

# THE APOSTATE

*Infidel*

*My Life*

Ayann Hirsi Ali

London: Simon & Schuster, 2007

*Reviewed by Edward Dutton*

Ayaan Hirsi Ali's political career was brief and dramatic. Born in Somalia in 1969, she is the daughter of Hirsi Magan Isse, a scholar and political dissident. She arrived in the Netherlands in 1992 as an asylum-seeker, learned the language, earned degrees in political science at Leiden University, and became an activist in the socialist Labor Party (one of Holland's biggest parties).

But Hirsi Ali became disillusioned with the Labor Party's cowardly refusal to confront the threat that unchecked Muslim immigration posed to the Netherlands' liberal political culture. She then joined the center-right People's Party for Freedom and Democracy, renounced Islam for atheism in 2002, and was elected to the Dutch parliament in 2003 (aged 34) as a vociferous critic of Islam in the Netherlands. Her 2004 screenplay about Islam's attitude to women—*Submission*—got its producer, Theo van Gogh, murdered. (The note pinned to van Gogh's body with a knife was a death threat addressed to Hirsi Ali.) She was forced into hiding, and Dutch taxpayers footed the bill for protecting her from her fellow immigrants: 3.5 million Euros, as of early 2007—only a sliver of the overall costs of diversity in the Netherlands.

A political crisis surrounding the legality of her asylum application led to the fall of a Dutch government in 2006. Stripped of her citizenship—ironically because of the policies she herself advocated—Hirsi Ali went to work for the American Enterprise Institute, a neo-conservative think tank based in the United States noted for opposing Islam in the Middle East, but not Islamic immigration to the United States and Europe. For all these reasons, she is very well-known in Europe, her fall being headline news all around the continent. Her autobiography, now in paperback, has been a best-seller.

*Infidel* tells the story of the author's conversion from fundamentalist

Islam to Western liberalism and finally to the “illiberal” desire to defend the Western way of life. The book is compelling reading for anybody interested in understanding Islam and the effect it will have—if unchecked—on the Western world.

*Infidel* is not an easy read. Much of it is like a horror film: you can't bear to look, but you can't bring yourself to look away. The tragedies of Hirsi Ali's life really have to be read to be believed. And, in some ways, they are made all the more horrific by her cold and detached style of writing (much like her style of speaking in interviews).

The narrative begins when Hirsi Ali is five years old. *Infidel* is immediately exciting in how it brings Somalia to life. We learn not only about its history, but also its clan-based culture. When Somalis meet, they list off each other's ancestors until they find a common one. A common ancestor means membership in the same clan, which brings immediate obligations of mutual aid. (Members of other clans can be left to starve.) Being members of different clans might also entail enmity because of feuds that could be centuries old. (This becomes interesting later in a Dutch refugee center where the well-meaning Netherlanders try to house Somalis from different tribes together.) Hirsi Ali recalls having to learn the names of her ancestors by heart, with her grandmother threatening to beat her if she gets them wrong. “Get it right!” the grandmother yells. “The names will make you strong.”

The cruelty of Somali childrearing is sickening: the lack of freedom, the genital mutilation, the almost total absence of genuine love. Hirsi Ali recalls parents forcing their children to fight to make them tough. She was once beaten so badly—by an Islamic teacher and her mother—that she almost died in the hospital. The pervasive superstition is also disturbing: “a father's curse is . . . a ticket straight to Hell” (p. 12); ancestors are prayed to; her illiterate grandmother, with whom she lived, thought the radio was “magic,” and the like (p. 25).

Because of her father's involvement in the Somali opposition movement, the family was forced to move to Saudi Arabia while Hirsi Ali was still a child. Saudi Islam is far stricter than Somali Islam. “You weren't naughty, you were sinful,” she explains. “Taking a bus with a man was *haram* [sin] . . . boys and girls playing together was *haram*” (p. 42). Wife-beating was commonplace. Also, “In Saudi Arabia everything was the fault of the Jews. . . . The children next door were taught to pray for the health of their parents and the destruction of the Jews” (p. 47). A rather daring young Somali woman whom Hirsi Ali came to admire was publicly flogged, then deported, because she had no

husband, which to the Saudis proved she was a prostitute (p. 51).

