

CONVERSATIONS WITH *AYAAN HIRSI ALI*

EXCLUSIVE DONOR EDITION

June 2026

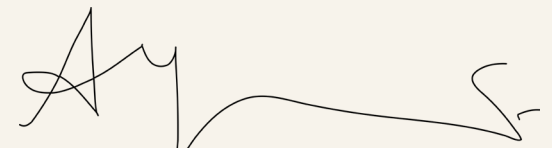


Freedom Women's Rights Restoring the West

Inspired by Ayaan's
Most Influential Essays
and Lectures



If you wonder why I—a woman of color, an African, a former Muslim, a former asylum seeker, and an immigrant—look at the antics of today’s anti-Israel, anti-American protesters with such fear and trembling, allow me to explain.


Ayaan Hirsi Ali

DEFENDING FREEDOM OF SPEECH

“Why is freedom valuable? To me, it is valuable because all other freedoms in a democratic society are meaningless without the freedom of speech. You cannot have freedom of religion without freedom of speech. You cannot have the freedom to assemble without freedom of speech. You cannot have any kind of freedom without the freedom of speech.”

— Ayaan Hirsi Ali

From the day her life was threatened and a fatwa was issued against her after the murder of Theo van Gogh, Ayaan Hirsi Ali has made the defense of free speech integral to her life’s work.

Where most would have stepped back, she stepped forward—seeing that moment as her call to action to ensure those who seek to silence dissent do not prevail. Through AHA Foundation, she has carried that fight into every arena, working to rescue our education system from ideologues and anti-liberty propagandists. For Ayaan, protecting young minds—our future leaders—means ensuring they can learn and embrace the values that have sustained open societies and democracies for centuries.



Trey: You’ve been a staunch supporter of free speech since moving to the West, especially during the height of cancel culture. How has your upbringing influenced this commitment?

Ayaan: Free speech enables people to explore controversial ideas and voice their own perspectives. My personal history of being silenced makes me especially protective of this right; once I finally experienced the liberty to think and speak for myself, it became something I could never give up.

When I was young, I grew up in countries like Somalia, Kenya, and Saudi Arabia. In Saudi Arabia and Somalia, in particular, universal human rights as we understand that term in the West do not yet apply. In Saudi Arabia, commanding right and forbidding wrong as determined by Sharia remains the law of the land, although the current Crown Prince appears to be seeking a different course. In many countries today, freedom of speech, especially for a woman, is not guaranteed. If you step out of line, you can be punished.

In my own life, I have witnessed restrictions within the household and within society at large. In Somalia, when I was a young child, the country was under the rule of a dictator, Siad Barre. There was zero tolerance for opinions opposing his authority. He abolished all political parties except for his own and squashed anything he saw as a threat to his control. Dissidence or even mild dissent was met with swift imprisonment. Those who favored charting a different political course—people like my father—faced prison or had to go into exile, or both.

When I escaped to the Netherlands and later enrolled at Leiden University, a whole new world opened up to me. The freedom of expression that I found in Holland—the freedom to think critically—is unknown where I come from. It is a right and practice that I always dreamed of having as I was growing up. Whatever its flaws, no nation understands the principle of free expression better than the Dutch. It runs so deep in Dutch culture that while I was a member of the Dutch Parliament, I received protection from death threats, even as some top figures in Dutch politics told me they strongly disagreed with my ideas.

Since coming to the West, I have since been fascinated with how deeply most people in this part of the world

are committed to the idea of an open society. Even though the open society is vulnerable, it is also stubborn. It is the place I ran to for safety and freedom. And I would like to keep it that way: safe and free. There is an irony: some people who were born into this open society appear unable to appreciate the ethical advantages an open society confers over closed societies.

“We lulled ourselves into a false sense of security. For while we were distracted by Islamist intolerance, Islamist terrorism, and maybe the demands of daily life, other forms of intolerance were being seeded and cultivated in our universities, schools, media, healthcare facilities, administrative government, political parties, and large corporations.”

Trey: How have threats to free speech in the West evolved over the past three decades?

Ayaan: In 1989 Ayatollah Khomeini, then supreme leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran issued a fatwa against the British author Salman Rushdie for a novel he wrote titled “The SatanicVerses”. This event sparked a debate between the West and Islam on the boundaries of speech. Margaret Thatcher, back then Prime Minister of Britain is quoted by the British journalist, Charles Moore in her response as having said: “Whether or not we have any sympathy with Rushdie’s views is not the point. We must react strongly to any state murder-hunt made against one of our citizens.”

The author Rushdie and the politician Thatcher were on either side of the left/right political spectrum. She points out the irrelevance of political differences and is solid in her conviction that the protection of the author is a matter of principle rather than politics.

