

Geraldine Bedell on an eloquent examination of Islam's place in modern Europe

## Antidote to absolutism

### Murder in Amsterdam

by Ian Buruma

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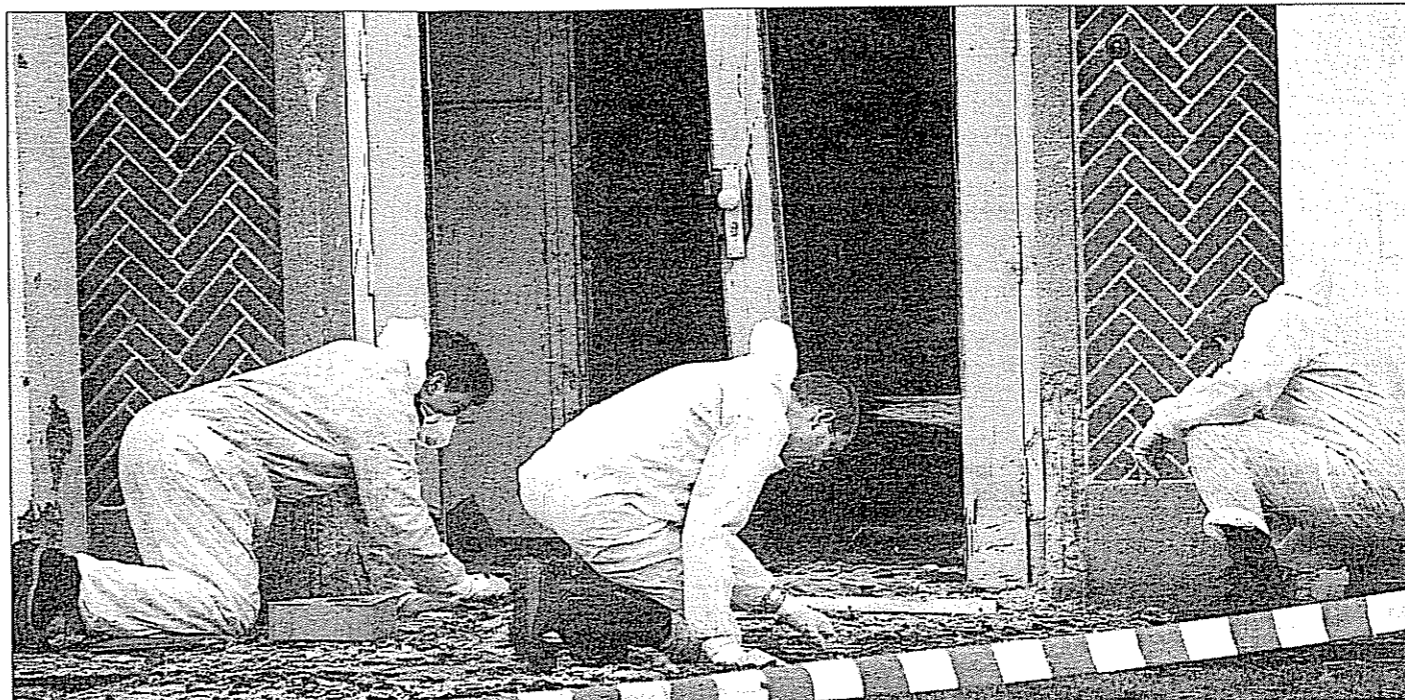
On November 2, 2004, the Dutch film-maker Theo van Gogh was shot in the stomach while cycling to work. He staggered across the street, where his killer shot him several more times, then pulled out a machete and cut his throat, "as though slashing a tyre", according to a witness. Van Gogh's murderer, a Moroccan Dutchman, Mohammed Bouyeri, pinned to the dead man's chest a note seething with Islamist rhetoric. The Dutch was stilted, possibly reflecting the patchiness of Bouyeri's education, possibly from having been translated from Arabic into English for consumption via the internet, then into Dutch.

