Theo van Gogh: Hero, Anti-Semite, Misogynist or Islamophobe?

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THE MURDER of Dutch film maker and columnist Theo van Gogh in Amsterdam on 2 November 2004 shocked many people. Not only in the Netherlands but also abroad, reactions were, understandably, often emotional. Many commentators described Van Gogh as a martyr in the fight for free speech. That leaves the question: free speech for himself and people who shared his views, or also for his targets?

Many reactions, e.g. in Britain, were by people who didn't know the writings of either Van Gogh or his critics first hand in Dutch. I will try in this article to help provide this information, necessary for a rational assessment.

So, first, the murder is terrible, must be condemned, and everyone should make an effort to prevent violence like this from happening again. However, if I were to keep saying that one plus one makes three, and then someone murdered me, I hope no one would write that I was a mathematical genius (as at least some people seemed to do in the case of Van Gogh – not on mathematics, but you get the point).

Theo van Gogh's inspiration was films like *A Clockwork Orange*, and the writings of French author Louis-Ferdinand Céline (a supporter of Hitler during World War II), both of which took human depravity as their central theme.

So let us see, from what Van Gogh himself said, what he really stood for. (There is more – in Dutch – on Van Gogh in the archives at http://groups.yahoo.com/group/linksnederlands.)

Van Gogh on Jews

"Fornicating yellow stars in a gas chamber.... What a smell of caramel today. Today the crematoriums burn only diabetic [in Dutch literally: sugar-sick] Jews". Thus van Gogh in *Moviola* magazine, 1991. The court then fined him 1000 guilders for anti-semitism. He pictured Jewish TV presenter Sonja Barend in a concentration camp, and Jewish author Leon de Winter in "Treblinka-style fornication with barbed wire around his dick". When Jewish historian Evelien Gans criticised Van Gogh, he wrote in *Folia Civitatis* magazine: "I suspect that Ms Gans gets wet dreams about being fucked by Dr Mengele." He hoped (*Volkskrant*, February 1995) Gans would sue him: "Because then Ms Gans will have to explain in court that she claims that she does not get wet dreams about Dr Mengele."

Van Gogh on women (including right-wing MP Ayaan Hirshi Ali)

Van Gogh's last film, a few minutes long, was written by a Dutch MP, Ayaan Hirshi Ali, a naturalised refugee, from the ex-royal family of Somalia. (On Hirshi Ali see, in Dutch, http://www.tijdschriftlover.nl/artikelen/artikelen_islam.html – an article by Antillean Dutch Black [not Islamic] feminist Troetje Loewenthal. At http://www.sp.nl/include/sh_opinie.php?code=406 another critical article on Ms Ali can be found, this one by Anja Meulenbelt, arguably the best known Dutch feminist and now a Socialist Party senator.)

Ms Ali is an MP for the VVD party, which is in government and is the most openly pro-capitalist party in parliament. Arguably, they are the Dutch equivalent of the British Tory party (though more "secular", without the Tories' Christian fundamentalists). The VVD, and Ali, and Van Gogh, have enthusiastically supported the government's expulsion of tens of thousands of refugees from the Netherlands, including Somali women who are refugees from female circumcision and who now have to fear it if the responsible VVD minister succeeds with her expulsion plans. (Female genital mutilation, by the way, is not an Islamic custom, as it happens in Somalia and among Christians in Kenya. It is not found among Turks or Moroccans, the biggest groups of immigrants from Muslim countries in the Netherlands.) In a parliamentary speech Ms Ali proposed that the African continent should not be given another cent of aid.

Anja Meulenbelt quotes Theo van Gogh as

saying that feminists should stop campaigning against husbands' violence in marriages: "Gentlemen who give a tough hiding are quite attractive to some ladies really." That remark was on women in general, not especially on Muslim women. But, as we know, about a hundred years ago, Lord Cromer, who was the boss of the anti-women's suffrage league in Britain, sounded very "feminist" in colonial Muslim Egypt.

The theme of Ali's and Van Gogh's film was Islamic wives beaten by their husbands, which was said to be inspired by the Koran. Muslim women who had suffered domestic violence reacted very angrily to the film when it was shown on Dutch TV: "I was beaten by that no good husband. Not by the Koran!", one objected. "Making this a Koran issue will just give them an excuse." The film was sort of soft porn David Hamilton-*Emmanuelle* style featuring a naked woman (with a Christian Moluccan actress playing an Islamic woman) in see-through clothes with verses from the Koran written on them. The women who objected to the film said this cheapened and sen-sationalised their extremely real issues with their husbands.

