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Geert Wilders Is No Hero Of Free Speech

Wilders accuses Muslims of thought crimes and believes that justifies restrictions of their civil rights.

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Geert Wilders, the leader of the Dutch Party for Freedom and one of Europe's most influential politicians, likes to express his admiration for the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment. That's no coincidence. The First Amendment provides the best legal protection of speech in the world, including the kind of speech that in December 2016 led to the conviction of Wilders in the Netherlands for having insulted Dutch Moroccans and having incited discrimination during a political rally a few years back.

I suppose that's why Wilders is seen by some as a politician willing to stand up for freedom of expression and speak his mind about uncomfortable issues that others have refrained from doing. He insists on his right to unfettered criticism of Islam and Muslim communities as fundamental to free speech. In the wake of terrorist attacks in Europe and clashes of culture and values, these issues have risen to the top of the political agenda in most European countries.

Recently, one of Wilders's supporters in the U.S., the right-wing activist David Horowitz, lauded the anti-Muslim Dutchman as "the Paul Revere of Europe ... a hero of the most important battle of our times, the battle to defend free speech." It's true that this is a crucial battle. Its outcome will have long-term consequences for the protection of freedom in liberal democracies. Free speech is under attack from many quarters. Wilders himself has to live with round-the-clock security because of his stance on Islam and immigration.

[Wilders is] ... a hero of the most important battle of our times, the battle to defend free speech. Right-wing activist David Horowitz

I am fully on Wilders's side when it comes to the speech crimes he has been accused of. I am against hate speech laws as a matter of principle but also for practical reasons. They are not the most effective way to fight bigotry. They tend to be enforced selectively and express a social

norm, not a genuine will to fight bigotry. One man's hate speech may be another man's poetry. I also believe it's important to defend Wilders's right to speak out in light of the threats against his life.

Nevertheless, I disagree with people like Horowitz, who see Wilders as a defender of free speech. Let me explain why. Wilders has called for banning the Quran. He wants to close mosques and ban the building of new ones, and he has proposed a change to the Dutch Constitution that would outlaw faith-based schools for Muslims but not for Christians and citizens committed to other religions and life philosophies.

As a justification for his position on Islam, Wilders often quotes Abraham Lincoln's words from a letter written in 1859: "Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves." But one could turn Lincoln's words against Wilders himself. By calling for a ban on the Quran and for the closing of mosques and faith-based schools for Muslims, he insists on denying freedom of speech and religion to Muslims.

Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves. Abraham Lincoln

Does that mean that Wilders, contrary to Lincoln's claim in a very different context, deserves freedom of speech for himself? It does, I believe, though Wilders's position on Islam makes his support for the First Amendment and calls for a European First Amendment ring hollow. A couple years ago, when I debated Wilders on the legitimate limits of free speech in a democracy, I told him that all his proposals to restrict freedom of speech and religion for Muslims would be denounced by the U.S. Supreme Court with reference to First Amendment protection. They wouldn't stand a chance to become the law of the land. Wilders responded that if that's the case, then we need to adopt a slightly different version of the First Amendment in Europe.

It became clear to me that Wilders's support for the First Amendment was based on the fact that it would protect his own speech, but when he found out that the First Amendment would also provide a robust protection of the freedom of speech and religion for Muslims, he was reluctant to support it.

In doing so, he failed the acid test for the support of free speech in a democracy. It was first formulated by the legendary Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, who issued a famous dissenting opinion in 1929: "If there is any principle of the Constitution that more imperatively calls for attachment than any other it is the principle of free thought — not free thought for those who agree with us but freedom for the thought that we hate."

Freedom for the speech that we hate. That's the acid test. This principle embodies the essence of tolerance. You do not ban, intimidate, threaten or use violence against speech that you deeply dislike or hate.

Freedom for the speech that we hate is the essence of tolerance.

So, on Islam and Muslims, Wilders comes down on the wrong side of democracy when it comes to three of its key principles: freedom of speech and religion, equality before the law and tolerance.

Wilders tries to escape accusations for discrimination against Islam and Muslims by saying that Islam just isn't like any other religion. It's a totalitarian ideology like fascism and Communism, he insists. He has compared the Quran to Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, and for a while, he justified his call for banning the Quran with a reference to the fact that *Mein Kampf* was banned in the Netherlands. In recent years, he has insisted on outlawing the Quran independent of the fate of *Mein Kampf*, which was recently published in Germany for the first time since the fall of the Nazis.

Some people would be inclined to support Wilders's claim about Islam as a totalitarian ideology. However, it doesn't improve his argument significantly. The works of Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, Mao Zedong, Benito Mussolini, Adolf Hitler and other ideologues of totalitarian or anti-democratic ideologies are accessible in the majority of democratic states. The classical texts of Communism weren't banned during the Cold War. In many Western democracies, there were Communist newspapers and publishing houses. Communists had their own schools and controlled unions, and Communist parties were running for Parliament. If Communist parties became targets of bans, they were usually short-lived or not enforced.

Why treat Islam any different, even if you think it's not a religion but a totalitarian political ideology?

Here is what Wilders replied when I said that it is fundamental to a democracy to make a distinction between words and deeds if one wants to safeguard free speech and provide space to a diversity of opinions: "We have to not only criminalize actions but the source legitimizing actions as well — that is the Quran. If we don't do it, we provide those who want to kill our freedom with the means to do so."

Wilders insists that it's impossible to separate words and deeds when it comes to Islam — i.e. between what the Quran says and what Muslims quoting the Quran say, and violence committed by Muslims in the name Islam. That is very problematic. This is the way a dictatorship operates. It treats words as if they were actions and therefore they put people propagating unwelcome opinions in jail. Authoritarian regimes state explicitly that these kind of people represent a threat to the public order, social harmony or security.

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Wilders's argument for limiting the rights of Muslims shares other similarities with unfree societies. When he calls for banning the Quran and shutting down mosques and faith-based schools, he refers to opinion polls taken from among the Muslim population — he bases his call for restrictions on what Muslims think and believe, not what they actually do or plan to do. In other words, Wilders accuses Muslims of being guilty of thought crimes, and he believes that this is sufficient to justify restrictions of their civil rights.

I am not saying that widely spread opinions among Muslims — on apostasy and blasphemy, on equality between men and women, on homosexuality and freedom of speech and religion and other issues — aren't problematic, to say the least. I am saying that in a democracy, you cannot restrict freedoms based on what people think. In a democracy, you criminalize quite a few deeds

— like tax evasion, shop lifting, fast driving, fraud and murder — but you ban only words that directly incite violence or crimes.

Wilders's quote of Abraham Lincoln — “Those who deny freedom to others deserve it not for themselves” — is incomplete. It continues: “and under a just God, cannot long retain it.” In the context of Wilders's selective defense of free speech, those words are worth remembering.

Flemming Rose is a Danish journalist and senior fellow at the Cato Institute. He was formerly the foreign editor at the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten and was a foreign correspondent in Russia and the U.S. for 14 years. Rose is the author of several books on free speech. His book "Tyranny of Silence: How One Cartoon Ignited a Global Debate on the Future of Free Speech" was listed as one of the 10 best nonfiction books of 2014 by The Economist. In 2016, he was awarded the Milton Freedman Prize for the Advancement of Individual Liberty, and recently he received the Danish newspaper Weekendavisen's 2016 Book Prize for his recent book De besatte (The Possessed).