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Infidel: My Journey from Somalia to the West

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On this book tour, I am experiencing what it is to be a parrot. I tell the same story again and again. Those who interview me on the radio, in print, and on television ask me to tell them about my life in Africa and Islam, female genital mutilation, forced marriage, and civil war. That is all in the book. But I think it is important to tell you how I got involved in this, how I became famous, and how I became infamous.

Ladies and gentlemen, let me take you back for a moment to November 2001. I attended one of the first debates in Amsterdam on the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington. I was 30, almost 31. The debate was organized by a publishing house together with a daily newspaper called *Trouw*. The title of the evening was "The West or Islam: Who Needs a Voltaire?"



Ayaan Hirsi Ali is a native of Somalia and was a member of the Parliament of the Netherlands until 2006. She is the author of Infidel, a New York Times best-seller published this year. Hirsi Ali, now a resident fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, made these remarks as keynote speaker at the 2007 Cato Benefactor Summit.

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That evening I listened to five of the six speakers propose a Voltaire for the West. They argued that the West was arrogant, imperialist, and cruel. America was the most evil of all, and Americans, under the control of the Jews, were responsible for all the conflicts in the world today. It was too bad that innocent people were killed in airplanes and in buildings, but if Americans did not want to be attacked again at home or abroad, then they had to change their foreign policy.

Islam was a great civilization and a source of peace; no Voltaire was required there. Only one speaker would counter those claims that evening. Afshim Ellian, an Iranian professor of law at the University of Amsterdam, pleaded for a reformation for Islam and urged that Muslims embark on a process of enlightenment.

I was frustrated to hear the other five speakers talk of Muslims only as victims. I agreed with Mr. Ellian. And, as he was outrageously outnumbered, I joined in when the audience was allowed to and supported him. I ended my plea with “The West has countless Voltaires; allow us just one, please.”

Then it was time for a break. The organizers of the event, various intellectuals and journalists, circled around me

appropriate to take them through my bloodline at that time.

“Where do you come from?” “Somalia,” I said. “Are you still a Muslim?” “Of course,” I stammered, dressed in trousers, head uncovered, and holding a glass of wine in my hands.

I was not a very convincing picture of a young, devout Muslim woman. “Well, a liberal Muslim,” I shrugged. And at the time I was not aware of the logical inconsistency in the compound term “liberal Muslim.”

“Where did you learn to speak Dutch so fluently?” “I have lived in Holland for almost 10 years,” I said. There are not many places in the world where Dutch is spoken, I always thought when people asked me that question. “Will you write for my paper an article in which you expand on your intervention tonight about allowing Muslims a Voltaire?” a man asked me. “All right,” I said, “I will show the article to my boss first at the Labor Party think tank.”

The strangers, almost all of them prominent thinkers on the Amsterdam scene, continued to question me, interview me, publish my articles, and so on. Weeks later, the man who first asked me to write an article introduced me to a publisher.

In March 2002 she and I had a conversation that is not in the book. She asked me what I thought of the debate on the relationship between Islam and the West. I said, “Well, you guys”—Westerners—“have developed from stages of superstition, ignorance, and cruelty to societies that put an emphasis on reason, know-

ledge, and humanity, with institutions that are based on those values.

“We Muslims have not done that. We live in tribes. We long for a Utopia.

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and started to question me eagerly. “Who are you?” “I am Ayaan,” I said. “Ayaan who?” “Just Ayaan. The rest of my name is difficult.” It did not seem ap-

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Our dream is to build a social order based on the Quran, follow the edicts of Allah, and look up to the Prophet Mohammed for moral guidance in order to achieve peace, prominence, and happiness. And clearly, we have failed. That is why we come here to Western countries in large numbers.”

It is quite a journey, I told her, to let go of the dream of a society designed by Allah. “You won’t understand,” I said. “You don’t know; you have to live it.”

“Tell me how you did that,” she said. So I told her where I was born, about my family, how we lived, and why I came to Holland. “That is the book you are going to write,” she said. “I am not going to publish a book of research papers. Tell us about your journey from being a member of a clan and how you have adapted to our society. Tell us what it is you still value in the moral framework you got from your parents, what you do not like about your old ways; and tell us what you do not like in Holland, what you appreciate and why.

“Ayaan, you overestimate the average Dutch person. No one has the time to read research papers on conflicting values. You will frighten your audience with terms such as ‘empirical,’ ‘data,’ ‘consistency,’ and ‘conclusion.’ But your story will help give us an insight into a world that is closed for us.

