in the name of freedom and democracy is marked by earlier, more brutal experiences.

When things get rough, Ellian said, after I had asked him

how he put up with living dangerously, he reaches for books by Friedrich Nietzsche. Why should Westerners be the only ones to dissent from their traditions, he wondered. "Why not us? It is racist to think that Muslims are too backward to think for themselves." He spoke with passion, and more than a hint of fury. I admired his passion, but there was something unnerving about his fury, something that reminded me of Huizinga's idea that dangerous illusions come from a sense of inferiority, of a historical wrong. Ellian likes to wonder aloud, throwing up his hands in despair: Why did the great civilizations of Persia and Araby not produce a Nietzsche or a Voltaire? Why not now?

The battle is both centuries old and relatively new. Until recently not much attention was paid outside the universities to the currents and crosscurrents of the Enlightenment and the Counter-Enlightenment. It was the attack on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, an act of mass murder that was random as well as precisely targeted, that brought the Enlightenment back to the center of political debate, especially in Holland, one of the countries where it all began more than three hundred years ago.

Not just academics but politicians and popular columnists saw the Enlightenment as the fortress to be defended against Islamist extremism. The jihad in which Mohammed Bouyeri served as a mere footsoldier was seen, not just by Ellian and Hirsi Ali, as our contemporary Counter-

Enlightenment, and conservative politicians, such as the former VVD leader and European commissioner Frits Bolkestein, jumped into the breach for the freethinking values of Spinoza and Voltaire. One of the main claims of Enlightenment philosophy is that its ideas based on reason are by definition universal. But the Enlightenment has a particular appeal to some conservatives because its values are not just universal, but more importantly, “ours,” that is, European, Western values.

Bolkestein, a former business executive with intellectual interests that set him apart from most professional politicians, was the first mainstream politician to warn about the dire consequences of accepting too many Muslim immigrants, whose customs clashed with “our fundamental values.” Certain values, he claimed, such as gender equality, or the separation of church and state, are not negotiable. We met on several occasions in Amsterdam, and when it was time to part he would invariably say: “We must talk more next time about the lack of confidence in Western civilization.” Like Afshin Ellian, he frets about European weakness. That is why he worries about the possibility of Turkey, with its 68 million Muslims, joining the European Union. For it would, in his view, spell the end of Europe, not as a geographical entity, but as a community of values born of the Enlightenment.

Fifteen years ago, when Bolkestein first talked about the threat to fundamental values, he was a hateful figure to the

Left, a fearmonger, even a racist. The main focus of his attack was the idea of cultural relativism, the common notion among leftists that immigrants should be allowed to retain their own “identity.” But something interesting happened along the way. There is a long and frequently poisonous history in European politics of left-wing internationalism and conservative defense of traditional values. The Left was on the side of universalism, scientific socialism, and the like, while the Right believed in culture, in the sense of “our culture,” “our traditions.” During the multicultural age of the 1970s and 1980s, this debate began to shift. It was now the Left that stood for culture and tradition, especially “their” cultures and traditions, that is, those of the immigrants, while the Right argued for the universal values of the Enlightenment. The problem in this debate was the fuzzy border between what was in fact universal and what was merely “ours.”

But the real shift came when a well-known sequence of events drove many former leftists into the conservative camp. First came the Salman Rushdie affair: “their” values were indeed clashing with “ours”; a free-spirited cosmopolitan writer was being threatened by an extreme version of an alien religion. Then New York was attacked. And now Theo van Gogh, “our” Salman Rushdie, was dead. Leftists, embittered by what they saw as the failure of multiculturalism, or fired

up by the anticlericalism of their revolutionary past, joined conservatives in the battle for the Enlightenment. Bolkestein became a hero for people who used to despise him.

At first sight, the clash of values appears to be straightforward: on the one hand, secularism, science, equality between men and women, individualism, freedom to criticize without fear of violent retribution, and on the other, divine laws, revealed truth, male domination, tribal honor, and so on. It is indeed hard to see how in a liberal democracy these contrasting values can be reconciled. How could one not be on the side of Frits Bolkestein, or Afshin Ellian, or Ayaan Hirsi Ali? But a closer look reveals fissures that are less straightforward. People come to the struggle for Enlightenment values from very different angles, and even when they find common ground, their aims may be less than enlightened.

Hirsi Ali and Ellian are often accused of fighting the battles of their own past on European soil, as though they had smuggled a non-Western crisis into a peaceful Western country. Traumatized by Khomeini's revolution or an oppressive Muslim upbringing in Somalia, Saudi Arabia, and Kenya, they turned against the faith of their fathers and embraced a radical version of the European Enlightenment: Hirsi Ali as the heiress of Spinoza, and Ellian as Nietzsche's disciple. They are warriors on a battlefield inside the world of Islam. But they are also struggling against oppressive cultures that

force genital mutilation on young girls and marriage with strangers on young women. The bracing air of universalism is a release from tribal traditions.

