



AYAAN HIRSI ALI IN CONVERSATION WITH PHILIP GOUREVITCH

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PAUL HOLDENGRÄBER: I have a very quick statement to make. As you know, we're doing kind of a marathon today—four different events—so, between the events, we'll have to graciously and I hope delicately and I hope very politely move you out of here unless you're going to stay for another event. Which I hope many of you have tickets for Kurt Andersen with Zadie Smith. So if you could kindly leave the auditorium at about 3:12 when the program comes to an end. I'll be quite firm about when it needs to come to an end. And stay in your seats if indeed you're staying for the next program. It's a great pleasure to be hosting this event now here with PEN, and to introduce the event I would like to bring to the podium the brand-new president—would we be so fortunate to have such a good one—Ron Chernow.

(applause)

RON CHERNOW: Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here. And welcome to the second annual World Voices Festival. As you know this is unfortunately the last day of the Festival. I think that if this were a Broadway show the reviews I think would say things like smash hit, runaway success. We've had the most extraordinary crowds and that's not only pleasant for us but you

have to understand that this festival was driven by our perception that as the U.S. becomes more involved in the world we paradoxically seem to become more insular. It's one of the great shames, I think, one of the great disgraces of American letters that only 3 percent of the books published in the United States each year are literature in translation and I think that this festival is going to do something about it. In fact I think that the audiences that we have been getting, starting with the sold-out audiences on Tuesday evening for Orhan Pamuk at Cooper Union, the sellout crowd at Town Hall for "Faith and Reason" on Wednesday night really kind of give the lie to the notion that the American reading public is provincial and complacent and not interested in literature from around the world.

We have a very, very special guest today. I had the pleasure yesterday of spending some time with Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a woman not only of great charm but really of a fearless intellect and candor. I think that she's somebody who has been willing to raise the uncomfortable questions, I think, when necessary to give the uncomfortable answers, one of those original thinkers who is not afraid of carrying a line of thinking to its logical conclusion and of taking us back when we need to be taken to first principles. I don't know if you'll agree with everything that she says, or some of what she says, or maybe some of you will agree with none of what she says. But I strongly suspect that everyone in this audience will walk away with a tremendous respect for her integrity and candor and intelligence and now I'm going to pass things over to my colleague, board member at PEN, and editor of the *Paris Review*, Philip Gourevitch. Thank you.

(applause)

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: Thank you. We have all too little time today so I think we'll probably get right into it. We'll talk for a while between ourselves and then we'll take questions before we have to check in and make room for the next crew. I met the honorable Member of Parliament last night, so I'm going to take the liberty, if that's all right, of probably calling you Ayaan instead of being altogether formal throughout. When we spoke you had been on a panel about multiculturalism yesterday, I believe, and you wished that there had been more of an opportunity to speak about Islam, you said. You know, you said Islam had been put to the side for part of the discussion, so let's get right into it. When you were about fifteen, seventeen years

old, in Kenya, you were in the streets protesting for the death of this man, in favor of it, I should say, Salman Rushdie (**laughter**) and generally calling for, saying that you would be happy to go and fight, whether in Iraq or elsewhere, against the great American Satan. You found your way to Europe eventually in the early Nineties, but remained as I understand it Muslim by identity and by faith and to some degree practicing until really very recently, that is to say, the last four years or so, that you fully renounced religiosity or faith and essentially embraced instead Western Enlightenment. Do you still consider yourself a Muslim?

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: I don't consider myself a Muslim in the sense that I believe in God, that I believe in hell and heaven, and the angels and the books and for Muhammad as the messenger, the last prophet, I don't believe in prophets anymore. But I am a part of that identity, I guess, I grew up in Islam, I was raised in Islam, and four years ago, after 9/11, there was this huge appeal unto Muslims, like please speak up and say this is—the terrorism or the terrorist acts in New York—this is not done in the name of my faith. And that's when the little compartment that I had at the back of my brain for like ten years when I'd been trying to shut off the dissonance of being a Muslim on the one hand, and simply not behaving in any way like a Muslim flew open and I had to find out: "Do I believe in a God? Does God say this? Is there a God who wants this, and is that my God?" And that's when my own individual conscious thinking started, that's when I consciously withdrew from religion in general and Islam in particular.

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: Do you consider yourself at this point, would you call yourself an atheist or an unbeliever?

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: I think I'll call myself a Muslim atheist. (**laughter**) The way in Holland we have Catholic atheists and Jewish atheists. I think if you want to bring this thing up. You talk about logic. I have become one who says there is no God in this. No, let's say it differently. God did not create mankind, but mankind created God.

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: I asked these things because you have not just, in a sense, renounced religious belief, but have become very much a critic of Islam in a very broad way. When you went through this thought process six months or so after September 11, were you at all a public

figure at that point? I mean, you say that Islamic leaders were called upon to sort of speak out. But in a sense it's really in this very short period of time that you've accomplished this—

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: I was not a public figure. I had actually just graduated in the year 2000 from university and I had my first serious job. I was there for a week when the Twin Towers were hit, and it's then that slowly I started to voice among the people closest to me. I was working in a research bureau of a political party. There was a guy named Pim Fortuyn who said Islam is backward. Everybody in Holland thought that he had kind of lost it, he had become a racist, he was compared to Hitler and Mussolini and so on. I just went through one of the interviews he did on Islam and what he's saying is not an opinion, it's a fact, measured by a certain number of broad standards like the treatment of the individual, or the position of women, human rights in general, in that sense, yes, Islamic civilization is backward. But then I attached to that conclusion, to that saying it *is* backward, not it's going to remain backward forever, but it can move on, and we can learn from the West and go through that whole process of Enlightenment in a much shorter time than the Westerners have done and only if we just open up for that process. And I keep on saying “we” meaning the people who share a past in which Islam was central to them.

