

357 Speakers Series- La Série 357 – The Future of Europe/L'Europe de Demain

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Is Europe up to multiculturalism?

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This is an edited transcript of Christopher Hitchens speech at Club 357 in Montreal. Mr. Hitchens is acclaimed as one of the most important thinker, essayist and journalist of his generation

Je m'excuse, parce que je ne parle pas parfaitement la langue magnifique de Racine, Voltaire, Camus, et cetera, but I can understand your questions even if you won't understand my answers.

We'll take questions, incidentally, on any subject. From George Orwell, if you like, one of my subjects, to Thomas Paine, if you prefer -- les Droits de l'Homme -- to le Moyen Orient, Mesopotamie, et cetera, and Thomas Jefferson, if you insist, whose biographer I am. I mention him because I'm sometimes asked, when I lecture about Thomas Jefferson, what would surprise him the most if he could come back. And I say that the thing that would surprise him the most would be American womanhood. The emancipation of American women probably would surprise him the most. The other would be mixed marriage -- not unrelated -- to which he made a huge contribution, in a private way. And maybe the transition of America from an agrarian to an industrial power would shock him, too. But most of all, he would be horrified that the United States has not yet occupied Canada. He would want to know, has our youth been asleep? Where are our ideals? Can it be that the British flag still flies over Quebec? I just felt like I might mention it.

As for the subject about which I promised to speak, the continent of Europe and the current crisis, or crises, I would say I'd want to offer three observations, or three topics. Though it can be a mistake when a speaker

says, I have three, because people start to count and look at their watches and then shake their watches as if they were in church. Still, I think for the sake of order and reason I should say what they are going to be.

Europe, in my judgment, has three very major crises at present. The first is its confrontation with Islam and Islamism. The second is the rise of the new Russia, and the third is the question of whether Turkey should be discussed as if it were European or not. I hope if I say these things in advance, you will understand that the three are intimately, immediately connected and related. I only segment them, or separate them as topics, for the sake of economy.

On the first point, it has struck me for a very long time that the attack mounted by the Muslim world on the very small European country of Denmark, a couple of years ago, was one of those events that when we look back on it will become much larger than it seemed at the time. It will assume a much greater importance than it appeared to possess at the moment it occurred.

I would ask you to recall the situation. An afternoon newspaper in Copenhagen, called Jyllands-Posten, the Post of Jutland, to be translated, publishes some cartoons -- you'll remember this -- that appear to lampoon, by representation, the Prophet Mohammed. An organized international protest, a pre-organized international protest, occurs against this, which involves the boycott of Danish businesses all across the Muslim and Arab world, the burning of Danish embassies and the assassination of Danish individuals in countries where protests are not normally allowed. For example, the Danish embassy in Damascus was torched. Usually, the Syrian police don't allow demonstrators in the middle of Damascus. Yet for this, apparently, protests seemed somehow to be possible. Danish goods, as I said, were boycotted.

But more than that, more than this controlled and obviously exploited violence -- which is so commonplace now on other questions that we've almost become too used to it -- there were two further things that I think should have been noticed more than the violence.

The first is this: every ambassador of a Muslim country to Copenhagen -- from the ambassador of Indonesia to the ambassador of Morocco to the ambassador even of Turkey -- formed up in a group and demanded to see the Danish prime minister, to tell him that this violence and this boycott would not end until he changed Danish law and told the newspapers in Denmark that they may not publish these cartoons. The prime minister said, I can't meet you on this point, I'm not allowed to

simply change Danish laws and issue edicts of this kind. They said: you didn't hear us the first time. We're the ambassadors of some twenty countries. We insist that you change your country's laws.

Consider the implications of this, if you will, just for a second, ladies and gentlemen. These are ambassadors of nations and states and countries that are represented at the United Nations. They wanted to be received as if they represented not their countries, not their republics, not their nations, not their states, but a religion. In the heart of Europe, these ambassadors were saying, if you won't change your rules, our diplomatic relations, our military relations and our interstate relations with you, will all be altered correspondingly. And they were saying, we have as our secret weapon, Muslim populations within your own countries who may possibly -- they hinted, they wouldn't of course say it outright -- use violence against you and against your social conventions. This was a completely unprecedented form of moral blackmail, backed by the believable threat of physical force. And it was happening in the very heart of Europe.

After Pope Benedict, as he calls himself -- Joseph Ratzinger as he will always be to me -- had offended the Muslim world with a rather ill-judged, I think, speech, based on the statements of a Byzantine emperor critical of Islam, he was forced, in his capacity as head of a government, Vatican City, not as head of the church, to receive the same delegation of ambassadors at Castel Gandolfo. They were, in effect, acting as potentates to be consulted with, about his right to speak on these matters.