It is very interesting to look back at the last three decades in the West and to see how attitudes to free speech have changed dramatically. Three things stand out in that timeline:

First, the threat to Free Speech inside the West in 1989 was perceived to be FOREIGN. Even though many commentators blamed Rushdie for provoking the ire of the Ayatollah, the intolerance of speech to the point of seeking to murder the offender was something that came from outside the West. Back then, it was thought—maybe even taken for granted—that Westerners had reached almost perfect consensus on the matter of saying, inquiring, writing, publishing, painting, drawing, singing, and producing any kind of content one wanted. It was left to audiences to decide what they wanted to pay attention to and what they wanted to ignore.

Sure, there were still controversies on what content might be regarded as offensive. Citizens sued their governments and one another on grounds such as defamation, libel, and slander but always accepted the final verdict of the courts. The idea that offensive speech was to be punished with fines, time in prison or capital punishment as in Rushdie’s case was thought of in the West as something foreign or something from the annals of history. Even better, on the matter of fictional output such as movies and novels anyone who felt aggrieved enough to complain to the courts was viewed as a narrow-minded loser. Matters of fact [non-fiction works] were reviewed based on such criteria as evidence, logical rigor, and coherence rather than emotional standards. When I came to the Netherlands thirty years ago that was the Western society I found: free, tolerant, and prosperous.

The second thing that stands out is the response in Western society to the religious intolerance exhibited by some members of the Muslim communities who live in the West. There was the heinous murder of Theo van Gogh; the killing of the Charlie Hebdo journalists, the crazed reaction to the cartoons of the prophet Muham-



mad in Denmark and in France; the relentless threats against Muslims who chose to leave their faith like me, or who criticized its intolerant and violent components. At first, the native populations of Europe and the U.S. reacted to this intolerance with horror. Most Westerners condemned the people who took offense as intolerant and backward.

It is true that a number of commentators from the media, politics, and the universities chastised those allegedly guilty of the provocation and urged the wider society to be patient with their Muslim minorities. In any case, the assault on the freedom of speech and conscience of those accused of provocation was seen as NARROW IN

SCOPE. Muslims were seen as a minority—new to the West—for whom religious identity is salient and who will one day learn the virtues of freedom and tolerance.

A key feature of this threat was that this particular minority seemed to want to silence only critics of their religion and did not interfere in other matters. The solution to this was seen as simple: steer clear of anything that could possibly antagonize the religious sensibility of any Muslim individual or group. Do that for as long as it takes this minority to catch up with the rest of society. If that is not a perfect solution, but a containment strategy, then so be it. For some problems, there is no such thing as a perfect answer.

Taken together, and this is the third thing I want to pinpoint, you could say that Western leaders concluded to stand up to: A) any foreign threats to our freedoms and B) to manage the intolerance within the Muslim communities with patience and as needed. End of story?

But we lulled ourselves into a false sense of security. For while we were distracted by Islamist intolerance, Islamist terrorism, and maybe the demands of daily life, other forms of intolerance were being seeded and cultivated in our universities, schools, media, healthcare facilities, administrative government, political parties, and large corporations.

The ideology that rose most recently and threatens Free Speech is Wokeism. It has potential. has the potential to ruin our societies is a different one. It is not foreign and it is not Islamic. It goes by many names, but I will call it Wokeism.

Trey: Wokeism is a term used frequently, yet it often resists easy definition. How do you define it, and why is it so elusive?

Ayaan: Wokeism, say those who have studied it, is an amalgam of postmodernist theories. I highly recommend the works of British author Helen Pluckrose and American mathematician James Lindsay if you need a primer on what Wokeism is. Especially their book Cynical Theories.

Mad minds like Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and Michelle Foucault cooked up the original woke potion in France because they were disappointed with the fruits of the Enlightenment. American scholars—many of them black—built their activism against racism, perceived or real, on this shaky house of theories. Legal Scholar, Derrick Bell, developed it further and centered it around ‘race.’ What was ‘Critical Theory’ became Critical Race Theory. Kimberle Crenshaw (another black scholar) seasoned it with something she called ‘intersectionality’.

Aggrieved members of the Gay community expanded these ideas further and intellectual conmen and women like Robin DiAngelo and Ibram X. Kendi monetized it. One reason why it is difficult to pin down Wokeism is that their theories of deconstruction are constantly expanded with grievance after grievance. They claim to possess a

skepticism that deconstructs existing metanarratives that favor groups who hold power and the structures they set up to maintain that power.

But then the woke reject the skepticism of the scientific revolution: that of the pursuit of inquiry using objective criteria to get to the bottom of things or the truth and then embarking on the process of bringing about the necessary changes. In other words, they have their own metanarrative and its objective is to deconstruct society into pieces. Literally! Race, gender, sexual orientation, disability...

“Sometimes I think this ambiguity is intentional. If you can pin an idea down, you can expose it and accept its conclusions or reject them. But if its meaning keeps shifting with the grievance of the day, it becomes elusive.”



Another key element is the contamination of language. Wokeism comes with its own lexicon. You may have heard Wokespeak—words like microaggressions, safe spaces, equity, diversity, non-binary, cultural appropriation. It also has its bureaucratic acronyms: DEI (Diversity, Equity and Inclusion); ESG (Environmental and Social Governance), LGBTQ... and even more sinister ones like MAPS (Minor Attracted Persons): let that sink in.

