Deconstructing Ayaan Hirsi Ali: On Islamism, Neoconservatism, and the Clash of Civilizations

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ABSTRACT
The Somali-born Islam critic Ayaan Hirsi Ali has been one of the world's most influential voices in present debates on the role of Islam in Western societies. Particular to Hirsi Ali's role as a public figure is that her political views are largely expressed in biographical writing. This has led many to believe that Hirsi Ali's views on Islam are simply a reflection of her personal experiences. This article aims to deconstruct her biographical narrative. It situates Hirsi Ali's writing in relation to two formative intellectual influences: Sunni Islamic fundamentalism and neoconservatism. Hirsi Ali became part of the Islamic fundamentalist movement in her teenage years, and joined an influential circle of neoconservative intellectuals after her arrival and study in the Netherlands. The paper will show how Hirsi Ali has sought to consciously transpose the fundamentalist image of Islam, known to her from her youth, unto Islam as a whole. It will trace the development of Hirsi Ali's views on Islam, which are of decidedly Western extraction, deriving from the Western tradition of Orientalism. And it will show how these adopted views are—in important respects—in open contradiction with her personal life story, as told in her biography, Infidel.

In The Evidence of Experience, a notable essay by the historian Joan W. Scott, she questions the naturalness attributed to subjective experience. Experience as personal testimony is commonly conceived as authentic and true, and the authority granted to experience powerfully buttresses claims to knowledge. Emancipatory projects—whether centred around the identities of workers, minorities, feminists, or gays—have often relied on subjective experience to question dominant, 'objective' paradigms. But the appeal to experience, Scott contends, leaves aside 'questions about the constructed nature of experience, about how subjects are constituted as different in the first place, about how one's vision is structured'. Therefore the 'evidence of experience' can end up essentializing identity and reproducing rather than contesting given ideological systems.

In the case of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, arguably those very qualities lend her writing its persuasive power and impressive popularity. A series of critical analyses has identified Hirsi Ali’s work as an example of the political efficacy of autobiographical writing in reinforcing dominant stereotypes through an appeal to authenticity and personal

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experience. Kiran Grewal, for instance, has described Hirsi Ali’s work as a falsification of the emancipatory function often attributed to autobiographical writing, offering instead a reinforcement of the dominant order through the “authentic” voice of the victim. Due to its personal nature Hirsi Ali’s biographical narrative is immediately imbued with an authority that other forms of non-fiction writing would need to prove through argument, leaving them open to criticism. As a result, Hirsi Ali’s writing seduces readers and scholars alike in the belief that her views on Islam are an expression of her personal experiences. Saba Mahmood has commented on the uncritical popularity with which Hirsi Ali’s work has been received in some American university departments. And Adam Yaghi points to the growing appeal of Hirsi Ali’s work in academia ‘where her serial autobiographies are treated as honest and reliable testimonies’. The analysis offered here follows up on recent calls for more critical scholarly engagement with Hirsi Ali’s work by authors such as Grewal, Mahmood, and Yaghi.

While there exists a growing literature on Hirsi Ali containing cogent critiques of the essentializing and simplifying quality of her writing, this article tries to take the argument one step further by offering an in-depth engagement with the literal text of Hirsi Ali’s autobiography. Critics have rightly labelled Hirsi Ali as an ‘inauthentic ethnic voice’. This paper sets out to demonstrate in detail how her writing is inauthentic, showing the discord between Hirsi Ali’s adopted Orientalist views and her personal experiences as described in her autobiography. It uses the work of Olivier Roy and Gilles Kepel to offer an alternative interpretation of Hirsi Ali’s autobiography than the one given by Hirsi Ali herself, which is inspired on the work of Bernard Lewis. The aim is to deconstruct Hirsi Ali’s biographical narrative, situating her writing in relation to two formative and interacting ideological influences: Sunni fundamentalism and neoconservatism. To do so convincingly, the analysis will necessarily cover some familiar terrain. But the argument also treads on less familiar paths, in particular Hirsi Ali’s early intellectual and political development in the Netherlands and the essential role of Dutch neoconservatives in Hirsi Ali’s rise as a controversial public figure. This Dutch episode is arguably crucial to understanding Hirsi Ali’s paradoxical description as ‘contemporary doyen of “conservative left criticism”’.

What follows is an attempt at exposition in five sections: the first introduces Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s relation to Islamic fundamentalism and neoconservatism as described in Infidel and lays out the basic argument, the second looks at Sayyid Qutb’s Islamism, the third describes U.S. neoconservatism and the clash of civilizations paradigm, the fourth

2See S. Mahmood, ‘Religion, Feminism and Empire: Islam and the War on Terror’, in Hanna Herzog and Ann Broade (eds) Gendering Religion and Politics: Untangling Modernities (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), pp. 193–216; S. Sheehi, Islamophobia: The Ideological Campaign Against Muslims (Atlanta, GA: Clarity Press, 2001); A. Yaghi, ‘Popular Testimonial Literature by American Cultural Conservatives of Arab or Muslim Descent: Narrating the Self, Translating (an)Other’, Middle East Critique, 25:1 (2016), pp. 83–98; D. Kumar, Islamophobia and the Politics of Empire (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012). N. Gana, ‘Introduction: Race, Islam, and the Task of Muslim and Arab American Writing’, PMLA, 123:5 (2008), pp. 1577–1578; M. Bosch ‘Telling Stories, Creating (and Saving) Her Life: An Analysis of the Autobiography of Ayaan Hirsi Ali’, Women’s Studies International Forum, 31:2 (2008), pp. 138–147.

3Grewal, ‘Reclaiming the Voice of the Third World Woman’, Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies, 14:4 (2012), pp. 569–590, p. 582.

4Mahmood, op. cit., p. 195.

5Yaghi, op. cit., p. 84.

6Grewal, op. cit., pp. 580–587.

7Mahmood, op. cit., p. 198.
section explores the Dutch reception of U.S. neoconservatism, and the final section uses the preceding to contrast Hirsi Ali’s views on Islam with her autobiography, *Infidel*.

1. The double life of Hirsi Ali

*Infidel*, the English edition of Hirsi Ali’s autobiography, was published in 2007 and quickly became an international bestseller.8 Echoing the divisions in her personal trajectory, the book is divided in two parts: ‘My Childhood’ and ‘My Freedom’. In the first section is recounted how Hirsi Ali’s family, a prominent clan in Somalia, fled the country in 1976 during the dictatorship of Siad Barré, before the ensuing civil war. The first place of refuge was Saudi Arabia, followed by sojourns in Ethiopia and finally Kenya, where she would stay for 12 years. There, Hirsi Ali came in contact with the *Sahwa*, the puritan religious revival that emanated from the Muslim Brotherhood and Saudi Wahhabism, onto the broader domain of Sunni Islam. Hirsi Ali describes how she became part of this movement, through the religious education she received at the age of 16 in Kenya, given by a certain ‘Sister Aziza’. Hirsi Ali recounts her subsequent conversion, how she started to veil herself in a hijab, and read Islamist texts with a community of like-minded believers.

In the process of escaping from an arranged marriage and coming to the Netherlands as a political refugee in 1992, Hirsi Ali slowly started repudiating her Islamic belief. She describes the day of her arrival as her ‘real birthday’: ‘the birth of me as a person, making decisions about my life on my own’.9 From 1995 to 2000, Hirsi Ali studied political science in Leiden. Among others, she was taught by Paul Cliteur, a prominent New Atheist inspired by U.S. neoconservatism, and the former head of the think tank of the conservative liberal party (VVD). Cliteur was part of a circle of neoconservative intellectuals who devoted themselves to the propagation of Western enlightenment values and the critique of religion, in particular Islam. After her studies, Hirsi Ali joined the think tank of the Dutch Social Democrat Party (PvdA), the Wiarda Beckman Stichting (WBS), where she started writing on Islam and immigration. As shown below, Hirsi Ali’s writing at the WBS was inspired on the work of the neoconservative Orientalist Bernard Lewis. In the months after 9/11, Hirsi Ali’s critique of Islam could count on a receptive audience. While still working at the WBS, Hirsi Ali was adopted as their protégé by the neoconservative intellectual circle surrounding Cliteur. The group is described in her biography as the ‘Gent’s Club’: Chris Rutenfrans, Jaffe Vink, Paul Cliteur, Sylvain Ephimenco, Hans Wansink, Leon de Winter, and Herman Philipse. She refers to Frits Bolkestein, the erstwhile Eurocommissioner and former leader of the conservative liberal party (VVD), probably the most prominent Dutch exponent of neoconservative ideas—as her ‘intellectual mentor’ in the acknowledgements.10 After calling Islam a ‘backward religion’ on Dutch public television in September 2002, Hirsi Ali started receiving death threats. She became an instant celebrity in the heated debate on freedom of speech, women emancipation, and Islam that followed. Following a short period in the U.S., hiding from the threats, Hirsi Ali exchanged the think tank of the PvdA for a position as parliament member of the VVD. After a spectacular and controversial political career, Ayaan Hirsi Ali moved to the

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8A. Hirsi Ali, *Infidel* (New York: Free Press, 2007). The Dutch edition appeared as *Mijn Vrijheid* [My Freedom] in 2006.
9Ibid., p. 188.
10Ibid., p. 352.
United States in 2006, where she started working for the American Enterprise Institute, a prominent neoconservative think tank. She subsequently married the neoconservative author Niall Ferguson.

