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MORE FAITH, LESS FEAR: ISLAM, ISLAMISM, AND THE FUTURE OF THE WEST

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These are difficult times for anyone who wants to believe in a free and pluralist society. The brutal ethnic and religious cleansing perpetrated by ISIS in Iraq, combined with the stories of young men from Western countries traveling to Syria to join the jihad in the Middle East, has sown fear and suspicion about Islam. Such fears have been further stoked by a disturbing rise in anti-Semitic demonstrations and violence in Europe, fed in part by reactions to the ongoing conflict in Gaza. For many observers, the two developments go together, an indication of a permanent and fundamental clash of cultures in which Muslims both abroad and at home threaten the peace and security of the liberal West.

Elsewhere in the world one sees even more reason to despair, from the civil war in Ukraine to the even more depressing spectacle of collapsing race relations in Ferguson, MO. Wherever one looks, one can find evidence of society breaking down, of simmering conflicts just about to boil over, and irreconcilable differences between social, religious, and ethnic groups. It's not surprising that this dire situation leads many people to throw up their hands, and to preach a kind of bunker mentality in response.

This atmosphere of dread has given new life to an Internet phenomenon. In recent weeks, many friends of FPRI have received and forwarded the text of a speech that Dutch politician Geert Wilders gave in New York back in 2008. In it, Wilders warned of the rising tide of Muslim immigration, painting a lurid and frightening picture of an inexorable force that was already on its way to destroying Europe, and which would leave the United States as the "last man standing" in the face of an existential threat.¹ Wilders is a spellbinding speaker, and a gifted demagogue. He does a very good job describing the problem, and attacking the complacency of European elites. He urges resistance to this threat, citing Churchill's unbending resistance against appeasement, "We cannot strike a deal with mullahs and imams," he concludes. "Future generations would never forgive us. We cannot squander our liberties. We simply do not have the right to do so."

But even as he presents an image of resolute resistance, there is something missing from this address, and from the arguments behind it. As is often the case with a politician who wants to stir the emotions of his listeners (and who has a very distinct, radical agenda), his comments are a mixture of the true, the wildly overstated, and the false. He is also much better at describing the dangers than he is at offering any actual solutions. The problem therefore is

¹ For a link to the speech with some background, see <http://www.snopes.com/politics/soapbox/wilders.asp>. The full-length speech is at <http://europenews.dk/en/node/14505>.

not that Wilders is completely wrong, but rather that he's not as right as he thinks he is, and the things that he gets wrong are potentially very dangerous indeed for the political future of the West.

It is certainly true that there currently is a growing population of Muslim immigrants in Europe. It is also certainly true that a lot of this population—like pretty much every immigrant population in the history of mankind—is currently quite insular and concentrated in self-reinforcing linguistic, cultural, and religious ghettos. The combination of self-isolation and the failure of institutions to encourage more interaction between immigrants and the native born have created a vast and threatening gulf between them. One recent article even notes that there are more Muslim British citizens fighting for ISIS than there are Muslims in the British Armed Forces.² This current reality feeds the sense that Muslim immigrants simply cannot or will not be integrated into the larger society. Such concerns about Muslim men also encourage larger worries about the capacity of Western democracies to absorb new immigrants. They of course extend to the United States as well, where some political leaders warn that despite the history of immigration in the United States, these new immigrants are somehow less assimilable than those who came before.

That there are problems with the current situation is clear. The question is, how is this different from other immigrant experiences, and how threatening is it for the future of America and the West. Wilders takes some basic facts but then extrapolates them to excessive effect. He makes three problematic assumptions that need to be challenged:

First and most obviously is his characterization of Islam, which he claims is not a religion but a “political ideology,” which he compares to Nazism and Communism. “Therefore, there is no such a thing as moderate Islam,” he declares. “Sure, there are a lot of moderate Muslims. But a moderate Islam is non-existent.” This simplistic assumption is flat out wrong. The vast majority of Muslims in Europe, just as the vast majority of Muslims in the world, are not intolerant Islamist radicals. Most of them are hard-working people with families who are simply trying to make their way in the world. That Wilders feels it necessary to characterize a religious community that has existed for 1500 years and that includes hundreds of millions of peaceful people who have never threatened anybody (Indonesia, for example, is the world's largest Muslim country, and currently threatens no one) as a relentless enemy of humanity, and that he wants to dismiss it as merely an ideology is the most stereotypical form of cultural arrogance and short-sightedness. Wilders even gets the basic definition of Islam wrong. He correctly identifies it as “submission” but the context he makes it seem as though that submission is of a political form, when actually what Islam is about his submission to God and God's laws. I know of no monotheistic religion that does not basically expect the same thing of its believers. It's also false to assume that there is no disagreement among Muslims about the practice of the faith, considering that most of ISIS's victims are fellow Muslims who do not happen to measure up to ISIS's particularly stringent dogma.