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: You mean there could be more Muslims who become Muslim atheists.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: They don't necessarily have to become atheists but I think that also because of the context that we live in, there was this Arab journalist who said, “Not all Muslims are terrorists, but almost all terrorists today are Muslims,” so it's really urgent to reform Islam, it's urgent to look at ourselves, to scrutinize ourselves. And because I was saying these things, and because I had written some of the articles which have been compiled into a book now, I became a public figure.

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: When you—you're quite tough on Islam. You speak of it, as you say, as being backward, in many ways far behind the West. There's a quote from one of your essays “the three main shortcomings are insufficient individual freedom, inadequate knowledge,

and a lack of women's rights." You write that daily Islamic life is "a dismal state of affairs" in which "mistrust is everywhere and lies rule." And you say, "Muslims don't realize that in fact pursuit of a life based on their own holy book is the most significant source of their unhappiness." Do you see anything in Islam that is worthy of defending and protecting and preserving?

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: Oh yes, I see the whole idea of how well you treat your neighbors and hospitality and it's a thousands, hundreds of years old civilization so there's a lot to defend, there's a lot to preserve, and art and architecture and for those who have been lucky enough in that context to make anything close to music and so on, and also the memory of it all is and should be preserved. But I think that's not the issue. I think if Islam were just made up of beautiful things that we should be preserving and if Muslims realized that, we wouldn't be having this debate.

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: When you say that Islam, or the Muslim world, can learn a great deal from the West, from its Enlightenment, and essentially from Western Enlightenment, ideas that have been liberating or emancipating and sort of fast-track that. The argument sometimes is made, but, well, the Enlightenment is a Western idea. It's not an idea that came from outside the West and contradicted the West, it was a Western idea that argued with the West and that it's difficult to simply fast-track a foreign idea and make it non-foreign for the Islamic world. How do you respond to that?

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: I respond to that by saying first, it's futile to compete with a sense—with the West in the sense that you're going to invent an authentic Islamic Enlightenment. They have been there before and there's no way you will find something like that. I get into all these kind of stupid arguments about Western human rights and "we don't want Western human rights, we want Islamic human rights." The fact that these ideas have been—of Enlightenment—have been developed in the West does not mean that they should be limited to the West. They could be universal, and you'll see that other civilizations that have borrowed this, the idea of protecting the life of the individual. The whole human rights as a yardstick—that they prosper, they progress, and that they don't necessarily have to throw away their own cultures. The second way

I respond to it is by saying, “Listen, we are, as Muslims, or people who grew up with this civilization of superiority. We take so much material stuff from the West—we drive cars, we fly airplanes, we buy the latest gadgets, we dress—not all of us, but many of us do all these—I don’t see why we cannot borrow the values that underlie that material growth and wealth.”

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: And when you write about this, you often—there are really two targets in your book, of your criticism. The first is what you describe as the backward aspects of Islam, or the culture that you came from, particularly the repression and the abuse of women, and stifling of women, but the ways that that in fact creates a cycle of an inhibited society and it doesn’t do the men much good either, and this notion of superiority that actually ends up working as a strong inferiority complex a lot of the time. But, alongside this, as you start to say, well, here is the West offering us a very much better model, you get quite indignant at the West for what you clearly see as its softness on its own ideas, the West not seeing itself as an evangelist for the Enlightenment but using what you call “the gospel of multiculturalism” to excuse other cultures that are non-Western in their values.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: The West is not a monolith like Islam; you have many different groups, and many different people and many different individuals. But what I’d like to point out, of course many people have called it different names, but it’s the liberal betrayal. The liberals, those who were critical of Christianity and Judaism and all kinds of obscurantism now stand up and defend Islam because Muslims in the West are a minority, they are perceived to be vulnerable, and they attach a lot of meaning to their religion, and so the liberal response has been to say, “OK, if that’s how they go about it, if that’s so valuable for them to hold onto these beliefs, and they don’t want us to touch on it, then we shall not,” thereby preserving this culture of backwardness. That, yes, annoys me, it makes me very, very angry. I can only describe it as betrayal, because, in your compassion, in your way of saying, “Welcome, we love you to be here,” you forgo that by indulging this escapism, this self-denial, this shutting yourself off from reality, that you’re actually freezing this culture in place, and thereby, without intending to, helping those in Islamic countries, those tyrants, that use Islam as an instrument to oppress their populations.

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: But I mean, part of the idea of Enlightenment, freedom, is that you're not free if you don't come to it freely.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: Absolutely.

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: So how are enlightened advocates of emancipation supposed to go about aggressively proselytizing in favor of the emancipation of others who do not seek that emancipation actively? As you've said, these voices aren't going to come from the Arab world, they must come from the West. Why does that fall to Western voices and how is that supposed to work?

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: It's not so much proselytizing as creating the conditions for a dignified discussion to take place. There are many individuals right now in the West with an Islamic background who propagate—one of them is sitting right here. Forgive me for wanting to burn your book. **(laughter)**

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: It wasn't just the book.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: I was very young... **(laughter)**

SALMAN RUSHDIE: I forgive you.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: When Salman wrote that book, there was a huge amount of commotion, and it was good, because at a later age, when I started to grow up and to think, and I myself was confronted with the Enlightenment, I could say, "Oh, yeah, so what I thought then was wrong." And that goes for many other, many other Muslim individuals living in the West and living outside the West. The only difference is if you are in the West, then you have, at least you think that freedom of speech is protected, so you can freely think and experiment and develop ideas and theories, theories which may be wrong, which may be right, but, you know, you may develop. If you are in the Middle East, if you're in Islamic countries, you can't. Well, you can, but there are many odds against you. And so it's not a question of proselytizing. It's more like,

please create the conditions, translate Popper and Hayek and Kant and all the other thinkers into Arabic. And by the way, what's wrong with proselytizing the Enlightenment? When I was living in Africa, we had Catholic missionaries coming and telling us all about their God. We had Jehovah's Witnesses spreading the truth, and we had Muslims coming from Iran and from Saudi Arabia spreading their form of truth. There was only one idea absent, and that was the Enlightenment, and I don't understand why liberals are ashamed of sharing these values with others who are not in circumstances to get it themselves.