With this remarkable course of life, Ayaan Hirsi Ali is one of the few people to have been part of both the Islamic fundamentalist and the neoconservative movement. In this itinerary of contrasting conversions and opposing allegiances, the strategic use of enemy images and essentialism that is inherent to both currents, provides a connecting thread. In his book War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West, the French Middle East scholar Gilles Kepel described the ascendancy of these movements and famously argued that both are to a certain degree each other’s mirror image, feeding and reinforcing each other.11 ‘You’re either with us, or against us’, would become a shared mantra of both George W. Bush and Osama Bin Laden. Both movements are seen to derive strength and legitimacy from an aggressive opponent. Both movements share an essentialist view of Islam, in which the fundamentalist perspective is seen as the true nature of Islam. Infidel is a poignant example of this confluence. In her autobiography, Hirsi Ali has sought to consciously transpose the fundamentalist image of Islam, known to her from her teenage years, unto the Islamic world as a whole. This fundamentalist image—defined by a literalist approach to Quran and Hadith; the myth of the timelessness of Islam; the stress on Islam’s inherent hostility to modernity and the West; and the view of Islam as an all-embracing societal system—bears a striking resemblance to the perspective on Islam in the ‘Islam criticism’ developed by neoconservatives, which has its roots in the Western tradition of Orientalism. As the Middle East scholar Olivier Roy writes: ‘Critics of Islam and Muslim fundamentalists are mirrors of each other, and each corroborates the other in the view of Islam that they share, merely with the signs reversed’.12 Hirsi Ali has made ample use of these analytical tools of Western Orientalism. Following Edward Said, the principal dogma’s of Orientalism, a long tradition of partisan Western scholarship regarding Islam and the Orient—can be reduced to four themes. First, ‘the absolute and systemic difference between the West, which is rational developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior’. Second, ‘abstractions about the orient’, particularly those based on texts representing a classical Oriental civilization, are always preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern Oriental realities. Third, ‘the Orient is eternal, uniform, and incapable of defining itself’. Four, ‘the Orient is at bottom something either to be feared […] or to be controlled’.13 Alternately, Olivier Roy summarizes Orientalism succinctly as the view that a timeless and all-pervasive “Islamic culture” is the major obstacle prohibiting access to political modernity.14 As we will see, these Orientalist themes characterize Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s views on Islam. Which is unsurprising if we consider that they are largely inspired on the work of the Orientalist Bernard Lewis, a principle target of Said’s critique. Hirsi Ali can rightfully be described as a ‘native informant’, a term used by Edward Said to describe an Oriental scholar sitting ‘at the feet of American Orientalists’, who uses her Western training ‘to feel superior to [her] own people’, because she ‘is able to “manage” the Orientalist system’.15 Orientalism,

11G. Kepel, The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).
12O. Roy, Secularism Confronts Islam (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), p. 43.
13E. Said, Orientalism (London: Penguin, 1978), p. 300.
14Roy, Secularism Confronts Islam, op. cit., p. 7.
15Said, op. cit., pp. 323–324.
according to Said, has a theatrical quality, and he describes that learned system of viewing the Orient as a ‘stage on which the whole East is confined’:

On this stage will appear figures whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate. The Orient then seems to be, not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a closed field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe.16

Ayaan Hirsi Ali can be seen as an actor on that theatrical stage, representing the Orient to a Western audience. Specific to Hirsi Ali is that she uses the Orientalist paradigm, not so much to study Islam or her society of origin, but to make sense of her own personal story, and to adapt that experience so as to fit into the public role she has crafted for herself on the confined space of the stage. In other words, she is a ‘native informant’ with regard to her own life. Hirsi Ali has offered her personal story as an illustration of the clash of civilizations thesis developed by Bernard Lewis and Samuel Huntington, referring to her life as ‘a personal journey through the clash of civilizations’.17 In Brown Skin, White Masks, the Iranian scholar Hamid Dabashi writes fiercely of critics of Islam such as Ibn Warraq and Hirsi Ali as ‘native informers who at once inhabit and target, personify and alienate, the hated abstraction they wish to exorcise from the moral psychosis that has posited them as aliens.’ For Dabashi, the particularity of Ayaan Hirsi Ali is that her aversion ‘for her own collective identity remains abstract and hidden within the stories that she keeps weaving about her life.’18 By retracing the intellectual ‘double life’ of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, this text aims to deconstruct the staged persona she has created, thus revealing and making concrete what has remained hidden and abstract.

2. Qutb and political Islam

The Sunni Islamist part of the story has its crystallization point in the figure of Sayyid Qutb. Born in 1906 in a traditional rural context in Egypt, Qutb first became a teacher, then a prominent intellectual, and finally the most important voice of modern Sunni Islamism.19 The Sunni Islamist movement has its origins in the 1930s, when Hasna al-Banna, the Egyptian founder of the Muslim Brotherhood and Abul-Ala Maududi, the leader of the Indian-Pakistani Jamaat-i-Islami party, founded a new political movement that aimed to reinvent Islam as a political order. Qutb would build on the work of al-Banna and Maududi, with the goal of developing Islam into a holistic alternative for modern twentieth-century ideologies. The leading Middle East scholar Olivier Roy—whose interpretation I will follow here, with the aid of John Calvert’s probing intellectual biography of Qutb—defines this movement as Islamism or political Islam, because it redefines Islam as a political ideology.20 This attempt at the modernization of Islam was paradoxically given legitimacy by presenting it as a restoration, a return to the source, to the original

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16Said, op. cit., p. 63.
17A. Hirsi Ali, Nomad: From Islam to America: A Personal Journey Through the Clash of Civilizations (New York: Free Press, 2010).
18H. Dabashi, Brown Skin, White Masks (London: Pluto Press, 2011), p. 92.
19For reasons of brevity, the focus of this article is restricted to the Sunni tradition, which has been central to Hirsi Ali’s development. While the Shiite tradition is of equal political significance in general terms, it occupies a more marginal role in the life and writings of Hirsi Ali.
20J. Calvert, Sayyid Qutb and the Origins of Radical Islam (Cairo: The American University Press in Cairo Press, 2011).
texts and the original inspirations of the first community of believers under the Prophet Mohammed. Islamism, Roy argues, is a movement that denies its own historicity.