“Ayaan,” my publisher continued passionately, “you think we know what goes on behind those closed curtains in Amsterdam West (home to many Muslim immigrants). We don’t. Those curtains will open if the women who live behind them tell us their stories to create awareness, raise questions, and potentially bring about change. That is how we Westerners changed. We told each other our intimate stories, our experiences of injus-

tice and brutality, and we shared our efforts of survival.”

She stood up and gave me books written by feminists of the early 20th century. She gave me books written by men, who wrote in detail of what it meant to live in oppression, mental oppression inflicted on them by fathers at home, priests in the church, and police magistrates.

This was all well and good, I thought. My publisher was a persuasive woman who cared about the world, but I did not want to write and sell a book based on my life. I thought that was pathetic. I wanted to establish myself as an academic, as a researcher. I wanted to propose a theory, set about gathering data, make a case based on consistent argument, draw conclusions, and move on to the next assignment. That was the career path I had chosen for myself. And I wanted to be judged by the criteria that all fellows at think tanks and universities were judged on, not my background.

I felt lucky that the Wiardi Beckman Foundation of the Labor Party had asked me to look into the question: Why did the integration of large numbers of Muslim immigrants fail? I gathered whatever was written on the subject since 1979. I concluded that most researchers overlooked cultural and religious variables. I looked for and found theorists who took those variables seriously.

I concluded that for the integration of non-Westerners to be a success, first, a shift in mentality must, occur from being a member of a tribe to becoming a citizen. Second, education

directed at this shift of mentality must be put in place. Third, the best place to start is the emancipation of the woman. And last, for all the above to be achieved, the approach of multiculturalism in the Netherlands must be dropped. Cultures are not equal, but human beings are.

For non-Western immigrants to live by the values in the Dutch Constitution, they have to discard those tribal and Islamic values that are in conflict with the rule of law. And just in case people didn't understand, I spelled it out: the acceptance of man-made laws as opposed to defined dogma when the two clash; respect for the liberty of the individual, his life, property, and choice of life; equality before the law; and equal opportunity for men and women, gays and heterosexuals.

So, there was nothing original in my articles compiled in *The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam*, my first book published in 2006. Everything had been said and written before. But all the same, I generated a great amount of interest with my redundant articles and interviews. When I wondered why the works of realistic thinkers, who are consistent, precise, and eloquent, were not as much in demand as mine, the answer seemed always to be that they are men and, worse still, they are middle-aged. And worst of all, they are white. I was told to be careful, those white men tend to be racist, be careful they don't use you as a ventriloquist for their own ideas.

My Muslim friends and family

were not pleased. "You are selling out." "Don't hang the basket on the outside," said a friend of mine. "You are white on the inside with a disgusting black surface," said a prominent Moroccan politician. "Defend the rights of women, but never in connection with Islam," said my father. "You only want to be liked by the white people," said another family member.

The confusion of race and religion went unnoticed. When I pointed it out, I was accused of imitating the white middle-aged males again and again. I left Holland and Europe with the impression that in the 21st

century no misfortune is greater than being male, middle-aged, and white. Very soon you might start a charity in the United States to rescue them.

We, the immigrants, especially those of us who are Muslim, are seen as victims of

racism, Islamophobia, imperialism, and most recently colonial terrorism. "Do as we demand," we Muslims are taught to insist of you, "and let us bring in our most backward beliefs and practices under the banner of multiculturalism, or you Westerners will pay and perish, because your forefathers were slave traders, colonizers, and racists."

My publisher wanted me, with *Infidel*, to bring alive my journey to the West, to try to recall my childhood, to tell a story that could be understood, to put a face to the statistics. One hundred forty million women who have undergone genital mutilation are too many for us to stomach. One woman among them, who can be seen, whom



they can relate to because she is one of them, having undergone that terrible experience, will move us, maybe, to legislation to end that horrible practice.

But then I asked, “What about the U.N. proposal, the immigration policy, the quality works, the numerous NGOs, all out there in Muslim lands trying to help? What about the endless peace process between the Israelis and the Palestinians? What about Kosovo or Bosnia, victims here in Holland, France, the UK, girls who are victims of honor killings, violence against women in the name of Allah? What would one more story add to the numerous stories?”

My friends convinced me that it would be a story with a face, a story of someone they know, someone who made the journey and succeeded in becoming one of us, with no mental or social despair. And thus I was elevated, catapulted from a recent graduate to an icon. But an icon of what?

If you radically agree with Hirsi Ali, you are an extremist. If you radically disagree with Hirsi Ali, you are an extremist, too. If you agree or disagree, depending on what she is advocating at the moment, you are a moderate.

I opened, you will recall, with an account of the evening on Islam and the West and who needs a Voltaire. What if I hadn’t opened my mouth? What if I had just defended the good things about Islam?