When Hirsi Ali was nine, the family fled Saudi Arabia to Ethiopia (which, to her mother's horror, is Christian) and then to Kenya. It was only in school in Kenya that Hirsi Ali discovered concepts such as "minutes, hours, years" (elegant proof of just how different Somalis are). It was also in Kenya that her independent temperament first awakened. Having reached puberty (for which her mother beat her), she was a proper woman. She took the veil and involved herself in Islamic fundamentalist activism. But she also learned English, romanticized Western ways of life, and even experimented with them.

Back in Somalia she started to become disillusioned with Islam: "I wanted to be someone, to stand on my own" (p. 132). She eloped with a boyfriend and married him (though Islam did not recognize the marriage). Then she fled an arranged marriage her father tried to impose upon her. (She idolized her father, who was generally absent from her childhood, until their relationship fell apart.) It is at this point that she managed to escape to Europe, eventually receiving asylum in the Netherlands. The second part of the book is entitled "My Freedom."

The first-hand account of life as an asylum-seeker in the Netherlands in the early 1990s is fascinating. Fluent in English and Somali, Hirsi Ali made herself indispensable as a translator, gaining valuable inside knowledge of the Dutch asylum system. She makes it clear that virtually every asylum seeker, including herself, lied to get into Holland. Once inside, Hirsi Ali came to love Holland and worked for its betterment. This is in stark contrast to most Somalis, who repay the generosity of their duped hosts with staggering hatred and ingratitude.

And, in truth, the Dutch establishment's naïve liberalism and suicidal "tolerance" of everything (except the desire to remain Dutch) is contemptible. Why do the Dutch insist on flooding their society with people who hold their permissive values in contempt? Is it some sort of suicidal self-hatred? Hirsi Ali was able to see Dutch liberalism from the outside and notice, unlike other liberals, its bizarre contradictions and hypocrisy. Ultimately, she parted company with the Left because she came to love Western civilization. Liberals, apparently, do not. Hence their mania to embrace those who would destroy them. The story of her break with the Left is truly inspiring.

The main problem I have with *Infidel* is that I just can't help wondering how accurate it is. Any autobiography is likely to be selective with the truth and cast its author in a positive light. Furthermore, Hirsi Ali is an admitted and proven liar (and not even particularly ashamed of it).

As she points out, in Islamic culture lying is far more acceptable than in the West if done for the sake of Jihad, family, or clan. The Hadith makes this fairly clear (Hadith 6303-05).

Hirsi Ali may, of course, have considered the possibility that the problem is not Islam *per se* but, as Alain de Benoist suggests, any monotheistic religion, which *ipso facto* entails not merely the affirmation that a god exists, but also the denial of the existence of other gods. This claim to an exclusive truth is the royal road to religious intolerance. The problem is compounded by the Biblical claim to provide revealed laws for governing ordinary life. In fact, considering that Hirsi Ali lived in the Netherlands, I'm surprised she didn't observe at least some parallels between Muslims and the conservative Calvinists in the north, where everybody wears black and women are not permitted to speak in church.

Reviewers have accused *Infidel* of simplistically lumping all Muslims together and of being "Islamophobic" which seems to mean "it hurts fundamentalist Muslims' feelings." Such criticisms are to be expected when a writer demonstrates that the liberal view of Islam is inaccurate. In most cases, these criticisms were anticipated and answered in the final chapter.

Ayann Hirsi Ali is evidently an intelligent and courageous woman. Often only an outsider can see a society with relative objectivity, and this is what Hirsi Ali does with Islam and the West's (especially Holland's) dealings with it. *Infidel* is undoubtedly emotive in tone, but its critiques of Islam and Western decadence are quite logical. Islam (like any monotheistic religion) is oppressive, anti-intellectual, and a threat to Western progress and freedom. We must stop it from gaining greater influence in Europe. We must overturn the restrictions on free speech imposed to insulate Islam and its European sponsors from criticism. *Infidel* may well persuade more people that we can't just sit back and hope Islam and other oppressors of free inquiry will go away. Like her, we must fight them. We will regret it if we ignore Ayann Hirsi Ali.

*Edward Dutton has a Ph.D. in the Anthropology of Religion. His book Meeting Jesus at University: Rites of Passage and Student Evangelicals (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2008) includes a chapter on religion in the Netherlands.*