The core proposition of the work of Olivier Roy is that this movement, of which Qutb would become the intellectual epicentre, is a product of modernity. Both sociologically and intellectually, Roy states, Islamism is a result of the rapid modernization process of the Muslim world. Like Qutb himself, the vanguard of adherents and disseminators of political Islam did not originate from the traditional Islamic clergy (the ulamas). They did not write in the ancient Arabic, the learned language of the Koran, but in national popular languages. The Islamists ‘are a product of the modern education system’, Roy writes, ‘where they took classes together with militant Marxists, whose concepts they used, and translated in the terminology of Koran.’\(^{21}\) In Islamism, special attention is given to organizational form, reminiscent of Leninist vanguard parties on the one hand (the role of party secretary is fulfilled by the Amir and that of the central committee by the Shura, the advisory council) and the Sufi brotherhoods on the other.\(^{22}\)

Like other Muslim intellectuals of his generation, Sayyid Qutb searched for a formula to modernize Islam, in such a way that Western technological and scientific knowledge could be assimilated without the accompanying liberal values. For that to occur, Islam had to be developed into a fundamentalist and all-embracing societal ‘ideology’ (fikra), a term derived from European progressive thought. For Qutb, a reinvented Islamic ideology had to function as an alternative to Third World nationalism, communism, capitalism, and liberal democracy. The titles of Qutb’s most popular books, published around 1950, are a good indication of the worldly character of his religious thought: *Social Justice in Islam* (1949), *The Battle between Capitalism and Islam* (1951), and *Islam and World Peace* (1951). The central idea in these books is holism: Qutb describes Islam as *nizam*, an integrated order that encapsulates economy, society, and politics.\(^{23}\) This fundamentalist vision must be realized by the creation of an Islamic state, starting at the national level. This was an important innovation. In traditional Islam, Roy writes,

> [t]he state is never considered in terms of a territorialized nation-state: the ideal is to have a power that would rule over the entirety of the umma, the community of the faithful, while actual power is exercised over a segment of the umma whose borders are contingent, provisional, and incomplete.\(^{24}\)

The term *nizam* is also a modern invention, and is not to be found in the Koran.\(^{25}\) The break with Islamic tradition consists in that the idea of divine unity (*tawhid*) is now applied on society, while before it only referred to God. Society needs to be a reflection of God’s unity. But where God’s unity is natural, in society it will have to be constructed. A holistic society does not tolerate intrinsic segmentation, be it social, ethnic, or tribal, or national, or a political order that claims autonomy from divine order.\(^{26}\) Therein lies the fundamentalist aspect of Islamism. Before the twentieth century, Islam was used as a verb describing a practice of personal belief and dedication. Only after the creation of

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\(^{21}\) O. Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), p. 40.

\(^{22}\) Ibid., p. 3.

\(^{23}\) Calvert, op. cit., p. 130.

\(^{24}\) Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, op. cit., p. 13.

\(^{25}\) Calvert, op. cit., p. 130.

\(^{26}\) Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, op. cit., pp. 40–41.
the Muslim Brotherhood by Hasan al-Banna, does the word attain the meaning that Qutb bestows on it: an integrated societal system.\textsuperscript{27}

Following the military coup of Nasser and the Free Officers in 1953, Qutb joined the Muslim Brotherhood and became the intellectual leader of the movement. The Brotherhood saw Nasser’s regime as an opportunity to implement their fervently desired Islamic state in Egypt. Nasser, however, chose for a path of secular modernization and relations with the Brotherhood turned sour. The Muslim Brotherhood subsequently attempted to overthrow the Nasser government. The regime of the Free Officers then decided to eliminate the Brotherhood and arrests hundreds of its most prominent members. Qutb was among them. In the years of imprisonment that followed, Qutb was tortured and his views radicalized. His writings in prison were oriented at formulating an Islamic doctrine that would legitimate a revolt against sovereign power (as in Christian faith, obedience to God-given authority is required in Islam). Qutb does that, on the one hand, by placing divine authority (hakimiyya, again a term not existing in Quran) above state sovereignty and popular sovereignty. And on the other, by stating that Muslim societies in which this godly sovereignty is not recognized, in which there is no attempt to implement divine law (sharia) are in reality in a state of unbelief. Under Western influence, a form of bad faith had developed among the political elites of Muslim countries, as in society more broadly. Qutb called this Jahiliyya (a state of unbelief) a Koranic concept that refers to the situation in the Arabic world before the arrival of Islam. Obedience to secular authorities implied disobedience to divine authority:

God (limitless is He in His glory) says that this whole issue is one of faith or unfaith, Islam and non-Islam, Divine law or human prejudice. No compromise or reconciliation can be worked out between these two sets of values. Those who judge on the basis of the law God has revealed, enforcing all parts of it and substituting nothing else for it, are the believers. By contrast, those who do not make the law God has revealed the basis of their judgement, are unbelievers, wrongdoers and transgressors.\textsuperscript{28}

Qutb’s views are a mirror image to the friend–enemy distinction employed by the neo-conservatives, as we shall see later on. Qutb makes a comparable back and white distinction between true Islam and the enemies of Islam, compounded by essentialist views of Jews, communists, Westernized elites, Orientalists, and other opponents of true Islam. In spite of the fact that Qutb saw his modernized version of Islam as relying on ‘Western ways of thought’, he portrayed Western thinking as especially hostile to Islam, due to the fact that Western science had developed historically in opposition to (Christian) religion:

The Western ways of thought and all the sciences started on the foundation of these poisonous influences with an enmity towards all religions, and in particular with greater hostility towards Islam. This enmity towards Islam is especially pronounced and many times is the result of a well thought out scheme, the object of which is first to shake the foundations of Islamic beliefs and then gradually to demolish the structure of Muslim society.\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{27}Calvert, op. cit., p. 130.
\textsuperscript{28}Ibid., p. 216. Qutb stopped short of calling individual Muslims unbelievers (kafirs): ‘Whereas the kafir is a person who intentionally disbelieves in God, the jahili individual sees himself as a believer yet dismisses Islam’s prerogative to govern all aspects of life.’ Ibid., p. 220.
\textsuperscript{29}S. Qutb, Milestones: Ma’alim fi l-tareeq (Birmingham: Maktabah, 2006 [1964]), p. 128.
An important contradiction in the thought of Qutb is the conviction that it is possible to have unmediated access to divine teachings. Islam, according to Qutb, is a doctrine that exists outside of human consciousness, as objective truth. Interpretation must be avoided as much as possible, so that human ignorance, individual desire, or group interests will not contaminate the purity of the doctrine. When confronted with an explicit text in the Koran or the Hadith, there is no space for *ijtihad* (personal appraisal), according to Qutb. In the case of uncertainty, interpretation only serves to ascertain divine truth. A scenario in which several interpretations come to coexist, a normal situation given the diversity of Islamic jurisprudence, is not deemed possible; there is only right and wrong. Since the assessment of clarity already requires human judgement, and there is no basis for assessing the correctness of an interpretation in the case of uncertainty, that vision is tautological. Ultimately, Qutb’s method requires a personal (and political) decision on the interpretation of divine truth, a decision that remains veiled behind the appeal to unmediated access. However, this approach allows Qutb and the Islamist movement to marginalize the traditional Islamic clergy such as the Egyptian Al-Azhar University, who traditionally have a monopoly on interpreting the religious texts and are politically loyal to existing regimes.

Qutb interprets and innovates to an important degree, by introducing new concepts, or by giving new meaning to existing terms. Denying the innovative aspects of his approach allows Qutb to articulate a political programme in the name of Islam, while cementing his vision in an appeal to divine truth. When Qutb is released from prison in 1964, members of the Muslim Brotherhood are working on the creation of an underground military organization. Qutb takes personal charge of the operation. When the organization is discovered, the Nasser regime decides to round up the Muslim Brotherhood, and to give Qutb the death sentence. Qutb would go down in history as a martyr. The Muslim Brotherhood, however, distanced itself from the more radical aspects of his legacy, rejecting the revolutionary *Jahihiyya* doctrine. The strategy of catastrophic revolution was abandoned for reformism and missionary work from the ground up. Only God has the authority to judge the veracity of the belief of other Muslims, Hudaybi argued, then Brotherhood leader. That continues to be the majority position in the Sunni world: failures in practice, be they crimes or omissions of worship, do not exclude a person from the community of believers. Only the confession of the faith matters. Nonetheless, in the following years, Qutbism inspired radicals all over the world of Sunni Islam. From that moment on, the Sunni Islamist movement is seen as divided between a reformist and a revolutionary pole.

The reformist pole is exemplified by Mohammed Qutb, the brother of Sayyid Qutb. He was invited by the Saudi monarchy—and with him many other Muslim Brothers—to integrate Islamism with the Saudi tradition of Wahhabism, an ultraconservative, fundamentalist interpretation of Islam. At the time, the Saudi Monarchy saw the Muslim Brotherhood as an appropriate tool to form an international counterweight to the appeal of secular pan-Arabism, and from 1979 on, revolutionary Shiism from Iran. On a national level, this was inspired by strategic concerns to limit the influence of Wahhabi clerics on Saudi society, by providing them with a competing doctrine. The

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30 Ibid., p. 43.
31 Roy, *The Failure of Political Islam*, op. cit., p. 24.
kingdom of Saudi Arabia thus became a site of refuge for the radical religious opposition movements against secular Arab regimes that were often aligned with the Soviet Union. This development was actively encouraged by the United States, as part of its Cold War strategy. Large amounts of Saudi oil-dollars were invested to facilitate this new religious movement. From the convergence of the activist impulse of the Muslim Brotherhood and the literalist, strict and puritanical approach of the Wahhabi tradition, also described as Salafism, the *Sahwa* (the awakening) emerged. Both Islamists and Salafists can be described as fundamentalist, although they differ in the nature of their fundamentalism, with Islamists more prone to challenge the political status quo and Salafists more focused on personal piety. This movement became very prominent in the 1980s and would take up the young Hirsi Ali in its sweep.