There are more and less tolerant Muslims, to be sure, and I am not going to deny that some pretty awful people use their religion to justify oppressing their own people (especially women) and threatening non-believers. Even here, however, analysts suggest that many jihadis are themselves motivated less by their faith than by other social and political issues.³ Indeed, the rise of ISIS is in large part the product of a systematic campaign by some elements within Islam to propagate a particular vision of the faith rather than some natural development.⁴ Ultimately, it helps nobody to dismiss a sincerely held series of beliefs as an ideology. It is not only bigoted, it is pointless in the extreme to claim that Islam is somehow unworthy of consideration as a body of religious faith—both because Muslims are not going to simply evaporate and because they do not have to disappear for there to be peace. This is not squishy political correctness talking, but pragmatic and respectful historical and cultural sensibility—a sensibility shared by every respectable religious leader in the non-Muslim world, I might add, such as the Vatican

² Kim Hjelmgaard and John Bacon, “More British Muslims fight for Islamic State than Britain.” *USA Today*, 21 August 2014. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2014/08/21/islamic-state-americans-british/14384045/>. Accessed 21 August 2014.

³ See Zach Beauchamp, “The Nine Biggest Myths about ISIS,” *Vox*, 22 August 2014, <http://www.vox.com/cards/isis-myths-iraq/crazy-irrational> and Mehdi Hassan, “This Is What Wannabe Jihadists Order on Amazon Before Leaving for Syria,” *The New Republic*, 22 August 2014. <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/119182/jihadists-buy-islam-dummies-amazon> Accessed 23 August 2014.

⁴ Ed Husain, “Saudis Must Stop Exporting Extremism,” *New York Times*, 22 August 2014. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/23/opinion/isis-atrocities-started-with-saudi-support-for-salafi-hate.html?src=me&module=Ribbon&version=origin®ion=Header&action=click&contentCollection=Most%20Emailed&pgtype=article>. Accessed 23 August 2014.

Secretary of state, Pietro Cardinal Parolin, who recently declared that the recent upsurge in violence in Iraq “is definitely not a clash between Islam and Christianity.”⁵

Wilders’ second problem is his assumption that some alleged Muslim tide is going to flood the West forever, leading inexorably to Muslim majorities. This sort of demographic alarmism assumes a constant expansion of the Muslim population, and has of course been popular ever since Thomas Malthus in the 18th century (wildly incorrectly) predicted that within 100 years there would be no food left England because the population would reach a couple of million people. Malthus was wrong because he assumed that human beings would continue along simple mathematical paths, and that there would be no other limiting or mitigating factors. They don’t and they won’t. There is no inevitability that Muslim families will continue to grow along the same path they appear to be growing now. A corollary point here is to plead for a sense of proportion. According to the most recent projections, the Muslim population of Europe may reach ten percent in some countries by the middle of the century, and usually much less than that.

Both of these points lead me to my third point. Wilders wants to assume that the Muslim population in the West will never change and will always conform to his most negative description of it, thus the tide is unstoppable. Those assumptions ignore the most powerful defense mechanism the West has in its arsenal, and that is the power of an open, individualistic society to challenge closed systems and to encourage social and cultural transformation. Wilders assumes for his own purposes that these Muslim immigrants would come to the West, will live in the West, and expand in the West, and will somehow influence the West without ever being influenced themselves by what they encounter. What he is assuming is something that has never happened in the history of mankind. Immigrant populations once settled into new territory always change. Indeed, the social transformation of Muslim populations among Indian, Pakistani, and Arab immigrants of the second and third generations in the US and Europe reveal this very clearly. If we want to talk about inevitable processes, that is one of the few for which we actually have ample historical evidence. Think also of the fates of insular and devout religious communities in the past. Ties to the motherland break down, and traditional religious practices fade and change. We know this in our own family histories, and can talk about whether that is always good or bad. But I’m sure all of us know how different we are from our immigrant grandparents, and how different our children and grandchildren are or will be from us.