This has all happened without our knowing. Suddenly, there was a phalanx of ambassadors acting not as representatives of a foreign power, not as diplomats, but as the spokesmen of a religion. Egypt has a Christian population of 25%, Turkey claims not to be a Muslim state, in Indonesia there is a Christian population of perhaps 10%, in Morocco and Tunisia there are large Jewish minorities. But no, the representatives of these countries all claim they speak only for Islam. And this phalanx of ambassadors in the heart of Europe demanded that laws on free speech and behaviour be altered, lest worse befall, lest there be cruelty and violence on European streets.

And this week, in Britain, my country of birth, it has been agreed by the British government that Muslims can resort to sharia courts on matters of inheritance, property, sexual, marital and other rights. In other words, something that began in 1215 with the Magna Carta, something that took long struggle to say and to make believable, that everyone on our soil lives under the same law and no one is above it, no one is outside it, no

one is below it, everyone can be protected by it, is now a lie. It is no longer true.

Does anyone believe that if the Jewish community had asked for this, that they would have got it? No. (Someone in the audience: They have it.) No, the Beit Din is a different thing. Does anyone believe that the Hindu community if they had asked for a separate court would have got it? No. Does anyone believe that it is not because of the believable threat of violence, that Muslims have got this exception? Can I phrase the question in that way? I think you'll understand why I'm doing so.

This is going to happen in Belgium, it has already happened in Holland, in Germany, in France and elsewhere. And it is not going to stop, as long as people allow those who are the enemies of multiculturalism to pose as its friends, if I can put it dialectically. You may well say you are for multiculturalism and you may well be for it, as in some ways I am. But you can't be for multiculturalism if you are a Muslim activist who says that all Jews should be killed, all Hindus are profane because they're not monotheistic, all Christians are heretics, all atheists are infidels and so forth. That's not multiculturalism. That's not adding to the gorgeous mosaic. That's calling not for multiversity, but for uniformity. Is Europe up to this challenge? My very serious doubt is that it is not. And some of its most important moral and political leaders are surrendering to what is obviously blackmail.

Second is the question of Russia. When Vladimir Putin came to see George Bush about eight years ago, wearing his grandmother's crucifix around his neck, you'll recall that President Bush reported that the crucifix alone was evidence of the man's integrity, but that he additionally had looked into Putin's eyes and into his soul and seen what a grand compadre he was. I think we can say that in a quite strong field of stupid remarks made by the President of the United States, that's the dumbest yet. And I'd have to add that it was a faith-based dumb remark, because most faith-based remarks tend to be, well...don't get me started on that.

At the time, though, I would have to say that probably quite a lot of people were under the same illusion. They thought, it doesn't really matter what you say to this old KGB hack and goon. Russia is so bankrupt, it is demographically slumped, its expectation of life for a man is maybe 55, for a woman maybe 56 -- it is off the map, off the charts. We don't have to worry about Russia anymore. Just make nice with our former defeated foe. Don't gloat over our Cold War victory.

All the time we were thinking that and the Russians were thinking they were not going to move until they had prepared themselves properly, until it would be a real shock to everyone. So they didn't. They acted crippled, broke, bankrupt and confused. They waited. They were very patient and then on a date that I think ought to be remembered in history, the 14th of February, Valentine's Day, this year, President Putin made a speech which nobody noticed. He said, if Kosovo declares independence and if NATO and the European Union recognize it, we will immediately move into South Ossetia and Abkhazia and the Georgians will be the losers in this game. It was an undisguised declaration of, in effect, war.

It was not exactly the first. The Russians had already said they supported Slobodan Milosevic's campaign of ethnic cleansing in the Balkans. They'd already said they considered the accession of their former property of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania ---- that they had only acquired as a consequence of the Hitler/Stalin pact -- and their membership in the European Union or NATO, an aggression. They'd already said they considered Georgia to be encircling them. This is a vast, cruel, morally bankrupt superpower that says it's encircled by Kosovo, which is landlocked within the former Yugoslavia, encircled by Estonia, which is way out in the water and encircled by the Ukraine. It makes these claims the excuse for calculated, pre-announced aggression, where irredentists are backed by the full force of a now increasingly well-equipped army, navy and air force.

I don't think Europe could have been better warned about this, or could have reacted as badly as it did. As with Yugoslavia in the 1980s, every country essentially reacted as it would have done were it 1914. The British are nostalgic for Austria-Hungary, so are the Germans, the French are pro-Serbian and so forth. It is exactly what you might have expected from the consort of powers after Sarajevo in 1914. It is very depressing, very sectarian, very short-term thinking. It is also the kind of thinking that is hoping for a compromise with Czarism, with which there can be no compromise.