Ian Buruma, who is half-Dutch, half-British, grew up in the Netherlands and is currently Luce professor at Bard College in New York. Following Van Gogh's murder, he conceived the idea of returning to the country he left when he was 23 to try to understand the historical forces and individual histories that led to this killing in one of Europe's most apparently tolerant and well-adjusted cities.

Buruma quotes the remarkable statistic that in 1999 45% of the population of Amsterdam was of foreign origin. If current projections are correct, this will be 52% by 2015. The Netherlands are, in some senses, a special case, but the question this book poses is one that is becoming urgent all over Europe: how to make such people and, in particular, second- and third-generation immigrants, feel at home in secular liberal societies where many customs and values seem to flout and even mock their own.

Theo van Gogh liked to portray himself as a kind of licensed jester, the "village idiot" in his own words, who was allowed to say the unsayable because you were never quite sure how much he meant. He was a provocateur who published diatribes against Jews and Christians as well as Muslims, as well as many former friends. A rebel with a noxious turn of phrase, he rallied to the side of anyone who was prepared to defy convention. With the Somali-Dutch politician Ayaan Hirsi Ali, he made a film, *Submission*, in which verses from the Qur'an were projected on the women's naked bodies in a not very subtle attempt to display the oppression of women in Muslim communities.

Since his death, what Buruma calls the



Violent hostility... a forensic team at an Islamic school in Eindhoven attacked following Theo van Gogh's murder. Photo: Robert Vos/Getty Images

"Friends of Theo" have sought to portray him as standing for Enlightenment values: secularism, science, equality between men and women, individualism and the freedom to criticise without fear of violent retribution. In the other corner stand revealed truth, male domination and tribal honour. No contest, you might think. When the Dutch anti-immigration politician Pim Fortuyn (who was also murdered, though not by a Muslim) was asked about his hostility to Islam, he said: "I have no desire to go through the emancipation of women and homosexuals all over again." Quite.

But the great strength of Buruma's book, which is part reportage, part essay, is to demonstrate that such stark oppositions are not only inadequate to describe what is happening, but liable to inflame hostility. He shows that Enlightenment values have been commandeered by conservatives who think multiculturalism has gone "too far" and who parade their commitment to them as a badge of national and cultural identity. Enlighten-

ment values are, for them, not merely universal, since they derive from reason, but they are "our" universals, rooted in western culture. In that sense they are a mirror image of the promised purity of modern Islam. Two hostile versions of absolute truth square up against each other, derived from different cultures, each with a mission to override culture and draw in the deracinated.

Mohammed Bouyeri's story is distinctively Dutch, but, at the same time, disturbingly similar to the stories of the 7/7 and Madrid bombers and even to that of Mohamed Atta, who was radicalised in Hamburg. You can see the same initial attraction to European lifestyles: sex and drugs and alcohol and partying; the same sense of rootlessness, of feeling neither one thing nor the other; the same influence of a radical imam and the seeking out of Islamist tracts on the internet; the same global sense of Muslim victimhood.

Buruma offers no easy ways in which "old" Europeans — mainly white, Christian or post-

Christian — can deal with this. That we must respond, however, is certain. Bouyeri's radicalisation seems to have begun when his sister found a boyfriend. For his sister to have sex was to impugn the family's honour. Bouyeri's values were at odds with the prevailing attitudes of his native city. But the point, for Buruma, is that he did not feel sufficiently at home to look for an accommodation.

Bouyeri chose, instead, to retreat, to imagine himself overwhelmed by a great force, to conceive of himself as a player in a utopian narrative, because that was more consoling than feeling threatened, torn by his uneasy existence between two cultures. For Buruma, the choice of future Mohammed Bouyeris depends on whether their fellow citizens are prepared to accept orthodox Muslims as fully paid-up, equal Europeans. "Attacking religion cannot be the answer," Buruma writes, "for the real threat to a mixed society will come when the mainstream of non-revolutionary Muslims have lost all hope of feeling at home." *Observer*