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: So Yeats was right, "the best lack all conviction"?

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: Please?

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: The best lack all conviction?

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: Exactly. Also, I think it's natural. If you are a true believer of the Enlightenment, you are naturally lazier, then when you believe in a God, and you believe in a hereafter, you will be rewarded for all these. As a liberal, you'd rather enjoy your own life here on earth because, you know, this is all you have, then going about spreading the Enlightenment...we are lazier, by nature. **(laughter/applause)**

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: You say this, and some of this might come as news to Americans who feel to some extent that there's been no particular shyness on the past five years, on the part of the United States, for instance, about trying to assert what it thinks is a better idea, trying to change governments and so forth. Yet you say, "What can Westerners do? Leaders such as Bush and Blair must stop saying that Islam is being held hostage by a terrorist minority. They are wrong. Islam is being held hostage by itself." How is that a message that a Western political leader can say in a way that is productive rather than merely provocative? Is there any way that that is ever going to—Obviously, you can say it and it will appeal to people who are here, there, and elsewhere, and they're saying, "Oh, yeah, that's true, that's how it is for us, maybe." But it will also set off a lot of people and you're saying we shouldn't be afraid of setting people off if what we're saying is the truth, but what's the use?

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: The use is because you think, you hope, you appeal to reason and you think that might dissuade people from resorting to violence. But when Blair and Bush after every terrorist attack inspired by Islam come surrounded by Muslim figures and saying it has nothing to do with Islam. And at the same time make an appeal to those Muslim individuals that they think are moderate or liberal (**tape inaudible**) all think otherwise. That's contradictory, because by saying it has nothing to do with Islam—like we are doing in the EU, we are developing a lexicon now where we are supposed to talk about terrorism without mentioning Islam, Jihad, or fundamentalism—if you do that, then in your own government, you will not realize that the people you are calling upon to take, to start this debate, will need protection. Like I have protection. I am not very brave, I can just go and say what I say because there are people protecting me. There are many others whom I know of and whom I'm very close with who would like to do the same and start a movement that is reformist in nature, not atheists, but that are seen as apostates, and the fundamentalists have the money, and they have the resources, and they have the conviction, and they want to kill them. The Bushes and the Blairs and all of these other Western leaders get themselves talked into denying that there is no relationship between Islam and terrorism, by tyrants in the Arab Islamic world who use religion, who use Islam, who use the Prophet Muhammad, as an instrument to stick to power. There are all these (**inaudible**) going on, and I'm happy to be in a free country to tell all both these gentlemen, “Stop saying that now.”

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: But do you think we would be in a sort of better situation, a more truthful situation and therefore a more promising situation, if instead Blair had said we are actually at the vortex of a cultural clash, of a religious confrontation, or a confrontation with a religion of 1.3 billion people?

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: Or if they don't say anything. They don't have to say anything about Islam, let them speak to the politics of it.

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: And stop making excuses.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: Yes.

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: But you're not saying that there should be a more explicit declaration of the identification of what you see as the enemy.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: Ideally, that would be the case. But we don't live in an ideal world. Both men will have to go to the UN Security Council, and Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, and persuade him that the twelfth Imam is not coming and that he doesn't have to wipe Israel off the world map. I think it's difficult to for these leaders to sit and look eye-to-eye with Islamic leaders and say, "You know, there may be some connection between Islam and terrorism," and have a fruitful conversation and dissuade them not to touch—they need these allies for all the wars and so forth. My ideal would be—we are not living in an ideal world—they will not say that this is going on. In fact, in July 2005, after the London bombings, Blair came out and said "This is a war of ideology. It is a battle of ideology." He just refrained from saying what the ideologies were. But it's okay. I mean, as long as he does not say it has nothing to do with Islam, and as long as we are not—intellectuals are not forced to self-censor, individuals with an Islamic background who are criticizing Islam, who are engaged in reforming Islam, are not forced—are not told to keep quiet about it, and that's what's happening now.

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: There's been since, certainly since September 11, one could argue that well before that, that September 11 wasn't really so much the starting point as it's often described as. But it certainly has been the starting point of an openly named and explicit war on terror and from the very start there was an awareness amongst many people that accompanying the whatever military action, whatever violence there would be there was also a sort of worldwide struggle for public opinion, and that that needed to be well engaged very directly. It's the same thing that you're talking about—the appeal to Muslim leaders to denounce terrorism, the appeal of trying to put forward alternative ideas. Arguably the West is doing a very very bad job of that. That as you point out, fundamentalism finds more adherents, and Western ideas find less and less traction in the Islamic world. How do you account for that? And doesn't that, that seems to be something that would make your idea that there should be more outreach—it's frustrating.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: Yeah, it is frustrating, and I'm not saying it's perfect, I'm not saying it's not difficult. I mean, after the decolonization process, Britain, France, and the other countries had left interim governments in place, thinking that they would just adopt the system of government left behind by the colonizers. And what's amazing is that many states failed—especially in Africa—many Asian states succeeded. Most or probably all Islamic states failed. Some of them took on to secular Western notions such as communism. Others got into these monarchies that they called democracy. But after the Westerners left the Islamic elite insisted that there was going to an Arab or Islamic or something authentic which had nothing to do with the West because we were better, we were more superior and everything. We didn't need their way. There was this turning back to this whole original ethnic stuff, and for many years, we tried that, and it doesn't work. It doesn't work. All these countries are overpopulated, they are very young populations. The UN Arab Human Development Report last published in 2002 tells us of the lack of knowledge, the illiteracy, the high rate of birth, the poverty, there's going to be a water disaster coming. So it's high time to just say, we've tried, we've experimented with some authentic form of Islam or Arab culture, but it doesn't work.