Russia in its present form, it seems quite plain to me, is probably more dangerous than it was when it was Russian imperialism from the left. Russian imperialism from the right has a difference that I think is very important. It is much more xenophobic, it is much more nationalistic, it is much more theocratic and it is underpinned by the power of the Russian Orthodox Church. Mr. Medvedev, Putin's pathetic puppet, was sworn in kissing a bible held by a black-cowled Archbishop. You can't make a political move in Russia now without the endorsement of the Russian Orthodox Church, which demands the right to suppress all other Christian

churches, to say nothing of all other religions, such as Islam, Judaism and so forth.

Russia is a theocratic and thus, questionably reliable power when it comes to deterrence, the understanding of self-interest, of what restrains aggression and what might lead to, say, given that there are still about 2000 nuclear tipped warheads in Russia, a nuclear war. We can't be as certain as we would like to be that that regime would be as rational as was Leonid Brezhnev's. So how much progress has been made? Not much. How helpful was European unity in the face of it? It was not very helpful.

Now, my third point. I should try and cheer you up, shouldn't I? Well, actually, it is very nice, given the history that started at Sarajevo in 1914, that the survivor state of the Ottoman Empire, Turkey, wants to be a member of the European Union. You couldn't necessarily have predicted that at the time of Gallipoli. Or at the time of the Greek invasion of Turkey after the war was over -- because the First World War didn't end in that part of the world until well into the 1920s, with millions more casualties. So, it's nice. They want to be members of the European Union. Many of them already are. Many, many, many millions of Turks already live in Europe. What could be more agreeable?

This is going to be Europe's big decision to come. And we are going to have to determine it in our immediate future. What are the odds? I'll do it metaphorically. Who here has read the novels of Orhan Pamuk? Can I get a show of hands? Okay. I find them boring too, sometimes. But more of you should have read them. He's a very distinguished Turkish novelist. Apart from Nazim Hikmet, he's probably their only Nobel Prize winner. But he always uses the same image -- and it's the reason he's popular in the West -- of Istanbul, the Bosphorus, Turkey, Asia Minor, as the bridge between Europe and Asia. You've heard the metaphor. You've read it in the New York Times, the National Post and so forth.

I have a friend in London who says, Turkey is not a bridge between the East and the West, between Asia and Europe. It's a tunnel. It's the tunnel through which the whole chaos of Asia and the Middle East will have unimpeded access to Europe. Once you're in Turkey, you're as good as if you were in Belgium or Ireland. You're in. There's no one who can take you out. You don't need another passport, you don't need another visa. This terrifies some people, so does the opposite.

What if we tell the Turks, having invited them to join, having asked them to change their constitution, asked them to change their economy, asked them to abolish capital punishment, to liberalize their import-export

policies, what if we take them through all these stages and then say, sorry -- you didn't quite qualify for our club. Might that not be even more destabilizing than the tunnel option?

To another thought experiment. There are two great forces in Turkey. One is the army, the guardian of Kemalism, secularism, Ataturkism. The other, now, is the Islamist Party of Prime Minister Erdogan. Which is the most pro-European? The Islamists are. Why is that? I'll tell you why I think it is. If Turkey gets accepted into the European Union, the Turkish Army can't ever take power again. There can never be another Ataturkist military coup because the day there is a military coup Turkey is thrown out of the European Union. You can't be in the EU if you're not a parliamentary democracy. So the Islamists know that Kemalism and secularism are over the day they join the European Union. Is that positive or is it negative? How long will it take to find out?

Okay, now one more question. What's the frontier country of Europe if Turkey becomes a member of the European Union? The Eastern frontier of the European Union becomes Iraq and Iran and Syria. Does that make you feel better? Does it make you feel more secure? Does it make you feel less secure? Would you rather have a collapsed post-Ataturkist, Islamist government patrolling those frontiers? These are the questions you're going to have to face.

But look on the positive side. My Iraqi Kurdish friends who patrol that Iraqi border with Turkey say, well, we have a democracy, we fought to overthrow Saddam Hussein, we have pluralism and we have oil. If the Turks can join the European Union, why can't we? So the projection of the European Union project is all the way now into Mesopotamia, which is exactly where the situation was when the Baghdad to Berlin Railway was being programmed in 1914. Which I think means I should stop asking questions and perhaps receive some, which with thanks for your indulgence and your kindness, I now will. It's been fun having you as my prisoners and now I'm your hostage.