One of the younger Muslim Brothers, and a scion of the Egyptian elite, Ayman al-Zawahiri, continued the revolutionary tradition of Islamism, and radicalized the ideas of Qutb even further. He became part of the group Islamic Jihad that assassinated Sadat in 1981, basing themselves on the revolutionary ideas Qutb had formulated. Heavy repression followed, and when Zawahiri was released from prison, he continued his activities as part of the Afghan Moedjehadien, where he met Bin Laden. Here, Salafist and Islamist radicals successfully mingled, as the guerrilla fighters were trying to live their lives (and fight) according to a very literal interpretation of scripture. After the success of the guerrilla war against the Soviet Union, he took up the plan to take aim, not at the corrupt Arabic regimes (the nearby enemy), but directly at the puppet player itself: the United States (the faraway enemy). He became the mentor of Bin Laden and the second in command of Al Qaeda.

3. Neoconservatism

Neoconservatism gradually developed out of the anti-Stalinism of the 1930s and the Cold War liberalism of the 1950s and 1960s. The beneficial nature of the struggle against an external threat has always been central to its worldview. Neoconservatives have championed an image of the world as divided by a dramatic conflict of starkly contrasted forces of good and evil. They have stressed the benevolent nature of America’s dominant role in the world, as a harbinger of democracy and human rights. The philosophy of Leo Strauss has provided an important theoretical reference point. Strauss, a Jewish refugee from the Nazi regime, rose to prominence at the University of Chicago in the 1950s, and would spawn a Straussian school of philosophy. Among the Straussians were many neoconservatives who would later acquire positions of power in government, in military and foreign policy circles, and in neoconservative think tanks. Elaborating on the thesis of the German Nazi-jurist Carl Schmitt that friend–enemy distinctions form the essence of politics, Strauss saw the struggle against an enemy—portrayed as an absolute moral evil—as a necessary condition for the construction and maintenance of a healthy

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32While all Wahhabists are Salafists, not all Salafists are Wahhabists, which is the Saudi current in Salafism.
33Calvert, op. cit., p. 276.
34J. Vaïsse, *Neoconservatism: The Biography of a Movement* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); P. Steinfels, *The Neoconservatives: The Men Who Are Changing America’s Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979).
35A. Norton, *Leo Strauss and the Politics of American Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004).
and hierarchical political order. In a personal letter to Schmitt, Strauss expressed this philosophy thusly:

“The ultimate foundation of the Right is the principle of the natural evil of man; because man is by nature evil, he therefore needs **dominion**. But dominion can be established, that is man can be unified, only in a unity **against**—against other man. Every association of men is **necessarily** a separation from other men. The **tendency** to separate (and therewith the grouping of humanity into friends and enemies) is given with human nature; it is in this sense destiny, period.”

At first, communism served this function. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, many in the U.S. establishment were convinced that a new rationale for conflict—and therefore a new enemy—needed to be identified. The initial impetus in that effort was given by the Princeton-based Orientalist Bernard Lewis. In 1990, a month after the beginning of the First Gulf War, Lewis published the essay *The Roots of Muslim Rage* in *The Atlantic*. It’s message immediately caused controversy: ‘This is no less than a clash of civilizations—the perhaps irrational but surely historic reaction of an ancient rival against our Judeo-Christian heritage, our secular present, and the worldwide expansion of both.’ It wasn’t Western intervention in Muslim countries, or Western support for dictatorial regimes that lead to virulent anti-Americanism in the Middle East. The hatred of Muslims against the West, Lewis wrote, goes beyond hostility to specific interests or actions or policies or even countries and becomes a rejection of Western civilization as such, not only what it does but what it is, and the principles and values that it practices and professes. These are indeed seen as innate evil, and those who promote them or accept them as the ‘enemies of God’.

The author came to this startling conclusion by presenting Islamic fundamentalism as an authentic return to ‘the classic Islamic view’. Lewis tactically embraced the fundamentalist definition of Islam and turned it against the Islamic religion as a whole. By thus projecting enmity on the entire religion of Islam, Lewis employed a friend–enemy distinction of his own. The hawks in the U.S. foreign policy establishment soon embraced Lewis’ thesis as a notion that could serve as a guide for future conflict. After 9/11, Bernard Lewis (together with the Lebanese scholar and ‘native informant’ Fouad Ajami) became the Bush administration’s preferred academic expert on the Middle East, visiting Washington six times in the weeks after 9/11. It is not surprising then, that Lewis’ thesis became an important mantra of the Bush administration after 9/11: ‘Why do they hate us? […] They hate our freedoms’.

In 1993, Huntington took up the thesis of Lewis in a groundbreaking essay titled *The Clash of Civilizations?*, published in the journal of the U.S. diplomatic and military establishment, *Foreign Affairs*. In 1996, Huntington expanded on the essay in his famous book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. Controversially,
Huntington defined Islam (and secondarily China, or the Confucianist civilization) as the primary source of civilizational conflict for the West. The ‘centuries-old military interaction between the West and Islam is unlikely to decline. It could become more virulent,’ Huntington suggested. As Gilles Kepel pointed out,

Huntington’s clash of civilizations theory facilitated the transfer to the Muslim world of a strategic hostility the West had inherited from decades of Cold War. [...] The neoconservative movement played a crucial role in bringing about this rhetorical and theoretical permutation.\(^{44}\)

4. The Dutch reception of neoconservatism

When Ayaan Hirsi Ali was catapulted in the public limelight, to become one of the most influential and controversial political figures of the decade, her appearance formed part of a larger emergence of a Dutch neoconservative movement. In February 2001, a much-discussed essay appeared in the Dutch newspaper of note, NRC. It boldly declared that the conservative moment had come. Referring to U.S. neoconservatism, the essay proposed its propagation in the Netherlands: ‘In the past 25 years, conservative thought in the Western world has witnessed a veritable revolution. Now is the time for conservatives in the Netherlands to attempt to reap its benefits.’\(^{45}\) The author was Joshua Livestro, at that moment the speechwriter of Frits Bolkestein, then European Commissioner and former leader of the right-wing liberal party VVD. Two months earlier, together with the neoconservative thinker Bart Jan Spruyt, VVD-intellectual Andreas Kinneging and the lawyer Michiel Visser, Livestro had founded an influential conservative think-tank, the Edmund Burke foundation. Also Paul Cliteur, former teacher of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a law professor in the Dutch city of Leiden and former director of the VVD think tank, became part of the foundation, together with his colleague, the Iranian emigré Afshin Ellian. Cliteur had written his PhD on U.S. neoconservatism in 1989 and—together with Bolkestein—debated neoconservative ideas with members of the VVD. Cliteur described a turn towards neoconservatism among VVD intellectuals:

When I wrote an article in 1987 on Irving Kristol, I didn’t think there was anyone in the Netherlands that seriously studied his work. But who compares the book of Kristol with the ideas of the aforementioned thinkers (VVD intellectuals such as Bolkestein, Kinneging and Van der List, MO) will find significant similarities … The ideologues of the VVD have gone through a trajectory from Rawls to Hayek, and from Hayek to Kristol, or so it seems.\(^{46}\)

Afshin Ellian had been part of the communist Tudeh Party in Iran, but had to flee after the Iranian Revolution, in fear of the Islamic regime. In the Netherlands he turned to neoconservatism, aligned himself with the Right, and became one of the most vocal critics of Islam. He served as an inspiration for Hirsi Ali, who saw him as a Dutch counterpart to Salman Rushdie.\(^{47}\)