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: When you mentioned earlier the need to translate texts into Arabic; what about your own work? Who is your audience? Reading your essays and knowing that they are published in Europe and then being published here, some in translation, it feels as if you're addressing yourself at least as much to a Western reader as to an Islamic or Arab reader. I wonder if they are translated in Arabic, if there are websites where this gets out, if you feel—I know that sometimes you've had a very hostile response from even the Dutch Islamic community. Do you feel that your words have been effective in the way that you wish them to be?

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: I've been effective in the wish to create awareness for the position of Muslim women living in the West, starting with the Netherlands. Now no one denies any longer that honor killings and female circumcision and confining of women to their homes and that kind of thing takes place in the heart of Europe. No one denies it anymore. That's acknowledged, and I consider that a success. Different governments are trying to deal with a way of changing that.

On the one hand through education on the other hand through repressive means or by offering the women runaway shelters and help. In the past when a woman would come to a police station and ask for help she would be told, “What’s wrong?” and she’d say “I’m afraid of my family,” and the policemen would say, “Oh, we have so many people working with the families,” and she’d be sent away or her complaint would be noted and nothing would happen. So that kind of awareness has worked out.

There is a lot of resistance to anything that criticizes Islam in any way, and that resistance is going on. The third element is yes, all that audience are leaders, that you can persuade people who’ve been socialized with the idea that God will solve all our problems. Or we have to sacrifice our lives to God. That maybe then you can find some kind of balance between faith and reason and say, and, also, some kind of balance the life here and a life in the hereafter. If you want to invest in a life hereafter then at least you have to pay for it, because the unemployment rate for example in Europe now for Muslims is sometimes as high as 20 percent, 25 percent. There is a lot of discrimination, I’m not denying that. But there’s also a lot of refusing jobs, because people say, well, where alcohol is sold I will not work. Where I’ll see women in short clothes I’ll not work. That kind of thing also is there. A debate on that has been generated by the articles and that’s what I wanted. But I haven’t achieved the real thing that I would like to achieve, and that is a real debate on whether the Prophet Muhammad can be a moral guide in the twenty-first century.

(applause)

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: How would that come about? How would that debate come about? Who do you want to debate it with?

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: With fellow, oh I can’t say Muslims now. With fellow Muslims, with people who say that they want to see the Prophet as a moral guide today. And that would mean talking about the Prophet Muhammad as we talk about all other thinkers. And we will honor him, I mean, I’m not going to call him names anymore, but I’ll be just willing to say, “Listen, if you want to follow, if you want to say, ‘I’m going to see him as an example, wage war because he

said wage war, or women should stay in their homes because that's what the Prophet said. Avoid contact with nonbelievers, because that's what the Prophet wanted, too.'" I think these are very relevant, very crucial, very urgent questions that you can have with those Muslim individuals who've had the privilege to have an education and with those who haven't...it will come.

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: Those who haven't are an interesting group category of all because they're the larger portion of the population. Also, reading some of your criticisms of what you describe as Islamic abuses of women. The nature of Islamic marriage—at one point, you say, you know, one of the most common complaints among Muslim women in the Netherlands is that their husbands don't talk to them and I thought, "Where would Hollywood romantic comedies be if American husbands talked to their wives?"

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: (laughs)

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: I'm serious, this is a pretty universal complaint amongst, not all married people, but a large group of sort of ordinary people anywhere. It seems to me that a lot of what you're against is provincialism, rather than Islam, and that that provincialism sounds very familiar when you look at—you say somewhere, in the West, people don't think that homosexuality is something to be punished by death. Well, there's a church in this country that actually attends the funerals—sends its members to attend the funerals—of American soldiers killed in Iraq, saying that the roadside bombs are the device of god punishing America for homosexuality, taunting the families of dead soldiers with this. So it is a kind of provincialism or so that is not *limited* to Islam, and I wonder if limiting it to Islam as strictly as you do, because it's your own world, doesn't in some way hurt your argument when you confront a group of people whom you say are backwards, by essentially seeming like you're—that the complaint is that you are humiliating them in advance. Do you see what my question is?

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: Yes, I get your question. I think that provincialism, as you call it, especially provincialism that rests upon these orthodox religious beliefs, is universal, certainly. It's not only Christianity and Judaism and Buddhism and so on, but it's even with secular—I

mean I am confronted every day with a secular kind of provincialism as well. Provincialism is universal.

But, let me define Islam, and let me tell you a little bit about how I conceive Islam to be. Islam is defined as “submission to the will of God.” The will of God, the will of Allah, is in the Qur’an, the holy book, and this holy book is made up of a number of verses that are all about kindness and goodness and really very good things, and a number of rules. Rules and regulations, that which is permitted and that which is prohibited. And that is supplemented by a series of writings supposedly saying “this is how the Prophet behaved,” and that’s called the Hadith. This body of thought was founded in Mecca in the seventh century in an Arab desert culture, in a tribal culture, and by saying this, I’m trying to answer your question.

