



Free Speech in Europe

by Roger Scruton

IT IS PROBABLY WELL KNOWN to our readers that the British government, on the advice of Jacqui Smith, the Home Secretary, recently prevented Geert Wilders, a member of the Dutch parliament, from visiting Britain, to which country he had been invited in order to show his short film *Fitna* to a group of peers in the House of Lords. *Fitna* means “turning away” or “temptation,” and denotes the sin to which young Muslims are exposed in Western societies. The film purports to demonstrate the terroristic nature of the Koran and to give a warning against the Islamization of Europe. It has not been banned in Holland, but it is clearly a no-holds-barred attack on Islam as a creed and a social force.

Prominent among those agitating to keep Mr. Wilders out of Britain was a certain Lord Ahmed, one of those cronies of Tony Blair who were shot into the House of Lords some 12 years ago in order to turn that venerable institution into the yes-machine favored by New Labour. Lord Ahmed, who claims to be a Muslim, announced that he could muster thousands of the faithful in order to make Mr. Wilders’s visit a serious problem for the government. Rather than test this insolent remark as it demanded, the government went along with what it took to be Muslim opinion, and made no effort to defend Mr. Wilders’s right, as a member of one European parliament, to explain his views to another.

A short while later Lord Ahmed was jailed for driving his car on the motorway while drunk and sending text messages—eventually running into the back of a stationary car and killing the driver. Whether his lordship’s reputation as a voice of the faithful will survive this particular episode is anybody’s guess, but no doubt some other self-appointed



representative of the Muslim minority will step forward to dictate things the next time the Koran is threatened with a public examination.

I am fairly sure that Mr. Wilders’s exposition of the Koran and its doctrines is biased. Like many non-Muslim readers of the Holy Book, I have been struck by the way in which spurts of vindictive anger punctuate a narrative that is, in itself, a heartfelt invocation of the pious life, and a profoundly serious

attempt to reconcile the belief in the one God, all-seeing, all-knowing, with the moral chaos of human communities. I regret the fact that Muslims take this text to be the word of God, rather than a particular person's attempt to give human words to a revelation that he should have sat on a little bit longer before being sure he had got it right.

Like Mr. Wilders, I find parts of the Koran disturbing in their bloodthirsty and unforgiving anger. But I find the book of Joshua similarly disturbing from beginning to end. So what? The book of Joshua emerged from a life-and-death struggle, in which God was conscripted to the winning side. The same is true of the Koran, which is as clearly marked by a great emergency as is the book of Joshua. This is normal: only in the Gospels does God appear (to His inestimable credit) on the losing side.

All this can be said and should be said. There is no way forward for Europe if it isn't said. Whether it is right to say it in the tone of voice of Mr. Wilders is another matter. But free speech is not about permitting only those voices of which you approve. It is about understanding your own beliefs and the beliefs of those who disagree with you. It is about creating the public space in which truth and falsehood can openly contend for their following. Free speech is critical to all the other freedoms that we enjoy, and the impulse to defend it—and in particular to defend the free speech of those with whom you disagree, of whom you disapprove, or who have been targeted by some mob or faction determined to silence them—is proof of the democratic spirit. The capitulation of our government before the hazy threats of one of its own criminal cronies is a disturbing indication of how things have changed in Britain, and how they are changing on our continent. It would not be correct to say, as it was reputedly said by our then Foreign Secretary (Sir Edward Grey) in 1914, that “the lamps are going out all over Europe.” But our governments, who have the responsibility to keep those lamps alight, have no guts for the task.

WHY IS THIS? To answer the question we must see the Wilders episode in its full context: the context of the Netherlands, into which country, unresisted by the guilt-crippled liberal elite, whole communities of Muslims have immigrated from North Africa and the Near East. The Dutch are a tolerant and moderate people who never go to extremes except in showing how tolerant and moderate they are. They have ostentatiously

stepped down from the throne of their old convictions and left it vacant. But they never expected what immediately happened, which is that the immigrant

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communities jumped onto that throne and began to dictate the terms under which they would accept what had been offered, admittedly in bad faith, as hospitality. The Dutch were shocked and, without having any clear idea of what they were up against or how to confront it, changed overnight from a people tolerant of everything to a people tolerant of everything except intolerance.

This is the context that changed the Netherlands from a quiet place where nothing ever happens to the improvised stage on which the drama of Europe is played out. The film *Submission*, made by Theo van Gogh to a script by Somali immigrant, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, brought death to the director and exile to Hirsi Ali, by then a member of the Dutch parliament. In the meantime Pim Fortuyn, a leftist academic, had led his party to power on the strength of popular revulsion against the dictatorship of righteousness that the Muslim immigrants wished to impose. Fortuyn was assassinated by an animal rights activist, and his party collapsed in disarray. But nothing by then remained of the old Dutch consensus, in which toleration was the ruling principle.