\(^{44}\)Kepel, op. cit., pp. 62–63.
\(^{45}\)Joshua Livestro, ‘Het Conservatieve Moment is Gekomen’, NRC Handelsblad, 3 February 2001.
\(^{46}\)P. Cliteur, ‘Neo-conservatisme en religie: Irving Kristol als nieuwe beschermheer van het liberale denken?’ Civis Mundi, 35 (October 1996), pp. 119–124, p. 121.
\(^{47}\)‘Very few Muslims are actually capable of looking at their faith critically. Critical minds like those of Afshin Ellian in the Netherlands and Salman Rushdie in England are exceptions.’ A. Hirsi Ali, The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam (New York: Free Press, 2006), p. 32.
The polarized aftermath of 9/11 provided the ideal environment for neoconservatives to come out of the closet. While the political culture in the Netherlands is traditionally consensual, moderate, and uneventful, this soon changed. The right-wing populist politician Pim Fortuyn, himself inspired to an important degree by neoconservative ideas, declared a ‘cold war against Islam’ two weeks before 9/11. The role of communism in serving as a threat to Western norms and values, according to Fortuyn, had been ‘taken over by Islam’. After the attacks, Fortuyn’s electoral fortunes took flight and he successfully campaigned on a platform to forcefully assimilate Muslim immigrants. In May 2002 an animal rights activist assassinated Fortuyn, causing a national outcry and leading to a landslide election victory for his now leaderless party. When in 2004, the filmmaker, columnist, and Islam critic Theo Van Gogh was brutally assassinated on the street by a Dutch-Moroccan jihadist because of his collaboration with Hirsi Ali on the film Submission, the Netherlands came to perceive itself as a frontline in the global War on Terror. In this context, the neoconservative message of an epic struggle against a civilizational enemy could count on a warm reception. Bart Jan Spruyt wrote on Carl Schmitt’s friend–enemy distinction and argued that these political murders had shown that ‘Western civilization now had an enemy’ in the Schmittian sense. Through confrontation with that enemy, Spruyt wrote, ‘we could come to rediscover our own identity’. In the years after 9/11, the Edmund Burke foundation revolutionized the Dutch debate and became the successful propagator of a—hitherto unknown and arguably never fully understood—neoconservative philosophy in the Netherlands.

Neoconservatism also had influential adherents in the Dutch press. From 2001 to 2006, journalists Jaffe Vink and Chris Rutenfrans used a weekly review-section of the national newspaper Trouw to promote what they called ‘the neoconservative revolution’. Vink described the neoconservatives as ‘the revolutionaries of our time’ who ‘want to make the world safe for democracy’. In their opinion section, they ardently supported the Iraq war and proposed to spread Western values in a ‘civilizing mission’ in the Middle East. In November 2001, Vink and Rutenfrans organized a debate with the appropriate Manichean title ‘The West or Islam: who needs a Voltaire?’ in Amsterdam cultural centre De Balie. In Infidel, Ayaan Hirsi Ali describes her attendance and how she intervened from the stand exclaiming: ‘Allow us a Voltaire, because we are truly living in the Dark Ages’. At this occasion Hirsi Ali met Ellian, Vink and Rutenfrans, who invited her to write her first opinion piece on the theme of her intervention at De Balie. From that point on, Jaffe Vink claimed Hirsi Ali as his discovery and protégé, and published several of Hirsi Ali’s opinion pieces in Trouw. Rutenfrans and Vink were the editors of Hirsi Ali’s first book, De Zoontjesfabriek.

In 2004, Bart Jan Spruyt became the ideologue of Geert Wilders, a popular right-wing populist politician following in the anti-Islamic footsteps of Pim Fortuyn. Spruyt accompanied Wilders on a visit to neoconservative think tanks in the U.S, and subsequently wrote the programme of Geert Wilders’ Freedom Party, PVV, which

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48 P. Fortuyn, ‘Koude oorlog met Islam’, Elsevier, 25 August 2001.
49 B. Spruyt, De Toekomst van de Stad: Over Geschiedenis en Politiek (Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boekencentrum, 2005), p. 63.
50 Jaffe Vink, ‘De Neoconservative Revolutie’, Trouw, 12 February 2006.
51 Hirsi Ali, Infidel, op. cit., p. 275.
52 See ‘Paniek en Roem’, NRC Handelsblad, 12 October 2002.
53 A. Hirsi Ali, De Zoontjesfabriek. Over Vrouwen, Islam en Integratie (Amsterdam: Augustus, 2002).
unsurprisingly had strong neoconservative overtones.\textsuperscript{54} When Hirsi Ali switched from the PvdA to the VVD, and entered parliament in January 2003 with a huge preferential vote, Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Geert Wilders campaigned together against the perceived Islamic threat.

Besides obvious similarities and explicit affiliations, there are also some marked differences between the American and Dutch strands of neoconservative thinking. The particularity of the Dutch political situation has marked Hirsi Ali’s position, and given her difficulties in integrating in the American context. These differences can be summarized in three points:

Firstly, while U.S. neoconservatism is a secular ideology, it considers religion to be an indispensable addition to liberalism and an important instrument for the spread of conservative values. A natural consequence is that neoconservatives formed a coalition with the religious Right, and defended conservative sexual morality in the culture wars. The Netherlands is to an overwhelming degree a secular context, with a largely progressive sexual morality. Dutch neoconservatives therefore chose to occupy a different position and defended progressive achievements—Enlightenment values, secularism, gay rights, and women’s emancipation—against the perceived threat of Islam, in what has been called ‘sexual nationalism’.\textsuperscript{55} It is in this context that Hirsi Ali could claim to speak as a progressive feminist, receiving considerable support from leading Dutch liberal feminists such as Cisca Dresselhuys and Social Democrat intellectuals such as Paul Scheffer and Joost Zwagerman. This defence of progressive values by Dutch conservatives is at the root of Hirsi Ali’s paradoxical description by Saba Mahmood as a ‘doyen of “conservative left criticism”’.\textsuperscript{56} The most prominent Dutch neoconservatives, such as Cliteur, Ellian, and Hirsi Ali were New Atheists, opposing religion as such. It is significant that Hirsi Ali has reconsidered her position on the role of Christianity since her arrival in the U.S.

Secondly, the focus of U.S. neoconservative efforts, from the 1970s on, was foreign policy, and the fight with foreign ‘enemies’. With regard to Islam, the U.S. domestic context has been a less significant theme. For U.S. neoconservatives, the superiority of Western civilization and the universalism of Western values or human rights served as an argument legitimizing foreign intervention.\textsuperscript{57} For Dutch neoconservatives, the primary concern was domestic policy.Neoconservative arguments concerning the superiority of Western values were primarily used to argue for the forceful assimilation of Muslim immigrants. It was then VVD-leader Frits Bolkestein who in the 1990s first pointed towards the incompatibility of Western and Muslim values, starting off the debates on immigration and multiculturalism that transformed Dutch politics in the wake of Fortuyn.\textsuperscript{58} This theme of superior and incompatible civilizational values, was subsequently taken up by Fortuyn, Cliteur, Spruyt, and Hirsi Ali.

Finally, while the currency of choice of U.S. neoconservatives largely consists of hard power, most famously through military intervention in Iraq, Dutch neoconservatives

\textsuperscript{54}G. Wilders, Kies voor Vrijheid (Den Haag: PVV, 2006); Koen Vossen, ‘Classifying Wilders: The Ideological Development of Geert Wilders and His Party for Freedom’, \textit{Politics}, 31:3 (2011), pp. 179–189.
\textsuperscript{55}See P. Meepscen, J.W. Duyvendak, and E. Tonkens, ‘Sexual Politics, Orientalism and Multicultural Citizenship in the Netherlands’, \textit{Sociology}, 44:1 (2010), pp. 962–979; M. Oudenampsen, ‘Post-progressive Politics, the Conservative Embrace of Progressive Values’, Paper presented at the conference of the European Sociological Association, Prague, 2015.
\textsuperscript{56}Mahmood, op. cit., p. 87.
\textsuperscript{57}Vaisse, op. cit., p. 118.
\textsuperscript{58}Prins, op. cit., pp. 363–379.
have been focused on combating Islam largely through soft power, or rhetoric. A choice that is likely informed by the absence of a significant Dutch military or foreign policy. Consequently, freedom of speech became one of the most important banners of the Dutch neoconservatives. While Huntington couched the clash of civilizations in military terms, the Dutch neoconservatives presented it as a predominantly rhetorical battle for the hearts and minds of the Western Muslim population, even though the target audience of this anti-immigrant discourse was the white Dutch majority. Only after her arrival in the U.S., did Hirsi Ali begin to couch her opposition to Islam in military terms, pleading to defeat Islam militarily in a controversial interview published in *Reason*.

