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On 'Knut Hamsun'

In a longer version of my "Letter From the Baltics" (January 1993), there is an additional paragraph on Knut Hamsun that clarifies his life and work, which I'd like to note: "Hamsun's heroes were loners, virile individualists, thwarted, self-centered, with a heroic rather than tragic (Hamsun was not a Catholic) sense of life. He hated England and the English, which is perhaps not well-known, though it is there in many of his writings: his contempt for the hypocrisy of the English, their puritanism, a dislike of their cult of moderation and of fairness. Hamsun was a Nietzschean of sorts. It is not surprising that Hamsun admired Hitler till the very end, sticking to his

guns, embarrassing and upsetting his own countrymen. And now my Swedish friends and I see Hamsun as a striking period piece, as a rebel voice that sounded strong and clear at a certain time. This period has little to say to us now, to those of us who also know that we live in a world at the edge of the sinking Modern Age—when all the real bourgeois virtues, their interiority and probity, have remained enduring, loveable, and admirable like a piece of family furniture that is both finer and more solid than we once thought, a more and more precious heritage as we are carried farther and farther away from its time. As a matter of fact, our only tangible heritage."

—John Lukacs

CULTURAL REVOLUTIONS

REGARDING IMMIGRATION, those like me who see it as an issue of economics and not of culture and who maintain that the American system has succeeded, and continues to succeed, in turning anyone in the world into an American owe critics of our view an answer to a simple question: Is there any class of immigrant we would exclude? For so formidable a claim to the continuing effect of the American system shades over into mindless Panglossism, unless a fair answer can be given to such a perfectly legitimate question.

Yes, there are persons to keep out: immigrants who reject the American system at its foundations and who come in sufficient numbers to threaten the system's continued hegemony. The system—to define it—accords equal protection of law to all persons, but special privilege to no classes of persons. Everyone is therefore subject to the same laws, enjoys the same opportunities, may make of himself what he will; in the fair division of rights and responsibilities no one gets less, or more, by law than any other.

Now, what if an entire class of immigrants were to make a clear claim to stand apart from the law that governs the country as a whole, seeking an exclusively religious, not a secular-pluralist,

identity in American society? Such persons, rejecting to begin with the premise of the American system, clearly cannot find a place within it and do not want to; they furthermore propose to end the system of equal protection of law to all persons, replacing it with a system of political allocation of rights and responsibilities among groups of persons.

If a class of immigrants, for example, were to advocate or demand political recognition for their religion or special status for their group, that group, as such, would declare at our borders its intention to change our system for some other. We could not admit that group, although the individuals of said group who renounced such a claim would obviously enjoy the same rights as any other individuals. A class of persons unanimous in their rejection of democracy, the American Constitution and Bill of Rights, the rule of law, the rights of individuals to property, and the like cannot be admitted as immigrants. We passed precisely such an immigration law in denying right of entry to communists intent on destroying this country.

Lest I be accused of inventing a case as a facile riposte for purposes of argument, with no concrete example in mind, let me point to the following:

“The implementation of X as a complete code of life cannot be limited to the home and to personal relationships. It is to be sought and achieved in society as a whole.” Now if we replaced “X” with “Christianity” or “communism” or “homosexuality,” for that matter, and large numbers of Christians, communists, or homosexuals presented themselves for entry into this country, we should do well to pause for a moment before issuing visas. People who wish to come here to impose on the rest of the country Christianity, communism, or the homosexual way of life (to choose examples sure to outrage someone or other) as a class of persons do give pause.

That statement was made by a British Muslim and preached at the mosque in Bradford, England, as reported in the March 1992 *Salisbury Review* by Mervyn Hiskett of the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London. An imam in France said, “There can be no government contrary to what God has revealed in the Koran.” It is the duty, so it is maintained by some, of every Muslim “to overthrow every power which governs in contravention of that which God enjoins and to bring about the erection of the Islamic state.”