Everything that happens in Holland is now closely watched by other European leaders, anxious to know where Europe itself is going. And when the opportunity arises to take sides in a Dutch issue—as in the Wilders affair—our governments rush in to show their political correctness. The fact that this involves jettisoning our inherited freedoms and the ground rules of democratic politics is of little significance, compared with the opportunity to show pre-

emptive acquiescence in whatever demands the Muslim minority might be prepared to make.

THE MAIN ARGUMENT PRODUCED BY those who censor people like Geert Wilders and Ayaan Hirsi Ali is not that their views should be silenced, but that their views should not be expressed

Even the most fervent democrat will admit that the right of free speech should not be used to stir up social conflict or destroy the civil peace. It is not just that you don't shout "Fire!" in a crowded theater. You don't shout "Sieg heil!" in a crowded synagogue, or "God is dead!" in a crowded mosque.

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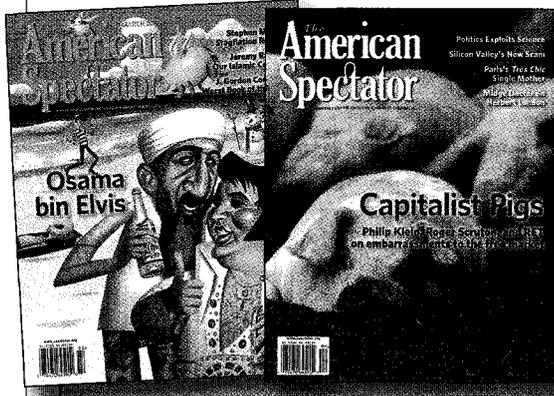
However, who is to decide what is, and what is not, a threat to the civil peace? It takes two to make a provocation, and while it is right to be provoked by some things, it is wrong to be provoked by others. If I am so constituted that any criticism in my presence

of the philosophy of Hegel causes me to boil over with anger and assault the speaker, does this make criticism of Hegel into a threat to the civil peace? Surely not: it is *I* who am a threat to the civil peace, and a true defender of free speech would have me locked up, rather than the anti-Hegelians who so enrage me.

Of course, criticism of the Koran is not quite the same thing as criticism of Hegel. But if we allow only those who resent such criticism to define how far it can go we are in effect surrendering to intimidation. It is for the community as a whole, and the politicians who represent us, to distinguish legitimate criticism from inflammatory provocation. To allow the issue to be settled, as at present, by the ostentatious outrage of Muslims is to surrender in the face of threat.

Just where all this is leading is anyone's guess. Nobody (other than al Qaeda) wants to change the resentments of Muslim communities in Europe into a state of open war. We are entering a situation that must be carefully managed if our legal and political inheritance is to survive. But one way of mismanaging the situation is to allow a belligerent minority to dictate terms to the rest of us. Our governments must face up to the fact that Geert Wilders was elected to the Dutch parliament, and enjoys considerable popularity, precisely *because* he has not been intimidated. You may not like what he says or his way of saying it, but it is people like him, and not the ones who censor them, who are defending the political order of Europe. ❁

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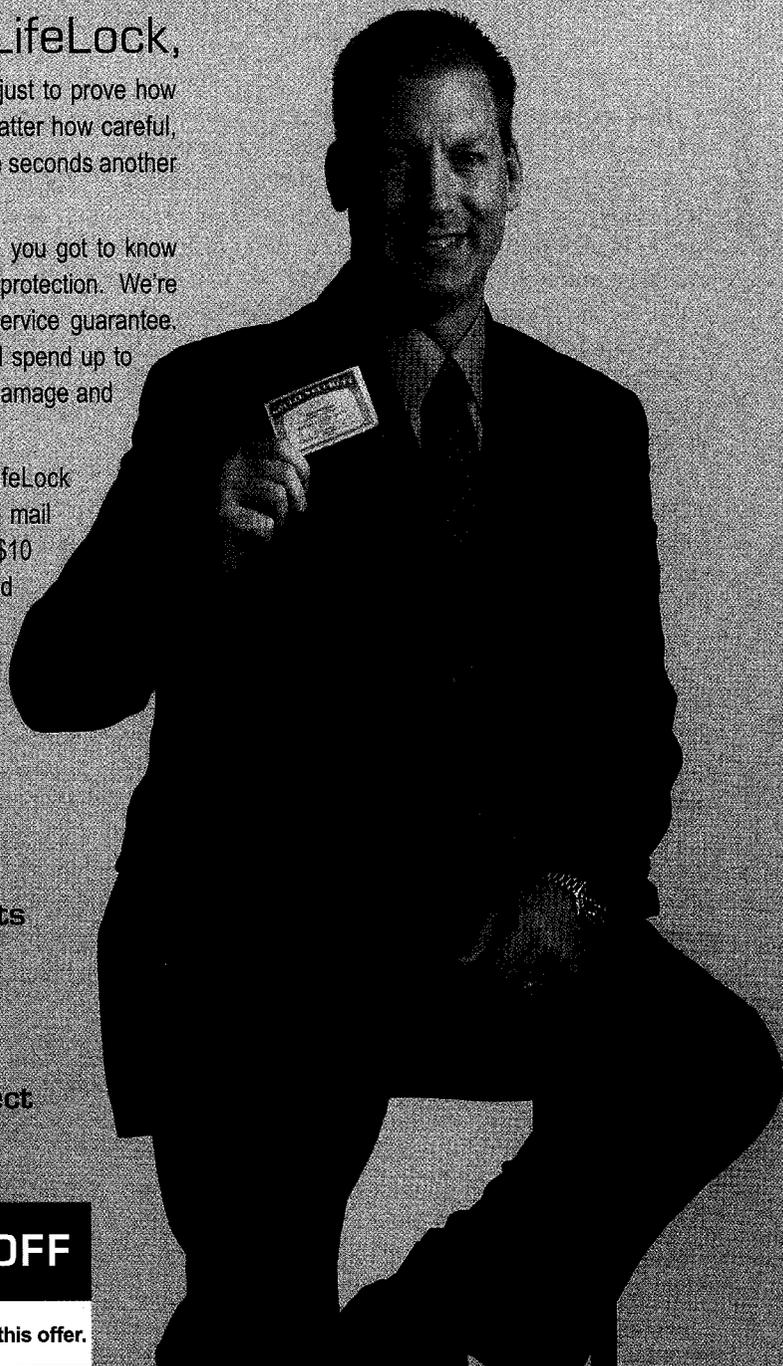
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Killing *Time*