5. Deconstructing Ayaan

A commonly held opinion is that Hirsi Ali’s views have developed and radicalized gradually over time, in reaction to real life occurrences such as 9/11, the death threats she received, her switch to the VVD, or the brutal assassination of her collaborator on the film *Submission*, Theo van Gogh. Retrospectively, Hirsi Ali also presented her trajectory in *Infidel* as a response to 9/11, identified by her as a moment of political awakening: ‘the little shutter at the back of my mind, where I pushed all my dissonant thoughts, snapped open after the 9/11 attacks, and it refused to close again.’ She describes herself in the weeks after the attacks as a deeply confused Muslim:

> War had been declared in the name of Islam, my religion, and now I had to make a choice. Which side was I on? I found I couldn’t avoid the question. Was this really Islam? Did Islam permit, even call for, this kind of slaughter? Did I, as a Muslim, approve of the attack? And if I didn’t, where did I stand on Islam? I walked around with these questions for weeks; I couldn’t get them out of my head.

None of that confusion is apparent, however, in those very same first weeks after 9/11, when Hirsi Ali’s first published article appears in the monthly journal of the social democrat think tank where she then worked as a researcher, bearing the title *In Between Confrontation and Reconciliation: The Netherlands and Islam*. The text analyses the Dutch debate on Islam in the wake of 9/11, a discussion between those proposing a more confrontational approach and those advocating tolerance. After some deliberation, Hirsi Ali sides with those opting for a more confrontational approach, in order to ‘force Muslims to debate Islam.’ That force is necessary because ‘in the perception of a Muslim, the Quran contains the truth and this truth is of all times and places. That makes it impossible for moderate Muslims to express doubts about the religion.’ Especially regarding three Islamic dogmas there is no substantive discussion possible, not between Muslims, nor between Muslims and non-Muslims:

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59. I. Buruma, *Murder in Amsterdam* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007).
60. ‘The Trouble Is the West: Ayaan Hirsi Ali on Islam, Immigration, Civil Liberties, and the Fate of the West.’ Interview of Ayaan Hirsi Ali by Rogier van Bakel. *Reason*, November 2007.
61. Hirsi Ali, *Infidel*, op. cit., p. 272.
62. Ibid., p. 269.
63. The article originally appeared in the journal of the Dutch social democrat think-tank WBS. A. Hirsi Ali, ‘Tussen Confrontatie en Verzoening: Nederland en de Islam’, *Socialisme & Democratie*, 58:10 (2001), pp. 446–451. It was published on 10 October 2001, and included in De Zoontjesfabriek, Hirsi Ali’s first book from 2002, but it has not been translated and published in *The Caged Virgin*.
64. Ibid., p. 451.
First, in Islam, ‘the individual and the community are inextricably bound up with each other. The will of Allah, as revealed in the Quran, determines ideology, politics, law, individual identity and his relation to the community.’ Second, the loyalty of a Muslim to other Muslims is obligatory: ‘in a conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims, sympathy and support will always go to Muslims first. Who violates this rule is a traitor and, according to the Quran, worse than unbelievers.’ The demand towards Muslims to ‘clearly distance themselves from acts of terror and radical Islam again and again faces the opposition of this loyalty principle.’ Finally, there is the significance of the hereafter: ‘Live on earth only counts as a passage towards eternal life after death [...] When one doubts the unity of God or his words in the Koran, then you spoil your chances on a place in the hereafter.’

To be clear, these are not empirical observations about Muslim life, they are statements that primarily serve a political purpose. To take only the most obvious example: in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, the attacks were widely and explicitly denounced by leading Muslim organizations around the world, including Islamist organizations such as the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas. The logical consequence of Hirsi Ali’s propositions on Islam is that of effectively binding together Al Qaeda and the 9/11 attacks with the whole of Islam, seeing that all Muslims are divinely ordained to be loyal to one another. She thus divides the world in two monolithic blocs, Islam versus the West, and questions the loyalty of Muslim immigrants in the West, who are pressed to choose sides—as individuals—against their own communities. In a typical case of textual determinism, Hirsi Ali reduces the everyday reality of contemporary Muslim life to the Quran, depicted as a body of closed norms, beyond discussion. Olivier Roy aptly characterized this type of Western criticism of Islam:

[T]o define Islam as a body of closed norms and Muslims as making up a community excluding membership in any other group is precisely to adopt the fundamentalists’ definition of Islam. This is a reference to an imaginary Islam, not to the real Muslim world, and the fundamentalists are made into authentic representatives of Islam, even if this means speaking with benevolent condescension about the poor [Muslim] liberals who cannot make themselves heard.

In that very first article, she writes how ‘moderate, benevolent Muslims’ are hopelessly uninformed about the true nature of their religion. The goal of the Western ‘dialogue’ with moderate Muslim immigrants, of forcing them to debate Islam, is to make Muslims more informed about the inherent radicalism and violence of their religion. This involves ‘civilizing’ and converting Muslims to what Hirsi Ali calls ‘Enlightenment’ or ‘reason’, as she wrote in the essay Why Can’t We Take a Critical Look at Ourselves?, published in the neo-conservative opinion section of newspaper Trouw in March 2002. Only by secularizing their faith—accepting scripture as man-made and Mohammed as a human, fallible

65 Ibid., pp. 450–551.
66 For example, on 14 September 2001, a communiqué was published condemning the 9/11 attacks as ‘against all human and Islamic norms’. Its signatories included leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, Sudan, Syria and Jordan, Pakistan’s Jamaat-e-Islami, Palestine’s Hamas movement, Tunisia’s Nahda movement, Malaysia’s PAS, Indonesia’s PKS, Morocco’s PJD, and scholars from Al-Azhar University. Statement published in the London-based Al-Quds Al-Arabi newspaper, 14 September 2001. For the full text, see http://nceis.unimelb.edu.au/about/projects/national_imams_consultative_forum/fatwa_and_rulings_against_terrorism_in_islam/sept11.
67 Roy, Secularism Confronts Islam, op. cit., p. 42.
68 Hirsi Ali, ‘Tussen Confrontatie en Verzoening’, op. cit., p. 451.
figure—only by extracting themselves from their communities can Muslims become acceptable to the West. This is the binary vision of Enlightenment and Islam that Ayaan Hirsi Ali started out with, and that she would consistently continue to defend right up to her latest book, *Heretic*, in which the ideas of Bernard Lewis again figure prominently.  

Hirsi Ali’s writing, from the very start, is a well thought-out version of the clash of civilizations theory, drawing on Dutch New Atheists inspired by neoconservatism, such as Paul Cliteur and Herman Philipse on the one hand, and Orientalist authors such as Bernard Lewis and Lewis Pryce-Jones on the other. Put differently, Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s views on Islam are of decidedly Western extraction, and these ideas are—at times—in open contradiction with Hirsi Ali’s own life story, as we shall soon see.  

The role of Orientalist authors in forming Hirsi Ali’s view of Islam can be deduced from her first more elaborate and theoretical text, published in the yearbook of the social democrat think-tank in the autumn of 2002 and translated and reprinted in *The Caged Virgin*. In the article, titled *What Went Wrong? A Modern Clash of Cultures* after the well-known book by Bernard Lewis, Hirsi Ali lays out her ideas on Islamic culture. Basing herself on Lewis and Pryce-Jones, Hirsi Ali argues that ‘the religious-cultural identity’ of Muslims is characterized by:

- A *hierarchical-authoritarian mentality*: ‘The boss is almighty; others can only obey.’
- *Group identity*: “The group always comes before the individual”; if you do not belong to the clan/tribe you will be treated with suspicion or, at best, not be taken seriously.
- A *patriarchal mentality and a culture of shame*: The woman has a reproductive function and must obey the male members of her family; failure to do so brings shame on the family.  

This is the classic Orientalist theme of timelessness, abstraction, and uniformity. From the skyscrapers in Istanbul and Teheran, to the villages in rural Pakistan and Somalia, from the Indonesian archipelago to Muslim immigrants on the European mainland: there is a single, unchanging Islamic ‘religious-cultural identity’ that can be known in the abstract. ‘The Islamic identity (view of mankind and the world),’ Ayaan Hirsi Ali writes, ‘is based on groups, and its central concepts are honor and disgrace, or shame’.  