That Arab desert tribal provincialism has been spread for many centuries, and has been spread in the name of religion, in the name of Islam, so it does not surprise me in the least when the people you are talking about who are standing with these placards saying that the United States is being punished because of homosexuality, that in exactly the same tones this is how Islam functions, and—that’s Christian provincialism and that there is also Islam provincialism—with this difference: that when you look at the United States there’s no way I can say that that is mainstream. That provincialism is not mainstream, and it has its degrees. If you look at the twenty-two Arab Islamic countries studied by the United Nations in the Arab Human Development Report, you will see that that provincialism prevails, and it prevails in the name of Islam, and anyone who criticizes it, and anyone who points it out, and it has been pointed out. There are several groups—the Ahmadiyyas, who tried to make, to reform Islam, into something that’s not provincial or that’s not backward or that tries to relate to modernity. There are the Bahá’is, there are the Ismailis from India. But all these three groups, and others, the Sufis, et al., they are all seen to be apostates, by the ruling elites both in Saudi Arabia and in Iran and the majority of Muslims—they are seen to be apostates because they try and point out the Qur’an or the Prophet Muhammad and these teachings are relative.

And that’s why I keep on pointing, let’s go back to the sources, because every child that is born into Islam is socialized into these rules, what is prohibited and what is permitted, into what’s in

the Qur'an and what did the Prophet say, and that kind of thing. So, I would say, let's start there. It's not that I'm obsessed with it, I'm not only relating it to Islam, but by starting there, I think we could reform, and increase the number of people who are willing to see the Qur'an as something written by human beings that can be changed and decrease the number of people who are fundamentalist by nature, if such a thing exists.

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: When you come up against this problem of faith of this kind, my sense is that in the Islamic world, one of the puzzles is—or questions is—why has there been such an increase not just in fundamentalism but in a certain kind of politicized radical violent Islam in the last, let's say, half century. That the idea of a cosmopolitan elite in Beirut, in Baghdad, in, even in probably certain academic atmospheres in Saudi Arabia, certain in Egypt, throughout the Arab world, certainly if one goes outside the Arab world and talks about the Islamic world, in Iran, in many, many places, has the space for that has been shrunk, and often without there being an Islamic government. In Syria, in Iraq, you cannot blame an Islamic government, you can actually say that it's the repression, or under the Shah, that Islamism is actually a response against some other form of dictatorship and so it seems that it's actually a good deal more complicated than this monolith of children simply being raised in this, if you're raised in this, that if you're raised in these texts, you're inherently going to have this narrow, submissive, and beaten-down view. There was a time that you could be raised reading the Qur'an and having a religious experience as a Muslim and being quite a cosmopolitan type. What's going on?

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: I think you're right. It's not that everyone is raised in that way. But Islamism is an elite movement. I think we all make a mistake of thinking that it's poor people who are Islamists. It's spread to poor people, but it is essentially an elite movement. Those engaged in (**inaudible**) and so on were cosmopolitans. They were people who took note of Western thought, of Western way of life, and who rejected that consciously. Intelligent people who thought they have an alternative idea, and that was going back to "What has Islam got to offer us?" and "Islam has got the answers," and then building on that an ideology that we've now learned to call Islamism. Which is, if you've been raised with the doctrine that what's in the Qur'an is perfectly true and it is the word of God and the Prophet Muhammad is the moral guide,

the only true moral guide, then when an Islamist comes and appeals to your reason and he tells you, “Well in that case, this is how you should behave, this is what is permitted, this is who you should engage with, this is when you should wage war,” then it’s all very consistent. The trouble with Enlightenment thinkers or the Enlightenment thought, secular thought is it’s never perfect, so there is always the totalitarian enticement in Islamism. It’s not only a reaction to secular thought or modern thought, and to Western thoughts that have been developed in the West. But it’s also a genuine attempt at getting at good, at doing things right, it just happens to be wrong. Yeah.

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: That also gets to the question, I mean, the notion that it’s serious people who made a conscious decision, that this was an appealing idea, even the killer of Theo Van Gogh was somebody who had been living in Holland, and who drank, who had girlfriends, who was, had friends, who played sports, who lived in a sort of You mentioned earlier it’s hard for liberals to proselytize or to get all that motivated since all they’ve got is the here and now rather than the sweet by-and-by. And here’s somebody who then made a conscious decision—“I repudiate all of that.” He obviously had a strong attraction to decapitation videos. But he also was himself at the same time quite, “I’m not insane. I know why I did this. I would do it again. It’s a clear decision. I repudiate *that* world.” How do you counter that, the notion that in fact there’s a hollowness in the West and in the Western, what the West has on offer, and that Westerners in the—post-Enlightenment Westerners have come up with all sorts of existentialism for their own amusement, but that some people will look at that and say “Actually, I don’t find that attractive. I find the consolations of a much more rigid orthodoxy attractive.” Is there room for that without that tending towards violence?

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: If Mohammad B, Bouyeri, were to say, “Okay, I repudiate all that but I’m not going to use violence,” he can live in the West perfectly well, it’s just that the moment that he takes his belief to the extent of saying “I reject all Western thought and the Western law and the Western judges,” in the country that he lives in, that he then ends up in prison. And that’s one way of showing all the potential Mohammad Bouyeris that if you really take your religion this serious you will first of all end up in jail. Next, I think that if—in the—because Mohammad Bouyeri was not born with this stance, it’s something that he learned, and in the socialization

process in Western countries I think it would do well to develop not only the faith side of individual Muslims, but also their reason, so that they realize that aspirations toward perfection and running away from hollowness does not always give the answers. Hitler tried it. Stalin tried it. We have so many examples in history of people who aspired towards these perfect kind of societies, who led those who followed them into destruction, and I think that it's not—it shouldn't be too difficult to persuade individual human beings, be they Muslim or not, that such a thing as a perfect society does not exist, and aspiring to it is very, very dangerous.

