

National or Enlightenment Liberal Identity?

I find much to admire about Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the Somali-born Dutch-American scholar, author, and one-time politician who has drawn international attention to the violence against women and girls not only in Muslim-majority countries but also in the West at the hands of Muslim immigrants. Hirsi Ali escaped from a marriage arrangement and then became a pariah among Muslims, including her own family, and even the target of a murder conspiracy because of her public statements and writings, her break with Islam, and her collaboration with director Theo van Gogh on the film *Submission*. As a result of the film, Van Gogh was murdered in 2004.

Hirsi Ali is obviously intelligent, courageous, and nuanced. But of course that doesn't mean she doesn't get some important things wrong.

For example, while Hirsi Ali disagrees with *how* the U.S. government responded to what she regards as the "civilizational conflict" between the Islamic world and the West, she believes that the United States must engage in that conflict so as to "emerge out of it triumphantly."

In my view, she interprets a geopolitical conflict, which is the result of a century of Western imperialism, as a civilizational conflict. Yes, Muslim fanatics (often with the help of not-terribly-devout recruits, incidentally) have committed atrocities against innocent people, including other Muslims, and we should say so without hesitation or euphemism. But that doesn't mean we should overlook the crimes committed against innocent people in the Middle East by the U.S. government and its allies, including Israel. One thing that follows from this fact is that U.S. military intervention in Muslim-majority countries, which invariably kills innocents, is likely to drive people to more not less extreme forms of Islam. Hirsi Ali urges Muslims to undertake a reformation, but military force is a poor way to bring this about.

For the record, as a member of the Dutch parliament, Hirsi Ali **voted** to support the U.S.-led coalition in the war in Iraq, which she now apparently thinks was a mistake. She also **says**, "I think you just can't drone bad ideas out of people's heads," although she doesn't exclude drones as a means of persuasion. I urge readers to watch her Freedomfest discussion with Scott Horton and Abigail Hall Blanco of the "war on terror" in which Hirsi Ali's views on the nature of the conflict with Islam and the ability of the United States to engage morally and competently in a "war on terror" are subjected to a withering critique.

Let's move on to a related matter. In an interview on the *Triggernometry* program and podcast, Hirsi Ali wondered why immigrants raised in an Islamic culture, which she regards as inherently violent, would want to assimilate in a Western country that does not proudly

embrace its own unique national identity. She makes a fair point when she says that the West has faltered *not* by acknowledging past sins such as slavery and imperialism, but by pretending that their past contains *nothing but* sins. The history of the West has much to admire thanks to enlightenment liberalism. Claiming otherwise seems little more than a fashionable and even nihilistic pose. Aggressive historical ignorance is never flattering.

But Hirsi Ali undercuts her point when she seems to claim that the people of Western countries ought to wear their unique *national* identities on their sleeves. Considering her embrace of enlightenment liberalism and its signature values — reason, toleration, freedom of conscience, freedom of speech, private property, freedom of enterprise, privacy, etc. — I would have thought that she'd be calling on the Western countries to stress their transcendent liberalism, not their unique local differences. I don't for a moment suggest that the unique features are unimportant, but only that for the purposes of acculturating immigrants from illiberal countries, they aren't the most important features.

National identity strikes me as identity politics writ large, grand blood-and-soil tribalism. But she doesn't see it that way. And while I favor decentralization, secession, and people's efforts to free themselves from distant and unaccountable rulers (such as Brexit), we ought to acknowledge that nationalism has a **pretty poor record**. (Hirsi Ali concedes this in the case of Germany.) A staunch nationalist is not likely to favor secession because the nation-state is taken at the sacred irreducible political unit. I'd guess that Hirsi Ali is a fan of Abraham Lincoln not only because he disapproved of slavery but also because he went to war, first and foremost, to prevent disunion.

While cosmopolitan enlightenment liberalism may be reconcilable conceptually with a benign, pacifistic version of nationalism (as Ludwig von Mises thought), whether it is likely in practice in our time is another matter entirely. These days nationalism — Buy American! Protect American jobs! — spawns trade protectionism obsession with borders, and other measures that create friction between countries and risk the outbreak of war.

Enlightenment liberalism is appropriate to people everywhere because they are all human beings (even if incidental local customs vary from place to place). That, then, is what we in the West ought to be offering to — but not imposing on — non-Westerners. Meanwhile, we must undertake the reforms necessary to get the politicians to leave us alone. As for newcomers to the West, respect everyone's rights and get on with your lives.