Borrowing from Pryce-Jones, Hirsi Ali’s reasoning concerning the inherent ‘backwardness’ and traditionalism of Islam revolves around its connection with tribal norms. The argument is as follows: the Quran consists of a set of rules that are adopted from tribal customs, specifically designed to organize the tribes in a coherent tribal system. Warring tribes were convinced to accept laws assuaging them to direct their animosity to unbelievers, leading to Islam’s inherently expansionist character and its hostility to the West. Tribal values are thus ingrained in the Quran, reproducing premodern practices, even in modern urban societies: ‘the ideas and traditions of Muhammed’s tribal society are adopted straight into the industrial and urban society of today’.  

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69 Hirsi Ali, *Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now* (New York: Harper Collins, 2014).
70 Bernard Lewis, *What Went Wrong? Western Impact and Middle Eastern Response* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).
71 Ibrahim, *The Caged Virgin*, op. cit.
72 Ibid., p. 47.
73 Ibid., p. 52.
Is there any way out of this vicious circle for Muslims? Hirsi Ali wavers between Lewis and Pryce-Jones. She is appreciative of Lewis’ argument that either the lack of secularism or the patriarchal nature of Arab societies is responsible for their backwardness. Muslims can undertake the painful process of modernization once they ‘relinquish their most substantial values’. Whereas Pryce-Jones believes that secularism and other Western developments cannot be truly understood by people living in what is essentially a tribal society. Ayaan Hirsi Ali chose Lewis’ vision, critiquing the Islamist idea of emancipation and equating emancipation with the escape from community:

emancipation doesn’t mean the liberation of the community of the faithful or its safeguarding from the power of evil outside forces, such as colonialism, capitalism, the Jews and the Americans. It means the liberation of the individual from that same community of the faithful.

Finally, she concludes her article in the yearbook by proposing to ‘interpret the concept of “integration” as a process of civilization for groups of Muslim immigrants living within the Western society into which they have been received’, and so ‘render superfluous the pseudodebate about the equality of cultures’. Here, the old colonial ‘civilizing mission’ is turned inwardly, towards the immigrants in the West. Considering integration to be a process of civilization is also good for the immigrants themselves since it allows them to ‘develop an awareness of their level of achievement in relation to others’, and to ‘see that in order to progress they need to behave according to the values and standards of their newly adopted home country’. In other words: making immigrants aware of their backwardness will make them happier to adjust.

Tactically choosing to adopt the Western Orientalist imaginary of Islam, instead of describing modern-day Muslim reality, Ayaan Hirsi Ali has had to work around a set of large contradictions from the outset. If power and authority are absolute and unassailable for the ‘primitive’ minds of Muslims, as Hirsi Ali has argued before, then what explains the revolt of Islamic fundamentalism against the Islamic status quo, sidelining the clerics, killing Sadat, and denouncing the Saudi monarchy? And how can contemporary Muslim life be determined by the Quran, when the average Muslim ‘does little with his faith’, and ‘knows little of the Quran’? According to Hirsi Ali ‘most Muslims never delve into theology’, and ‘rarely read the Quran’; ‘it is taught in Arabic, which most Muslims can’t speak’. Here, Hirsi Ali wrestles with what Said has described as the second dogma of Orientalism: the notion that abstractions about the orient based on ancient texts, are preferable to direct evidence drawn from modern realities. She resolves that problem by introducing a tautology: ‘for many non-practicing Muslims, the essence of their identity and the system of values and morals by which they live remain Islamic’.

Moroccan and Turkish immigrants in the Netherlands have somehow assimilated the seventh-century tribal values embedded in the Quran, which are ‘adopted straight into the industrial and urban society of today’, without having understood or read the text itself.

74Ibid., pp. 52–53.
75Ibid., p. 32.
76Ibid., p. 56.
77Ibid.
78Hirsi Ali, ‘Tussen Confrontatie en Verzoening’, op. cit., p. 450.
79Hirsi Ali, Infidel, op. cit., p. 272.
80Hirsi Ali, The Caged Virgin, op. cit., p. 44.
These contradictions come to a head in *Infidel*, where Hirsi Ali’s personal experiences openly contradict the views she adopted from Bernard Lewis. The paradoxical nature of fundamentalist Islam, as described by Roy, a modernizing break with tradition that represents itself as a return to tradition, is also to be found in Hirsi Ali’s autobiography:

A new kind of Islam was on the march. It was much deeper, much clearer and stronger—much closer to the source of the religion—than the old kind of Islam my grandmother believed in, along with her spirit ancestors and djinns. It was not like the Islam in the mosques, where imams mostly recited by memory old sermons written by long-dead scholars, in an Arabic that barely anyone could understand. It was not a passive, mostly ignorant, acceptance of the rules: Insh’Allah, ‘God wills it.’ It was about studying the Quran, really learning about it, getting to the heart of the nature of the Prophet’s message. It was a huge evangelical sect backed massively by Saudi Arabian oil wealth and Iranian martyr propaganda. It was militant, and it was growing. And I was becoming a very small part of it.\(^8^1\)

Of course, the very notion of a ‘new’ kind of Islam, contradicts the earlier statement that Islam is ‘an unchanging, fossilized culture’.\(^8^2\) In *Infidel*, Hirsi Ali inadvertently stresses the innovative aspects of fundamentalist Islam, the break with old traditions, and existing forms of religiosity: ‘Traditional ways of practicing Islam had become corrupted, diluted with ancient beliefs that should no longer have currency.’\(^8^3\) Fundamentalist Islam represents a break with the quietist passivity of mainstream Islam:

We were not like the passive old school, for whom Islam meant a few rules and more or less devoutly observed rituals, and who interlaced their Quran with tribal customs and magical beliefs in amulets and spirits. We were God’s shock troops.\(^8^4\)

She writes about her immersion in political Islam:

We read Hasan al-Banna, who set up the Society of Muslim Brothers to oppose the rise of Western ideas in the lands of Islam and promote a return to the Islam of the Prophet. We read Sayyid Qutb, another Egyptian, who said preaching was not enough, that we must stage a catastrophic revolution to establish the kingdom of God on Earth. We thrilled to new movements called Akhwan (Brotherhood) and Tawheed (the Straight Path); they were small groups of true believers, as we felt ourselves to be. This was the True Islam, this harking back to the purity of the Prophet.\(^8^5\)

Many of Olivier’s Roy observations concerning the modern character—in the sociological sense—of political Islam, can also be found in Hirsi Ali’s writing. The we-form that Ayaan Hirsi Ali employs in the quotations above, refers to an Islamic debating group in a local neighbourhood centre in Nairobi that Hirsi Ali joins in her late teens. The group consists mostly of highly educated urban Pakistani and Somalian youth, dressed in Western clothing. They were ‘dissatisfied with the intellectual level of the teaching at the madrassahs’, and Hirsi Ali portrays them as ‘very bright, deeply committed older students’.\(^8^6\) Whereas in the mosque, sermons were often just a recitation of old texts in Arabic, here the debates were in English, they ‘were lively, and often clever, as well as

\(^{8^1}\)Hirsi Ali, *Infidel*, op. cit., p. 88.

\(^{8^2}\)Hirsi Ali, *The Caged Virgin*, op. cit., p. 153.

\(^{8^3}\)Hirsi Ali, *Infidel*, op. cit., p. 215.

\(^{8^4}\)Ibid., p. 220.

\(^{8^5}\)Ibid., p. 108.

\(^{8^6}\)Ibid.
much more relevant to our lives than the mosque. An image that raises questions about Hirsi Ali’s earlier claim that Muslims are not allowed to debate their religion. It corresponds with how Roy describes the religious revival in the 1970s and 1980s, the emergence of which is a consequence of the disembinding of Islam from the local, traditional culture. Hirsi Ali writes disparagingly of the local Islamic traditions of believers who ‘interlaced their Quran with tribal customs’ and points to the ‘universal character’ of the Brotherhood: ‘In contrast to the clan warfare of Somalia, the Brotherhood seemed to have a more universal character because it included people of every clan.’ Here the Brotherhood’s Islamism seems to work against the very clan culture that Hirsi Ali has argued to be quintessential to Islam. It is in line with Roy’s argument, that Islamist radicals are Westernized youth who now see the Islam as a universal and global phenomenon, decoupled from local traditions. The loss of cultural identity—‘the old Islam my grandmother believed in’, in the words of Hirsi Ali—is the condition for the rise of new forms of fundamentalism.