Under this ideology, our existing language is constantly policed to become ‘purified’ of any perceived bigotry and injustice, understood only as the woke understand these things. The main goal of the woke is to seek unchecked and absolute power, advancing from the academy and out into the other institutions of society. And into the streets.

In America and the rest of the English-speaking world there is no issue of any significance that we can discuss in any meaningful way without running into Woke sabotage. Think about the challenges we face. From globalization, national identity and immigration; to inequality; healthcare; radical Islamism; the pandemic; climate change; the threat of authoritarian great powers like China and Russia; new technologies such as AI and the opportunities and threats they introduce. None of these issues is free of wokespeak and in almost every case we tend to bend towards where the arc of wokeness leads.

Trey: Why do you see woke ideology as dangerous, and how does it compare to other harmful ideologies?

Ayaan: In fact, in a spooky way, Wokeism has remarkable similarities with white supremacy; and with Islamism; it is inherently hostile to women and gay people; and worst of all, in practice, it ruins the lives of those who live with gender dysphoria.

In what way, you might ask? Like white supremacists, the woke rank human beings into races, with the white-skinned people still on top, except this time as the top oppressors of all other races. In the Woke rankings, as in the white supremacists’ ideology, various shades of skin color are distinguished. Some brown-skinned people the woke tell us are ‘white adjacent.’ But blacks are still placed at the bottom this time, as ultimate victims.

According to the woke, merit, punctuality, hard work, hygiene, individualism, objective truth, and the notion of lifting yourself by your bootstraps—all of these things are manifestations of whiteness. That, of course, implies that mediocrity, tardiness, laziness, filth, tribalism, superstition, and lack of ambition are inherently the traits of non-white peoples.

Colonialism, as was practiced by whites (Britain, France, Spain, Portugal, and the Netherlands) is scrutinized for all kinds of sins of oppression and condemned but non-white empires (the Han Chinese, the Moghuls, the Muslim empires) and their barbarities are ignored. America’s past of holding slaves and America’s treatment of indigenous peoples is constantly litigated but black and brown people’s role in slavery, in producing slaves, trading them, and still perpetuating it to this day is completely ignored. According to the worldview of the woke, only white people are capable of reckoning with their history. Only white people are fit enough to be held accountable for their actions. If that is not racism, you tell me what is!!

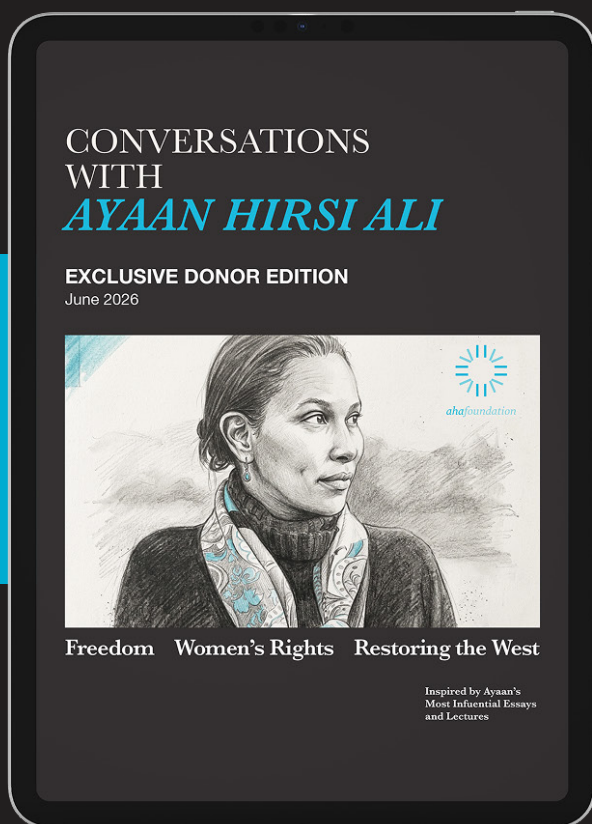
The woke and the white supremacists are both antisemitic: If you are Jewish, you are categorized by them as white. Never mind that just 77 years ago, a serious attempt was made to eliminate all Jews because they were considered pollutants to the white race. The woke hate the state of Israel and they freely indulge in conspiracy theories about the Jews. For those of us who recognize it as the threat it is, I believe we have no option but to fight it in just the way we fought the other bad ideologies such as white supremacy and Islamism.

Read more about TOPICS IN THIS CHAPTER:
• What about free speech in the West? University of Lucerne (October 2022)



ahafoundation

Give a gift and join AHA Foundation
Donor Circles to receive the full
donor exclusive e-book.



Scan to
discover the
full story

AHA Foundation 5237
River Road, Suite 333
Bethesda, MD 20816

TheAHAFoundation.org

AHA Foundation is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization committed to preserving, protecting, and promoting Liberal freedoms and ideals.