On a British internet forum, a comparison was made between "Van Gogh making films vividly critical of Islam and the likes of Bunuel or Scorsese who made films that challenged the basis of Catholicism". However, there is a difference. Bunuel and Scorcese came from a background where Catholicism/Christianity was the dominant religion, at least during their childhoods. While never-a-Muslim Van Gogh called all Muslims, most of whom in the Netherlands are a lot poorer and more powerless than he was, "goatfuckers". Not once: probably a hundred times or more in writing (I did not count).

The internet message continued: "There is therefore no comparison with the BNP or NF, whose staple diet is attacks and violence by Black men against White women, not intra-communal violence." However, even though Van Gogh, in contrast to Ms Ali, was no party politician, intra-communal violence, including hypocritical pity for the victims of female circumcision, *was* the staple diet in party political broadcasts by the now defunct Centrumpartij, then the Dutch sister party of the British extreme Right, over 10 years ago.

When, in 2002, Pim Fortuijn (he himself preferred the more "aristocratic" spelling Fortuyn) founded an anti-immigration party with four other people, one was former Centrumpartij leader J. Boiten. (When his past came out after Fortuijn's death, Fortuyn's – their spelling – party dismissed Boiten from his position as a parliamentary assistant. Boiten, however, claims Fortuijn knew all about his Centrumpartij past.) Van Gogh helped Fortuijn write his political speeches. Fortuijn wanted him to stand as an MP for his party, but Van Gogh refused, as he hated other prospective candidates.

Can a fascist party be led by an open gay in some individual cases, even though gay bashing is a main point of the extreme Right? Yes it can. Michael Kühnen, the leader of the National Socialist Action Front of Germany, who died of AIDS in 1991, was openly gay and had a macho theory to justify it. Right now, Michiel Smit (see photos on http://www.geenstijl.nl/paginas/michielsmit) the leader of the Nieuw Rechts (New Right) in the Netherlands is openly gay. Though fascist competitors have used that against both of them.

Van Gogh on war and socialism

Van Gogh strongly supported George W. Bush's wars, and opposed all socialism in his columns. He wrote of Paul Rosenmöller, an ex-dockworker, then Green Left party leader: "May he get a joy-bringing brain tumor. Let us piss on his grave."

Van Gogh on migrants from Muslim countries

As I said, Van Gogh routinely substituted "goatfucker" for "immigrant to the Netherlands from an Islamic country". In his book *Allah Knows Best* (2001) he wrote: "There is a Fifth Column of goatfuckers in this country, who despise and spit at its native people. They hate our freedom." "Soon, the Fifth Column of goatfuckers will hurl poison gas, diseases and atomic bombs at your children and my children."

However, nothing justifies the murder of Van Gogh. The main immediate effect of it has been a further racist backlash in the Netherlands, with an Islamic primary school in Eindhoven firebombed for the fourth time, and mosques and buildings of secular Moroccan immigrant organisations attacked at night. Very many Dutch Moroccans participated in, and/or organised, protests against the murder of Van Gogh. However, that did not impress the bigots. Vice Prime Minister Zalm (VVD) declared, in George W. Bush style, "war on extreme Islam".

Who killed him and why?

The arrested suspect wrote a rambling five-page letter and left it at Van Gogh's body. Though his parents were from Morocco, he was raised in the Netherlands, spoke Dutch and apparently did not know Arabic. The letter contained nothing about Van Gogh. It was a long ramble concerning purported quotes from the Jewish Talmud. The suspect was said to be upset by his mother's death and by TV footage of US soldiers killing wounded Iraqi civilians. There is no proof that he did not act alone. So, an *individual* killed Van Gogh. Not "Islam". Not even "political Islam".

Again, there was *never any* excuse for this terrible murder. It seems murderer and victim had something in common: both fairly intelligent but mentally disturbed. Van Gogh often suffered from depression, according to the Dutch daily *NRC*. So, indeed, he certainly cannot be equated to a calculating racist politician who is neither alcoholic nor takes drugs.