In *Infidel*, you may read about my journey from a tribal Islamic life to my 14 years in Holland as a resident and a citizen, my journey for emancipation from hell, from the stifling social control of the family and the clan, my journey toward becoming an individual, and perhaps most interesting of all, my sexual self-emancipation. It is one life story and, as life stories

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go, very subjective. It is not about empirical data but about likes and dislikes, about prejudice, about the frightening adventure of putting aside the moral framework that my parents gave me and adopting that of the “Great Satan,” summarized in the motto: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

That is the background to the writing, or rather the telling, of *Infidel*. It is a different take on things than is common, because nowhere in Europe can an immigrant join in the debate on the most pressing issues of our time without also joining in the cause of victimhood. *Infidel* takes a completely different view, showing that we Muslims have victimized ourselves.

I am a happy individual now. I am happy that I can share in all this wealth, knowledge, and progress. But I am also sad. I am sad that women who have inherited this social order, this civilization called the West, with its values of human rights, curiosity, trust, and integrity, might stand by and watch its decline.

To go back to the conversation with my publisher, she had a point. *Infidel* seems to be more convincing than all the scholarly publications produced by the sweat of my labor. It seems that citizens of liberal democracies are often skeptical of research results but can be moved by a story like mine to a different point of view. Westerners are good at self-reflection. And if you ask me what you must wonder about the most, I will say what happened to the temple of science and reason? Perhaps middle-aged white men, dead or alive, have a point.



Cato Scholar Profile: **DANIEL J. MITCHELL**

Daniel J. Mitchell is a senior fellow with the Cato Institute and a leading expert on tax reform and supply-side tax policy. Prior to joining Cato, Mitchell was a senior fellow at the Heritage Foundation. He holds a Ph.D. in economics from George Mason University.

Why did you decide to leave Heritage for the Cato Institute?

Although I joke with my friends at Heritage that they are a bunch of big-government conservatives, I actually have high regard for the foundation. During my 17 years on the payroll, Heritage enabled me to fight for individual freedom and limited government. Having said that, the Cato Institute has always been my philosophical home. I can't count the number of times people would ask me—sometimes with approval, sometimes with scorn—why I wasn't working at Cato. Now that I'm here, I ask myself why it took so long. The intellectual environment is stimulating, and there is no ambiguity about the mission.

Should taxpayers fear the new Congress?

Taxpayers should fear every Congress. It is the natural instinct of politicians to tax, spend, and regulate. As the experience of the GOP's Class of '94 shows, even well-meaning lawmakers get corrupted by the culture of Washington. The new Democratic majority won't need on-the-job training, however. They arrived in Washington already primed to expand the size and burden of government. The only good news (relatively speaking) is that they will have a hard time increasing spending as fast as the Republicans they replaced.

On the tax side of the ledger, it will be interesting to see whether the Democrats suppress their instinctive desire to raise taxes. They want to get reelected, which suggests that they will seek to avoid the tax-and-spend label. Moreover, they can get a lot more money to spend (at least on paper) if they are patient enough to wait until the Bush tax cuts expire at the end of 2010.

What is the first thing Congress should do for the sake of taxpayers and the nation's

economic prosperity?

Adjourn. But just in case that's not an adequate answer, let's modify the question by assuming Congress will be in session. In that case, I'm not sure that it's possible to identify any one policy that would be most helpful. Would it be more valuable to repeal the death tax or get rid of Sarbanes-Oxley? Would it be better to shut down the Department of Housing and Urban Development or create personal retirement accounts? Get the federal government out of the education business or reduce the third-party-payer crisis that is plaguing health care? Adopt a flat tax or defund the global warming gravy train? Sadly, this Congress is probably going to move in the wrong direction on all those fronts, which underscores the need for principled analysis from groups like the Cato Institute.

What can supporters of limited government learn from tax policies abroad?

Americans have much to learn from other nations, in terms of both what to do and what not to do. Perhaps the most dramatic development is the global flat tax revolution. There are now more than 15 jurisdictions with flat tax regimes. Many of those flat tax systems are far from perfect, but even the "worst" examples provide valuable lessons on the benefits of lower tax rates. And the best systems—found in places such as Hong Kong, Estonia, and Slovakia—illustrate how simple and fair tax regimes lead to robust economic growth. Ireland also is a good role model. It doesn't have a flat tax, but its 12.5 percent corporate income tax is a key reason why the Sick Man of Europe is now the Celtic Tiger. The world also tells us what not to do. The economic weakness of France and Germany provides a painful lesson about the dangers of excessive government.

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