The modern aspects—on an intellectual level—of the Islamism of Sayyid Qutb and the Muslim Brotherhood are also present in the writing of Ayaan Hirsi Ali. There is the dismissal of the authority of the mosques and existing Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), described as ‘old sermons written by long-dead scholars’. There is the aversion to Arabic and the idea of studying the Koran independently in modern languages: ‘I bought my own English edition of the Quran and read it so I could understand it better.’ There is the notion of ‘a catastrophic revolution’, alien to the Islamic tradition, and closer to Lenin than Mohammed. There is the ideal of Islam as a universal government, to be realized not by God, but by the movement itself: ‘Our goal was a global Islamic government, for everyone.’ There is the idea of a revolutionary vanguard, which we see expressed in terms like ‘small groups of true believers’ and ‘God’s shock troops’, and finally there is Qutb’s distinction between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ Muslims and the ‘true’ and ‘untrue’ faith, when she describes their intention ‘to awaken passive Muslims to the call of the true, pure belief’.

At the same time, Hirsi Ali stays true to the theme of the return to the source, the notion of a pure Islam. In her autobiography, Sister Aziza tells the teenager Hirsi Ali that it is ‘not permitted for one second to imagine that perhaps the Quran’s words could be adapted to a modern era. The Quran had been written by God, not by men.’ Surprisingly, Hirsi Ali seems to agree with this statement. At times, a more sceptical tone is present in the text. When Hirsi Ali for example writes how ‘the Muslim Brotherhood believed that there was a pure, original Islam to which we all should return’. Or when she describes how ‘the Islam that we were imbibing stemmed from the hard, essentialist beliefs of thinkers seeking to revive the original Islam of the Prophet Muhammad and His disciples in the seventh century’. Her scepticism is even more explicit in The Caged Virgin, where she writes of ‘a return to a largely imaginary past as occurred in the Iranian Revolution and in

87Ibid.
88Roy, Secularism Confronts Islam, op. cit., p. vi.
89Hirsi Ali, Infidel, op. cit., p. 136.
90Ibid., p. 104.
91Ibid., p. 109.
92Ibid.
93Ibid., p. 105.
94Ibid.
95Ibid., p. 108.
other fundamentalist movements and regimes in Muslim countries.’ 96 In these passages, Hirsi Ali seems to be conscious of the fact that the appeal to a return to a true, pure Islam, needs be taken with a few grains of salt.

Nothing of that scepticism remains, however, when Ayaan Hirsi Ali writes about her response to 9/11 in a later chapter of Infidel. It is the assault on the Twin Towers, we learn, that gave the decisive impetus for her break with her belief. The attacks on the World Trade Center take place in the period that Hirsi Ali worked at the Wiarda Beckman Foundation, the think tank of the PvdA. She recounts how she exits the train, on the morning of the attacks, heading for the office. En route, she encounters Ruud Koole, then party chairman, who asks her why everybody seems to connect Islam with the attacks, when it is nothing but a ‘lunatic fringe’. 97 Ayaan Hirsi Ali answers: ‘This is Islam’ and recounts her thoughts, walking into the office as having ‘to wake these people up’. 98 When she describes the letter from Mohammed Atta with the instructions to the hijackers, how they are to die as good Muslims, she recognizes it as originating in the fundamentalist movement she herself had been part of. She concludes: ‘This was not just Islam, this was the core of Islam.’ 99

Hirsi Ali ties the attacks to fundamentalist Islam, and proceeds to present that as ‘genuine’ Islam: ‘Every devout Muslim who aspired to practice genuine Islam—the Muslim Brotherhood Islam, the Islam of the Medina Quran schools—even if they didn’t actively support the attacks, they must at least have approved of them.’ 100 The former is not only untrue, for someone like Hirsi Ali, familiar with the Muslim Brotherhood, it should be easy to corroborate.

Then Hirsi Ali goes even further: it is scripture and not Bin Laden that is responsible for the attacks: ‘The Prophet Muhammad was the moral guide, not Bin Laden, and it was the Prophet’s guidance that should be evaluated.’ 101 In her biography she seems convinced that quotations from the Koran can be taken literally: ‘All these statements that Bin Laden and his people quote from the Quran to justify the attacks—I looked them up; they are there. If the Quran is timeless, then it applies to every Muslim today.’ 102 ‘Did the 9/11 attacks stem from true belief in true Islam?’, Hirsi Ali asks rhetorically. 103 The answer is clearly confirmative. In other parts of her writing, however, she criticizes the people who ‘interpret the holy texts’ in a ‘literal vein’, blaming the amount of Islamic ‘word-nazis’ for the sad state of women in Islam, 104 and associating the literalist reading with fundamentalist Islam. 105

The recurring essentialist qualifications in the passages above and in the biography of Ayaan Hirsi Ali—true Islam, the core of Islam, pure Islam, genuine Islam, timeless Islam, the source of the Islam, the essence of Islam, the real Islam—are deeply significant. Take the following passage:

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96 Hirsi Ali, The Caged Virgin, op. cit., p. 51.
97 Hirsi Ali, Infidel, op. cit., p. 268.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid., p. 269.
100 Ibid., p. 270.
101 Ibid., p. 271.
102 Hirsi Ali, Infidel, op. cit., p. 273.
103 Ibid., p. 271.
104 Hirsi Ali, The Caged Virgin, op. cit., p. 160.
105 Hirsi Ali, ibid., p. 171.
I first encountered the full strength of Islam as a young child in Saudi Arabia. It was very different from the diluted religion of my grandmother, which was mixed with magical practices and pre-Islamic beliefs. Saudi Arabia is the source of Islam and its quintessence. It is the place where the Muslim religion is practiced in its purest form, and it is the origin of much of the fundamentalist vision that has, in my lifetime, spread far beyond its borders.106

Hirsi Ali is aware that these fundamentalist views originate from the Sahwa mentioned before, the religious revival in the 1970s and 1980s that she became part of, stemming from a combination of Islamism and Wahhabism. She presents the fundamentalist perspective as the timeless essence of the entire Islamic religion. Here it is useful to return to Olivier Roy’s remark that Islamic fundamentalism is a movement that denies its own historicity. Hirsi Ali uses that myth of timelessness as a weapon against her former religion.

But I could no longer avoid seeing the totalitarianism, the pure moral framework that is Islam. It regulates every detail of life and subjugates free will. True Islam, as a rigid belief system and a moral framework, leads to cruelty. The inhuman act of those nineteen hijackers was the logical outcome of this detailed system for regulating human behavior. Their world is divided between ‘Us’ and ‘Them’—if you don’t accept Islam you should perish.107

Following in the footsteps of Bernard Lewis, by describing the friend–enemy logic employed by jihadists, and by subsequently equating Islamic jihadism with scripture as such, Hirsi Ali makes the whole of Islam into an enemy that needs to be vanquished. ‘The greatest advantage of Huntington’s civilizational model of international relations is that it reflects the world as it is—not as we wish it to be’, Hirsi Ali wrote in 2010 in an opinion piece in The Wall Street Journal.108 ‘It allows us to distinguish friends from enemies’, she added, closely mirroring the worldview of the 9/11 hijackers she had described in Infidel.

6. Conclusion

Hirsi Ali has described her life as a journey along the clash of civilizations. That journey is both physical and intellectual. There is a dramatized, staged quality to her life story, presented to us in stark contrasts between the modern, enlightened West and traditional, backward Islam. Her perspective on Islam rests on views adopted from the tradition of Western Orientalism, which leads to contradictions with her own life story as recounted in Infidel. The profound similarities between the Western Orientalist and the Islamic fundamentalist perspective on Islam, has allowed her to present the latter as the validation of the former. Using the work of scholars such as Olivier Roy allows us to extract a markedly different perspective from Hirsi Ali’s biography, in which the modernity Islam supposedly lacks, is exactly the precondition for the rise of fundamentalist movements. Finally, Hirsi Ali’s politics are shaped by the concerns of neoconservatism, and her writing can be seen as a biographical variant of Huntington’s clash of civilizations theory, relying on a Schmittian friend–enemy distinction. Since Hirsi Ali’s work is predicated on a

106Hirsi Ali, Infidel, op. cit., pp. 675–676.
107Ibid., p. 272.
108A. Hirsi Ali, ‘How to Win the Clash of Civilizations’, The Wall Street Journal, 18 August 2010.
necessarily hostile—and incompatible—relation between the West and Islam, she has little to offer in terms of solutions.

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**Notes on contributor**

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