Dutch poet Remco Campert wrote: "*De mortuis nil sini bene*" [speak only good of the dead]. That is a maxim which Van Gogh violated consistently. I think I would insult him if now I would say nice sugary things about him." Campert continued his article with Van Gogh's quotes on Jews. He concluded: "These are not really the words of a true hero of free speech." ■

Qaradawi, Ken Bigley and Islamophobia

THE KIDNAPPINGS and killings by terrorist groups in Iraq, highlighted by the horrifying execution of the British engineering worker Ken Bigley, have appalled all of us.

Muslims across the world have been vociferous in condemning these acts and rejecting the murderers' claims to have committed them in the name of Islam. Daud Abdullah and Musharraf Hussain of the Muslim Council of Britain visited Baghdad in an effort to win Ken Bigley's release. The Qatar-based Islamic scholar Sheikh Yusuf al-Qaradawi also begged the hostage-takers to release Bigley, "whose only fault is having come to Iraq to help rebuild".

Dr al-Qaradawi, who was the subject of a hysterical Islamophobic campaign by the right-wing press during his visit to Britain in July, has in fact been one of the most active campaigners against the seizure of hostages in Iraq. He has declared that "Muslims are forbidden from kidnapping innocent people who have nothing to do with wars", and has demanded that the hostage-takers "stop such practices which unfairly brand Islam with terrorism and do disservice to its adherents". In August, Qaradawi blasted the terrorists who had executed twelve Nepalese building workers in Iraq as "people without religion and without brains".

After the journalists Christian Chesnot and Georges Malbrunot were kidnapped by a group demanding an end to the ban on the hijab in French schools, France's foreign minister Michel Barnier met with Dr al-Qaradawi in Cairo to enlist his support in securing the release of the two men. Despite the fact that he has been one of the fiercest critics of the hijab ban, Qaradawi had no hesitation in broadcasting an appeal on Al-Jazeera television condemning the kidnapping as "incompatible with Islam" and calling for the journalists to be freed immediately.

Antoine Basbous of the Paris Observatory of Arab Countries stated that Qaradawi's intervention was "fundamental" to winning support across the middle east for the French government's initiative. Michel Barnier later sent a letter to Qaradawi thanking him for his "vehement condemnation" of the kidnapping of the two journalists and other civilians in Iraq. "With such a clear condemnation of the abduction of the French hostages", Barnier wrote, "you have sent a clear-cut message demonstrating respect for the tenets of Islam."When the Italian aid workers Simona Pari and Simona Torretta were abducted in Iraq early in September, Italy's foreign minister Franco Frattini visited Qaradawi's home in Qatar to ask for his help. Frattini declared his respect for Qaradawi as a moderate Muslim leader, and paid tribute to his role in initiating a dialogue with the West. Qaradawi for his part immediately condemned the kidnapping of the Italians, stating that "the two work for a humanitarian organisation which has nothing to do with the war". He pointed out that "while Italy participated in the war on Iraq, millions of Italians took to the streets to demonstrate against the war".

In view of the disgraceful coverage of his visit here in July, you might have thought the British media would give Dr al-Qaradawi credit for the contribution he has made in working with European political leaders to try and resolve the hostage-taking crisis in Iraq. On the contrary, not only has the press failed to report any of this, but they have slanderously accused him of backing the terrorists.

On 3 September the *Daily Mail* published an article falsely stating that Qaradawi had called for the killing of US and British civilians in Iraq. The *Mail* assured its readers that the report "demolishes the claim that al-Qaradawi is a moderate". The *Daily Mirror* followed up on 6 September with another lying article reporting that Qaradawi had issued a fatwa concerning "the religious permissibility of killing civilian Americans in Iraq". This provided the basis of a further article in the *Sunday Express* on 12 September, in which UKIP MEP Robert Kilroy-Silk claimed that Dr al-Qaradawi "asserts that it is permissible for Muslims to kill – by beheading? – American citizens in Iraq".

On 23 September, following the deaths of the two US hostages, Jack Hensley and Eugene Armstrong, the *Telegraph* reported a malicious and baseless accusation from a United Arab Emirates newspaper that Qaradawi bore responsibility for the killings, under the headline "TV sheikh incited hostage murders says Arab paper". And all this despite the fact that Qaradawi has stated unequivocally that US civilians in Iraq should be "treated in accordance with the Islamic tenets which stipulate the killing of civilians is forbidden".

The campaign against Islamophobia is a crucial one for the labour movement and all progressive forces in Britain today. The British media's treatment of Dr al-Qaradawi, both during and after his visit here, has only served to underline this point.

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