

# Multiculturalism and Its Discontents - Why are liberals excusing religious abuses on grounds of cultural relativism?

Thursday 2 September 2010, by [JACOBY Susan](#) (Date first published: 19 August 2010).

I am an atheist with an affinity for non-fundamentalist religious believers whose faith has made room for secular knowledge. I am also a political liberal. I am not, however, a multiculturalist who believes that all cultures and religions are equally worthy of respect. And I find myself in a lonely place in relation to many liberals, political and religious, because I cannot accept a multiculturalism that tends to excuse, under the rubric of “tolerance,” religious and cultural practices that violate universal human rights.

The latest example of the Left’s blind spot on this issue is the antagonism of so many liberal reviewers toward Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s recent memoir, *Nomad*. The Somali-born Hirsi Ali immigrated to the United States in 2006 after her close friend, the Dutch film director Theo Van Gogh, was murdered by a radical Islamist. Hirsi Ali still needs bodyguards because of frequent death threats.

She was educated as a child in Muslim schools, subjected to genital mutilation, and broke with her family when she refused to consent to an arranged marriage. She first settled in Holland, where she worked as a Somali-Dutch interpreter, and her convictions about violence in many (though not, she emphasizes, all) Muslim families are rooted in her work with immigrants as well as her own upbringing. Yet Nicholas D. Kristof, reviewing *Nomad* for the *New York Times Book Review*, writes that “I couldn’t help thinking that perhaps Hirsi Ali’s family is dysfunctional simply because its members never learned to bite their tongues and just say to one another: ‘I love you.’”

I was startled by this patronizing comment, because I admire Kristof for being one of the few male columnists who writes frequently about violence against women. Somehow, “I love you” isn’t the first thing that would come to mind if I were being held down by female relatives while my clitoris was maimed or if my father told me I had to marry a stranger.

As a journalist, I have heard many similar observations from professors of religious and multicultural studies. Some have even suggested that dissidents like Hirsi Ali and Salman Rushdie have exaggerated the threats against them in order to promote their books. Such slanderous statements are invariably followed by, “This is off the record, you understand.” I do not agree with everything Hirsi Ali has to say — about Islam or the United States — but I strongly agree with the essential point she makes in *Nomad*:

*“Here is something I have learned the hard way, but which a lot of well-meaning people in the West have a hard time accepting: **All human beings are equal, but all cultures and religions are not.** A culture that celebrates femininity and considers women to be the masters of their own lives is better than a culture that mutilates girls’ genitals and confines them behind walls and veils or flogs and stones them for falling in love. . . . The culture of the Western Enlightenment is better.”* (italics [bold] in the original)

It is understandable that American liberals, and particularly religious liberals, are wary of anyone

who makes negative public judgments about other faiths. There is a long history of disrespect for various minority cultures and religions in America, although the Constitution and the First Amendment — products of Enlightenment secularism and Enlightenment-influenced religion — have (usually) stopped the disrespect from turning into bloodshed..

But it is one thing to recognize the legal right of all Americans to believe whatever they want and quite another to maintain that all belief systems are compatible with democracy. In a free society, religion should be no more immune to criticism than atheism, and the First Amendment does not give anyone carte blanche to violate secular law in the name of faith. This crucial distinction applies to all religions, not only to Islam.

In *Prince v. Massachusetts* (1944), the Supreme Court upheld the conviction of a Jehovah's Witness for violating state labor laws by requiring children to distribute religious literature at night. The Court declared: "The right to practice religion freely does not include liberty to expose the community or child to communicable diseases, or the latter to ill health or death. . . . Parents may be free to become martyrs themselves. But it does not follow [that] they are free . . . to make martyrs of their children."

In recent decades, state and federal courts have cited *Prince* in taking a much harder line against parents who deny standard, life-saving medical treatment to their children out of religious conviction. Similarly, polygamous religious sects do not have the right to force their minor daughters into "celestial marriage." And parents may not physically abuse their children because their religion sanctions corporal punishment.

Furthermore, the fact that some traditional religious and cultural practices are technically legal does not make them right. An 80-year-old friend of mine — a woman of forceful intellect who used to teach Renaissance history — now lives in a Florida retirement community where many of the part-time staff are teenaged children of recent Afghan immigrants. When my friend saw one of her favorite young Afghan-American women — a high school senior — weeping in the dining room, she asked what was wrong. "Oh, madam professor," the girl replied, "my father has arranged for me to meet my future husband. He is 40 years old, and the wedding will take place in six months. I wanted so much to go to college, and this will not be permitted."

My friend replied gently, "You know, Yasmin, you don't have to marry anyone in this country because your parents say so. There are organizations to help girls like you think these things through. There are college scholarships. I can give you the names of people to talk to." Another resident of this community sharply reproved my friend, saying, "We have no right to interfere with her culture, her religion, her family," Wrong. This type of "interference" — telling a troubled young woman that she has choices other than an arranged marriage — is exactly what a true liberal ought to be doing. The idea that someone should ignore the tears of a 17-year-old who says she is being pushed to give up her education is utterly perverse.

Finally, it is a politically strategic error as well as a form of moral blindness for liberals to push people like Hirsi Ali into the eager arms of the political Right. She is a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, and that alone is enough to make her a pariah to many liberals. Her thinking has clearly been influenced by the narrow prism of her colleagues — she is under the mistaken impression, for example, that most American feminists are indifferent to universal human rights — but liberals ought to be asking themselves why they never reached out to her.

AEI was, in fact, the only American think tank to offer Hirsi Ali a job when she needed one badly. Several years ago, I made repeated inquiries at the Brookings Institution and the Center for American Progress about this issue and was stonewalled by their press aides. Panderers to the

multicultural gods, in foundations and academia, often assert that religiously sanctioned violence against women and other human rights violations are matters of “tribe and culture, not religion.” But what is more central than religion to most of the world’s cultures?

This muddled thinking allows the American religious and political Right to misrepresent itself as the chief defender of Enlightenment values. More important, reflexive liberal multiculturalism fails every child being denied, in the name of faith and family, full access to the promise of this nation.

**SUSAN JACOBY**

---

---

**P.S.**

\* From Big Questions Online, Thursday, August 19, 2010:

<http://www.bigquestionsonline.com/columns/susan-jacoby/multiculturalism-and-its-discontents>

\* Susan Jacoby is the author of *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* and *The Age of American Unreason*.