by William Murchison

IT ISN'T NEWSPAPERS ALONE that seem dazed by the challenge of just staying alive amid the ruins left by technological revolution. A less-noticed casualty is the venerable newsmagazine—70 or 80 pages each week of allegedly discerning interpretation and analysis, aimed at the educated, middle- to upper-middle-class reader, serious in his concerns, or mostly so; interested, glancingly at least, in a wide range of current topics; at worst, desirous of passing himself at the clubhouse or the church door as more than your average beer-guzzling know-nothing.

Oh, those days! As you'll know or intuit, they are no more. *U.S. News & World Report*, formerly a weekly, is a monthly digital magazine, with "embedded video and audio podcasts." *Newsweek*, long owned by the *Washington Post*, is reportedly contemplating a makeover as a shaper of thought rather than a reporter of events. *Time* marches on, but...

The "but" is considerable, revealing as much about Americans as about the journalism they commission through the deployment of their money at newsstands and subscription offices. Or elsewhere.

The Henry Luce style of magazine writing discourages the personal, but I would fall short of the present mark if I were not to disclose my lost romance with *Time*. *Time*, which came into my parents' household (along with *Life*) during the '50s, taught me to read and, in reading, react: punch back, cogitate, or just laugh. The old *Time* wasn't junk food. The new *Time*—for all its red-bordered sense of importance and its profitable standing in the marketplace, is pure Quarter Pounder with cheese and fries. The dumbing down of America is what it represents.

It's been coming on a while. I can't quite remember when I quit subscribing to *Time*. It might have been the mid-'70s; likely earlier, when its sparkle faded altogether. "[O]ur mission at *Time*," confesses *Time*'s present editor, Richard Stengel, "is to help you navigate this new world." Dammit, sir, it's a good thing I already know a bit about the world, because the new *Time* would be content if I just wandered around to my heart's content.

In today's journalism market, the newsmagazine isn't about news. No, no, it's about views and

tastes—of which everybody, apparently, has some. *Time* in its heyday, under its surviving co-founder Henry Luce, had views aplenty, generally of the centrist Republican sort. It so happened that underlying those views was an appreciation of wisdom and culture, which appreciation is missing almost entirely from the present *Time*.

The old *Time* spoke to an audience (according to a 1939 poll) comprising 60 percent businessmen and women and 18.5 percent professional persons—doctors, lawyers, and the like. "Our journalism," said Luce, "is concerned with the middle and upper-middle class"—a class one might assume was burdened with education, curiosity, and taste.

Ahead lay the late 20th and early 21st centuries, with their peculiar obsessions, such as the equivalency of all knowledge areas, the need to dismiss standards in learning, and, feeding those obsessions, the technological style in news-gathering and presentation: everything fast, everything knowable the minute you want to know it. The old *Time*, and the other newsmagazines, were framed on the need to know and understand a broad range of events and ideas. What you want to know these days is pretty much up to you, the lonely voyager through oceans of blogs and websites. You pays your money, and you takes your choice.

Newsweek's reported quest to become an interpretative authority makes sense within the modern context of technology-driven journalism. But technology doesn't account entirely for the decline of *Time*. Education does. Culture does.

JUST A MINUTE HERE. What is going on at *Time*? I checked the March 16 edition. It sure wasn't the *Time* of yore: sophisticated, self-confident. This was a *Time* looking not so much as to inform its reader as to send him away with a friendly squeeze of the arm.

We started in the March 16 edition with "10 Questions." Go ahead—ask the "Interview Subject of the Day"—on this occasion, Louisiana Gov. Bobby Jindal. Read a feature story about George W. Bush, "home" at last in Crawford, Texas (despite his pur-