# Letter to the TLS, February 4, 2011

Sir,

In the issue for January 21st I was glad to find that by an accident of layout a poem of mine had been printed next to a photograph of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, but the shine of the juxtaposition was rather dulled by Tim Winter’s review of her new book. Personally I can’t see why she thinks that all the religious Islamic men who behave murderously towards women would behave less murderously if they became atheists, but surely it isn’t hard to see why she would hope so. If “there remains something formulaic about her pilgrimage from Muslim to atheist certainty”, wouldn’t that be because there was something even more formulaic about the determination of men in her religion — or in her local branch of that religion, if you wish — to mutilate their female children? Just such a dreadful thing happened to her, yet she wishes for her assailants nothing worse than a change of mind, while they, for her, wish death.

And why shouldn’t Ayaan Hirsi Ali, no matter how enslaved to the American Enterprise Unit, find the Archbishop of Canterbury one of the “accomplices of jihad” and “a cultural and moral relativist” (her phrase each time, and each time quoted scornfully by her reviewer), if the Archbishop is so keen to open a window, be it ever so small, for Sharia to make its way into British law? You don’t have to be an atheist to decide that the Archbishop, one of the most learned men of his calling, is, on this issue, as dense as plutonium. When Ayaan Hirsi Ali hears about Sharia getting within a hundred miles of any democratic legal system, she feels it like a knife, or a razor. Is that so hard to understand?

Apparently it is. At a time when British police have truly distinguished themselves by at last requesting potential victims of honour crimes to report death threats, we have a piquant state of affairs in which Tim Winter, a lecturer in Islamic studies at Cambridge University, thinks that the first thing we have to understand is the “twentieth-century Muslim debate on Islamic law and modernity.” But surely, while we wait for the results of that debate to come in, the first thing to understand is that the men of the Islamic minorities in the democratic countries should be prevailed upon to honour the law of the land before they concern themselves with the supposed honour of their families. They simply must be induced, if not by persuasion then by punishment, to stop cutting up and killing their women. Otherwise there will be little hope for Islam within democratic borders.

Nominally concerned with how Islam is being provoked by “this mobilization for a Kulturkampf”, Mr Winter seems reluctant to face just how provoking Islam itself can be. He was explicit enough when he condemned terrorism. “Targeting civilians,” he said, “is a negation of every possible school of Sunni Islam.” That left in the air the question about all the schools of Islam that weren’t Sunni, but at least he seemed aware that the matter could be decided on principle, in conformity with the law of any free country, and was not up for a protracted learned discussion within the religion. With regard to genital mutilation and honour crimes, he seems harder to pin down. The “debate on Islamic law and modernity” is all very well, but what we want is something better than the silence of the majority on the subject: we want a clear condemnation, and especially from the intellectuals. Notoriously, Tariq Ramadan, when pressed, was unable to give this. It’s Mr Winter’s turn, and I hope he won’t complain that he has been put on the spot. He was on the spot from the moment he picked up Ayaan Hirsi Ali’s book. She outranks him. She might know less than he does, but what she does know, she has felt on her skin.

Clive James