But the same could be said, in a way, of their greatest enemy: the modern holy warrior, like the killer of Theo van Gogh. The young Moroccan-Dutch youth downloading English translations of Arabic texts from the Internet is also looking for a universal cause, severed from cultural and tribal specificities. The promised purity of modern Islamism, which is after all a revolutionary creed, has been disconnected from cultural tradition. That is why it appeals to those who feel displaced, in the suburbs of Paris no less than in Amsterdam. They are stuck between cultures they find equally alienating. The war between Ellian's Enlightenment and Bouyeri's jihad is not a straightforward clash between culture and universalism, but between two different visions of the universal, one radically secular, the other radically religious. The radically secular society of post-1960s Amsterdam, which looks like the promised land to a sophisticated refugee from religious revolution, is unsettling to the confused son of an immigrant from the remote countryside of Morocco.

But not every pious Muslim is a potential terrorist. To see religion, even religious orthodoxy, as the main enemy of Enlightenment values is misleading. For even though the modern terrorist has latched onto a religious faith, he might as well have chosen—and in different times did choose—a

radically secular creed to justify his thirst for violent death. Besides, there is a difference between the anticlericalism of Voltaire, who was up against one of the two most powerful institutions of eighteenth-century France, and radical secularists today battling a minority within an already embattled minority.

There is also a difference between the eighteenth-century *philosophes* and conservative Dutch politicians of the twenty-first century. The pioneers of the Enlightenment were iconoclasts, with radical ideas about politics and life. The Marquis de Sade was a typical man of the Enlightenment, as much as Diderot. In terms of Islam, Ellian and Hirsi Ali are certainly iconoclasts. It is harder to see a link between a respectable conservative EU commissioner and the great chronicler of sadism. But then, of course, a desire to smash sacred icons is not why many conservatives joined the battle for the modern Enlightenment in the first place.

The sacred icons of Dutch society were broken in the 1960s, as elsewhere in the Western world, when the churches lost their grip on people's lives, when government authority was something to challenge, not obey, when sexual taboos were publicly and privately breached, and when—rather in line with the original Enlightenment—people opened their eyes and ears to civilizations outside the West. The rebellions of the 1960s contained irrational, indeed antirational, and sometimes violent strains, and the fashion for such far-flung

exotica as Maoism sometimes turned into a revolt against liberalism and democracy. One by one the religious and political pillars that supported the established order of the Netherlands were cut away. The tolerance of other cultures, often barely understood, that spread with new waves of immigration, was sometimes just that—tolerance—and sometimes sheer indifference, bred by a lack of confidence in values and institutions that needed to be defended.

The conservative call for Enlightenment values is partly a revolt against a revolt. Tolerance has gone too far for many conservatives. They believe, like some former leftists, that multiculturalism was a mistake; our fundamental values must be reclaimed. Because secularism has gone too far to bring back the authority of the churches, conservatives and neo-conservatives have latched onto the Enlightenment as a badge of national or cultural identity. The Enlightenment, in other words, has become the name for a new conservative order, and its enemies are the aliens, whose values we can't share.

Perhaps it was a necessary correction. Islamist revolution, like any violent creed, needs to be resisted, and a nation-state, to be viable, must stand for something. Political institutions are not purely mechanical. But an essential part of Enlightenment thinking is that everything, especially claims to “nonnegotiable” or “fundamental” values, should be open to criticism. The whole point of liberal democracy, its

greatest strength, especially in the Netherlands, is that conflicting faiths, interests, and views can be resolved only through negotiation. The only thing that cannot be negotiated is the use of violence.

The murder of Theo van Gogh was committed by one Dutch convert to a revolutionary war, who was probably helped by others. Such revolutionaries in Europe are still few in number. But the murder, like the bomb attacks in Madrid and London, the fatwa against Salman Rushdie, and the worldwide Muslim protests against cartoons of the Prophet in a Danish newspaper, exposed dangerous fractures that run through all European nations. Islam may soon become the majority religion in countries whose churches have been turned more and more into tourist sites, apartment houses, theaters, and places of entertainment. The French scholar Olivier Roy is right: Islam is now a European religion. How Europeans, Muslims as well as non-Muslims, cope with this is the question that will decide our future. And what better place to watch the drama unfold than the Netherlands, where freedom came from a revolt against Catholic Spain, where ideals of tolerance and diversity became a badge of national honor, and where political Islam struck its first blow against a man whose deepest conviction was that freedom of speech included the freedom to insult.