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: I gather you've been called at times an "Enlightenment fundamentalist" by critics and that you regard that as a sort of badge of honor, like "What's so bad about that?" But in some way though I think, when I hear the phrase that what it is seems is you're really saying, "Well, there is a problem with decadence or hollowness in the West and that is that there is a failure to stand up for these ideas of the Enlightenment, to embrace them as actually being—not to take them for granted, but to understand that the struggle continues." Is that in a sense accurate?

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: My criticism on the West, especially on liberals, is that yes, they do take freedom for granted, probably also because people who are born after the Second World War in Western Europe haven't seen war, they haven't seem conflict, they've been really born in the middle of freedom, and the conviction of their parents to live with the hollowness that freedom brings. Freedom does not bring happiness always. Freedom brings with it a lot of doubt and a lot of depression and you know and then people come from areas that that freedom wasn't always there, or from within, when a threat comes of these freedoms, and they just have lost the instincts to recognize that there can be such a thing as an enemy, or there can be a threat to freedom, and that's what I'm witnessing in Europe. The European elite simply doesn't know how to go about it. They don't know what—they just don't know what's going on. And the whole pacifist—in itself religious-like—pacifist ideology that's been spread, that violence should never be used under no circumstances and so we should talk and talk and talk. Even when your opponent tells you, "I don't want to talk to you. I want to destroy you." The European elite is like, "Please let's talk. Let's talk about the fact that you want to destroy me."

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: Well, isn't that what—where was I told that Theo Van Gogh's last words were "Can we talk about this?" as the man was, had shot him and was starting to stab him.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: I think that's no laughing matter in fact and it shows that people have, and humans are capable of reaching such a high level of civilization and such a high level of morality. It's admirable. But when there is an enemy who says "I'm going to destroy you," whether you're admirable or not, you have to make sure that you don't get destroyed.

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: Well, you're saying it's not necessarily a level of only civilization but a level of unreality.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: To some it's been a level of unreality. That idea that after the Second World War we are not going to have another war ever. Which is a good thing. It's a good point to start with. But that works only if the entire human race thinks and believes that.

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: Since that's not about to happen. . . . When you see, in your criticisms of, for instance, the multiculturalism when one looks to France and the debate about the veil. I assume you would be on the side of those who say the veil should not be part of French—they shouldn't make room for it in the schools. They should assimilate.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: Yeah, it's just in the schools. The idea of a neutral school where children who have not formed—it's a liberal idea, an Enlightenment idea—children who have not made up their minds about who they are and whatever they want to be, should first get a chance to be educated in *all* the variety of thoughts and ideas that are possible, enough that when they're eighteen, whether they want to veil themselves or not, that's fine—whatever religion that they want to take. I believe that in school, you shouldn't give them religious lessons, and if parents want their children to be religious they have the opportunity to teach them their religion in the evenings and in the weekend. School is not a place where you go to learn about God. You can do that at other places.

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: When you talk about the cosmopolitanism of some of the early as you say Islamic fundamentalists, Islamism is an elite movement or comes from elites, that suggests, though, that there's still a huge challenge for anyone trying to promote, as you're suggesting, a liberal Enlightenment model of civic citizenship, nonreligious, based in law, and equality before law simply on its own merits. You're saying, "Here it was. It existed. The merits were there and this was a reaction that came against it." What's missing, where's the missing piece, how does one spark this debate, if that's really the program?

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: The conviction of the liberals is missing. Just the passiveness with which people say, "Let them get ahead, let them go on, and let them believe in that." So you have all these masses and masses of ignorant people who are getting a one-dimensional message repeated all the time. Not just the Islamists. Again, like I said, in the third world, the Catholic missionaries are there, the Jehovah's Witnesses are there. All these religious groups are there. There are also the communists and what have you. All kinds of movements believing and promising paradise. And the other side isn't there. In that same report that I was talking about. . . .

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: But universities—there are universities that train people in law and international law and teach them Western literature and European philosophy.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: And halfway of that European philosophy, some appealing easy idea comes along and many people subscribe to that, and whether they are actually Muslims or not. Let me tell you about just one example. In that Arab Human Development Report one thing that worried me was that the number of books translated from foreign languages into Arabic from the ninth century up to today were equal to the number of books translated into Spanish every year. That alone, that fact alone shows how tyrannical governments use Islam to keep their populations ignorant. Ignorant populations you *can* tyrannize easily. And when they grow and become too many and when there is so much hunger, there is going to be some kind of revolution. People will stand up and come for your head. But, again, as long as they remain ignorant, the ruling elite will only be replaced by another tyranny and so on and so forth. If you allow—and I wish that Bush and Blair instead of saying "We are going to spread democracy in the Middle East," if they would just say "We will take it one by one, step by step and fight for

freedom of expression and other freedoms, like the freedom of movement for women,” then at least these people could first read about freedom, watch movies, laugh at themselves, and then grow towards making elections or taking part in elections. Because when you are ignorant, when you know very little about the candidates and the programs that they have, what is election worth?

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: I’m going to open it up to questions after asking just one more myself. Which is, you mentioned, laughing at yourself. You’re a big advocate. You’ve written that what the Islamic world needs is its own *Life of Brian* (**laughter**) and I wonder what you think about the subversive power of humor and its absence or presence in the Islamic world. Is there a tradition for that, how does one get into that? You know, your film, *Submission*, which shows religious texts projected on the naked bodies of veiled women and then also has testimonies from abused women, it’s definitely subversive, but it’s hardly funny, and, or one wouldn’t want to meet anybody who thought it was. And so I guess, where is that, and why is that, and are you going to make *The Life of Abdul* for us?