Nor are these statements expressions of the happy hour, of closeted religious intellectuals making up their little worlds and writing down the results. A Muslim parliament in Britain was announced on May 9, 1991. British Muslim authorities explicitly stated, “Islam is . . . a charter for Muslim political life; it could not properly be reduced to merely an item of personal piety in the private sector.” But in the United States religion is kept apart from politics by the First Amendment, which prohibits the government from favoring or opposing any religion, or religion generally. The authority quoted by Hiskett complains, “Islamic principles and values have always been systematically excluded from exercising any influence on the politics of the British government.”

I do not think a Roman Catholic cardinal, Evangelist preacher, or Hasidic rebbe would win a friendly hearing among Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish Americans for his complaint that “Catholic/Protestant/Judaic values have always been systematically excluded from exercising any influence on the politics of the American government.”

Part of the American system requires all distinct groups to accomplish their goals by focusing upon the public interest. A politics of sectarian preferment is unconstitutional. And, I hasten to add, in the American system it is also unnecessary. Through negotiation people generally get, out of what they want, what they should have. Our system requires consensus.

What, then, will this country make of a large immigrant group, forming a sizable proportion of the population as in Britain, France, and Germany, that declares, “The Muslim community cannot commit itself to follow all ‘current laws’ however anti-religious these laws may become through democratic means”? The British Muslims object, Hiskett reports, to state neutrality toward Islam, to pluralist systems, to democratic decision-making that yields conflict with revelation, and to the relegation of Islam to a personal belief system without political and social institutions. The upshot is simple. Islam among the new Britons is not a Protestant and Westernized religion, in the way Catholic and Orthodox Christianity and Judaism are Protestant and Westernized in America. Its leaders identify correctly the conditions under which, in the West, religion thrives in countries that sustain pluralism: rigid adherence to the rules of pluralism, which are not negotiable.

It is one thing to recognize Islam as one of the religions of democracy when Islam affirms the rules of democracy; it is another to contemplate admission of large numbers of persons who reject democracy and espouse an alternative theological politics. We can make an American of anybody who wants to become an American, without distinction of race, religion, creed, previous condition of servitude, or any of the other distinctions we are not supposed to make. But if applicants for green cards inform consular officers from the very start that they reject the American Constitution and Bill of Rights, then they should not receive visas. The American system not only works for all for whom it is meant to work, it also does not work for all for whom it can never work.

French Jews became French citizens on terms that required giving up any chimera of forming a separate nation or estate within France: to the Jews as individuals, everything; to the Jews as a nation, nothing. That contract (alas,

unilaterally abrogated by anti-Semitism in the 19th century and the holocaust in the 20th) defined the conditions for all who would join the commonwealth and take up the common tasks of citizenship and responsibility. So far as British Muslims contemplate being governed, in the age-old manner of the Middle East, by their own law (as Anglicans would be governed by theirs, and Catholics by theirs, and Methodists by theirs, if they could make up one), they contemplate a system other than the territorial one that has worked in that country, and that works here. Muslims, Hiskett says, will then be subject to the writ of their own parliament, “largely autonomous of non-Islamic governing institutions and isolated from the surrounding mainstream culture—in other words independent theocratic Islamic enclaves within the wider British state.”

If that is what immigrants contemplate—whether for Islam or Christianity or Judaism or the celebration of Satan, for that matter—then they should be excluded. Watching German TV last summer, I remember seeing a German of Turkish origin saying to a reporter in what to my ears was perfect, unaccented German: “But we do not want to become Europeans. We do not value Europe, and we do not like Europe.” The reporter was rude enough to ask, “So what are you doing here in Europe?” This seems a fair question.

—Jacob Neusner

IN THE STATES and in the souls where Confederate flags still fly, they fluttered at half-mast last March for M.E. Bradford, gentleman, scholar, political thinker, and Good Old Rebel, who departed this world too soon at the age of 58. Yet the legacy he left to an America now being reconstructed to suit political correctness and political expediency is one that not only his Southern friends, students, colleagues, and admirers should receive. The two countries he loved so much—America and the South—need to take their stand on the ground he unflinchingly defended.

Trained as a Faulkner scholar at Vanderbilt, Dr. Bradford wound up best known for his political thought and the political action to which his thought led. At the center of that thought was the American South, whose native and faithful son Mel was, though his thought was not limited to it and the