This all leads to my main argument. When Wilders talks about Islam as a dangerous ideology that is somehow going to swamp the free West, he compares it to communism and National Socialism. Leaving aside how wrong Wilders is to label Islam an ideology, it is worth noting that Western Civilization managed to defeat both of those other previous threats, not only through being aggressive, but in large part just by being free. Western Civilization’s encouragement for individuals to pursue their greatest individual development has done more to change the world than any of these other ideologies. Wilders claims to love the West, yet seems to believe that the West is so weak that it will have no impact on the Muslims, even after it has had so much impact on so many other peoples for so long. It is proof of the narrowness of his mind that he fails to see how free societies’ greatest strength comes from maintaining their freedom. That is why he is so good at describing the problem yet so bad at offering constructive solutions. He doesn’t actually have much to say on the subject of solutions, preferring to offer not-so-veiled references to banning certain practices and generally clamping down on Islam, spiced with indications of permanent war against real and imagined Islamic enemies at home and abroad. None of that, to my mind, plays to the strengths of Western Civilization.

Stirring up fear makes people believe that they will only be safe if the threatening Other is forcefully excluded. But fear will not save us. We need less fear and more faith. We need faith that a free and confident West that values the individual, a West that is strong enough to enforce its existing laws, need fear no idea or ideology. Groups of people will believe different things, but freedom has shown it has great power to encourage dialogue and break down barriers.

This is not a call for passivity. Maintaining faith in the West and its values is hard work. It requires a commitment to the institutions that preserve and protect the community, especially schools that both teach important material and model the values of citizenship. As Afzal Amin, Tory MP who was chairman of the Armed Forces Muslim Association has admitted, the failure of those institutions to do more to reach young Muslim men shares some

⁵ <http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/en/the-vatican/detail/articolo/iraq-iraq-irak-35945/>

responsibility for their alienation. Improving those institutions has to be part of any effort to shore up free societies.⁶ Western societies have to be confident enough in the importance of their laws, values, and traditions to teach young people to value and defend them.

That said, contra Wilders, Western society can only thrive if its members live the tolerance that we demand from others. That means facing and overcoming suspicions and grievances that divide people from each other, whether they are in the deserts of Iraq or the suburbs of St. Louis. The rule of law is more than a reliance on police power. It also means embracing the kind of civility and mutual respect that allows fellow citizens to live together in peace.

Wilders and others will respond to these comments by pointing out that too many young immigrant men have turned violently against the West. They are certainly correct that people such as the Tsarnaev brothers who bombed the Boston Marathon, or Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebowale, who brutally murdered Lee Rigby on a London street, reflect failures of integration. It is a sad truth that no matter how many opportunities they may be offered, some will turn on the society that nurtured them. But as bad as the Tsarnaevs are, they did not kill as many Americans as Tim McVeigh and Terry Nichols, who were native-born (one of them even a veteran!), and they also lag behind other home-grown terrorists such as Adam Lanza, James Nichols, and Dylan Klebold. No amount of civilizational confidence can protect us perfectly, but too much focus on imagined external enemies weakens us by imagining that the only enemies are some easily identifiable Other, and blind us to other, more endemic social problems.

The West is strongest when it is unafraid. Wilders and his supporters think that they will make the West greater by encouraging people to fear. Fear, however, breeds weakness and enervation. A brave society welcomes challenges, and does not fear them. It expresses its values without feeling the need to repress others. The most important values of the West—its commitment to free individuals, to freedom of conscience, and to the preservation of the rule of law—appear as weakness to totalitarians, and require a degree of patient bravery in the West's defenders that can sometimes be difficult to maintain. Nevertheless, the future of the West depends on maintaining our faith in freedom. Peddlers of fear are among the worst enemies of Western Civilization. We need to resist their message and embrace a vision of hope and inclusion, of faith in freedom, even in the face of a frightening and conflicted world.

⁶ Jane Merrick, "Exclusive: We share blame for creating 'jihad generation', says Muslim strategist," *The Independent*, 24 August 2014. <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/exclusive-we-share-blame-for-creating-jihad-generation-says-muslim-strategist-9687896.html>. Accessed 24 August 2014