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: I wish I could make it. I’m not a filmmaker, I’m not a scriptwriter. But there are comedians, there are many many people—Muslims—who have a wonderful sense of humor, who can write and laugh, write funny stories about the Prophet, about God, about the way we engage in religion. For example, the whole idea of praying five times a day. I really don’t think that there are people who really get to pray all five times a day. And there are all these jokes among Muslims on how to evade that and how to kind of pray at one time five times instead of five times spread out, that kind of thing, so there is a lot of sense of humor. It’s just that it’s not allowed. It’s suppressed, you can’t exchange it, you can’t spread it. But with today’s technology, with the Internet, with the satellite dishes, that process of emancipating people through images and through mass media, is starting, just as much as mass media is also used to indoctrinate people into Islamism.

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: I’m going to open it up to questions. There are microphones, I believe, being carried around. There is a gentleman here with a microphone, certainly, and a gentleman over there with a microphone, and I will call on you, as many of you as we have time

for, but I also will ask very much that you help out here by asking a question. No speeches, no sustained comments, a question for Ayaan.

Q: Number one, you are very brave and I really appreciate your courage. We hear about Islam being tolerant, but one of the key doctrines of Islam is the doctrine of abrogation or cancellation, Surah 2-106, which cancels out every tolerant statement made before Muhammad got to Medina. In light of that, how can any rational person say that Islam is a tolerant philosophy?

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: A rational person can say that, because if you've been socialized to do that, to believe that, then you will say it. But I think a rational person will have some kind of dissonance in his mind when you read that on the one hand and on the other hand say Islam is tolerant, or Islam means tolerance, but there is also the concept of hell and, unfortunately, rational people are not immune to the fear of hell. As you may know, you probably have read the Qur'an, otherwise you wouldn't have quoted it so eloquently. The Qur'an is full of hell. The Hadith is full of hell. When you go to the mosque. You know the Islamic hell isn't like the Christian hell, it's ever-present, it's always there. And just imagine if you get a car accident and you die now, you will *really* burn, and I think even rational people fear that. And I think first and foremost, the first emancipation activity for individual Muslims is to get rid of the fear of hell. Like many Christians in Europe say there is no hell, there is only heaven. When that fear of hell falls away, then you can proceed into—with rational human beings—having discussions on “OK, so what part of the Qur'an should we follow and what part should we not follow or should we follow the Qur'an at all?”

Q: I just wanted to query a little bit your argument that this has its roots in ignorance or lack of education. Two points, one is that if you take a country like India, where people are very poorly educated in many ways, or the mass of people, it's a country which is nevertheless wedded to the idea of democracy at the mass level, not just at the elite level. So it seems as if *there*, a lack of education doesn't necessarily create the preconditions for antidemocratic ideas. And also, as you yourself said, the leaders of the Islamist movement are highly educated. Lenin described terrorism as bourgeois adventurism and you can see, in the people who were on the planes in New York, even in the July 7 bombers in London, they were not uneducated people. So I just

wanted you to explore that because it seems that it may not be automatic that a lack of religion leads to this kind of prejudice—sorry, a lack of education.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: I concede to that. Even when there are uneducated masses. I mean, I come from Africa, and I have seen many people who cannot read or write and who are in the least not violent and who find the idea of democracy appealing. You see thousands and thousands and thousands of people line up in the sun in Kenya, in Zambia, in Zaire, wherever democracy is introduced, just to cast their ballot. So, lack of education is not equal to terrorism, absolutely, that is not what I am saying in the least. But like I said in answer to one of the questions, if you are educated with the idea of “life on earth is temporary, it’s just a transition,” democracy is all about investing in your, in life here on earth. Getting property, building it, decorating it, all that kind of thing is an investment in life on earth, and one of the things, one of the characteristics, not unique to Islam, but very strong in Islam, is that it takes away the urge of the human being, the human individual, to invest here, in life on earth and when so many terrible things are happening in the world, which used to happen in the past, but because of technology, which seems much bigger and greater the tendency to invest in life on earth becomes less and more and more people get persuaded to the hereafter, and you know, building a hereafter, and I think it also has to do a lot with that fear of hell which we just mentioned here.

Q: Just questioning about literalism, whether it’s Christian literalism or Islamic literalism, that there seems to be a underlying sense of fear and insecurity that allows the person to give over to that literalism rather than take the responsibility of individual thought. And I thought maybe, especially in terms of how women are suppressed, you might want to elaborate on that a little bit.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: Literalism—again, that’s universal. All religions have that. But I think tribal and group cultures make it difficult for an individual to make a choice without far-reaching consequences. If you yourself come to the conclusion as a Muslim individual, well, I’m not going to, I’m going ignore this literalism. And many do. Even within Saudi Arabia, the country that lives in the middle of Sharia, still individuals there make choices that are not taking the Qur’an literally or the Hadith literally or anything, very attracted to the West. But it all happens secretly. There is a lot of hypocrisy. It’s never internalized that what you are doing is right in

itself. And that's another aspect of Islam. It's not that I'm now Islam-bashing, but it encourages hypocrisy. Always trying to, always this dissonance in your head. This is the rule. You know this is the rule. But your mind, your drives, you know, everything, your environment, drives you in a different direction. And that is explained away by the imams as "It's the Satan doing that," so besides the idea of hell there's also the idea of Satan playing with your mind, and if you get to a level of accepting that this is really what makes you happy—a glass of wine, or having a relationship without having to marry or anything like that—you then get into this dissonance that you have allowed yourself to be persuaded by Satan to do these things. And the Islamist rules, and what the Islamists are trying to revive, is the very detailed rules of life. It really goes, it gets very absurd. When you enter a toilet, enter with the left foot first. When you are coming out, right foot first. When you sit down, you say, it depends on, you have to sit in a certain way. When you go to bed, you first have to lie on your right side. Before doing anything you say "in the name of God." Who to engage with and how to engage with whom. It goes very very far, so it creates a neutral, sorry, a neurotic individual.

Q: Hello. First I want to say that . . . that I'm happy that you have the courage, or I congratulate you for having the courage to exercise your strength, and a couple questions. Do you consider yourself a rebel?

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: Yes.

Q: Okay, my sister-in-law wanted me to ask that. My question is, if you had children in today's time, where would you have them educated? And I have a gift for you.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: Thank you so much. Thank you very much. Where would I have my children educated? I think it's not so much *where* as *how* I would have them educated. I certainly would not educate them in the same way that my parents educated me. I would educate them in the Enlightenment, in individualism, in tolerance, in moderation, in pluralism, and respecting others, but also in learning that these things don't come free of charge or cheap, that they have to fight for it, if ever a moment comes that it is needed for them to fight, and to recognize it. So maybe I'll just bring them up as rebels.

Q: At the end of such gatherings where you spend an hour talking about Islam, do you ever have any qualms about not mentioning oil?

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: We mentioned it in the green room. It's not a taboo. We just didn't get there.

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: Oil. To the Muslim world, oil has probably—Salman just mentioned how India and other places have learned to commit, even when there is ignorance, to the idea of democracy. I think oil in the hands of tyrants has been a curse to the Muslim world and still is. The money gained from oil is not shared with the larger public. It's used to oppress them. And the best thing that the West can do for Islamic countries, and for the environment, is to look for alternative means of energy. That way, the creativity that Asian countries, like the Asian tigers, have, that have no resources at all, but who have learned to survive, may start in the Middle East and in the countries that are oil-rich. Nigeria, whether it is—I mean, part of Nigeria is Muslim and part of it isn't—but when this kind of wealth comes, and it's concentrated in the hands of a few powerful people who are ruthless, then it only ends up being a curse.

Oil is not a taboo for me. Oil is—unfortunately it has not been good fortune—may I please give an example of Saudi Arabia? Saudi Arabia discovers that they are rich from one day to the next. A population of twenty-two million people. And they set up schools. And 80 percent of the curriculum is made up of religion. And they import all labor. There is this idea that oil is from God and it will never finish. And they are so rich now that they—not anymore, because things are changing slowly—but in the Seventies and the Eighties, when they could have educated their people, when they could have created their own capital, they did not. They were importing people from all over the world and that's what wealth from oil can do to people. In this case it's oil, it could be other resources. But you get a nouveau riche intellectual mentality which makes it very very difficult to change things. Really a curse.

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: We'll take one more question. I'm sorry that this has to be an arbitrary cutoff but perhaps . . . yes.

Q: I just wanted to go back to a question that Philip Gourevitch raised but I didn't feel was answered thoroughly and that was how largely secular governments—like that of Egypt, of Algeria, Turkey—are facing this resurgence of fundamentalism. And especially, as you know, in Algeria the results of an election had to be dissolved because of the threat of fundamentalism. Why should that be? Why should secularism in those countries not have proved itself?

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: Because it's secular tyranny. And when these tyrannized populations respond—I mention in my book three—I mean, they respond in many different ways but I describe three forms of response. One is to join the ruling elite through the tribal means. Or engage with the *ullamah*, the imams, the learned clergy—so, okay, not learned, but the clergy. Another way is by fleeing the country. Many Egyptians and many many many Algerians have left their countries. But a third way is asking yourselves, and that's why Islamism is *really* an elite movement, “What is wrong, what are we doing wrong?” and then finding the answer in Islam and going back and then that becoming a movement. And so when that becomes a movement, and it is really a genuine movement, and you hold elections then of course people are going to vote for those people they trust. And the Islamists in Egypt and Algeria, but also in other Islamic countries, when they have these community facilities, they are very honest. If you take your money to an Islamist bank in Egypt, you are bound to get it back, without having to pay rent. And if you go to a health clinic run by Islamists you are bound to be treated and very quickly, and so also that has a lot to do with it. There is this guy called Gerecht, Raul Gerecht, I think that's how you pronounce it in the United States, it sounds a very Dutch name, Gerecht. He has this theory that Algeria of the time should have been left with its vote and it should have become like Iran and the Algerian population would have then experimented with Islamist theory, with a theocracy based on Islam, just like Iran has, and that in the end, like many Iranians are learning today, it was a bad thing to go after Imam al-Khomeini, Ayatollah Khomeini, and so on and are now open for an alternative form of government, which is man-made, which is therefore secular. The same process would have taken place in Algeria, and he says that they've been denied this opportunity to experiment. He also says, look at Hamas now having been elected into government. Let the Palestinians experiment with what that means, and when they discover through experience that it's not working, they will learn to vote for something else, they

will learn to open to that. That's one theory. I don't know if there are people who support him. It comes at a huge price. But there is a lesson in it.

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: Thank you all for coming. Thank you, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, for being here.

(applause)

AYAAN HIRSI ALI: Thank you very much.

PHILIP GOUREVITCH: I know most of you haven't had a chance to read this, because it's just coming out now in hardback, but the *Caged Virgin*, a book of Ayaan Hirsi Ali's writings and essays, has just been published by the Free Press. *An Emancipation Proclamation for Women in Islam*, it's called, and it's very good of you to be here with us. Thank you.