

The Trouble with Islam: A Wake-Up Call for Honesty and Change

Irshad Manji

Toronto: Random House Canada, 2003. 247 pages.

Set up as an open letter to Muslims, Irshad Manji's book contains one letter, nine chapters, six pages of recommended readings, and three pages of acknowledgement. Together the 247 pages charge that "[t]otalitarian impulses lurk in mainstream Islam" (p. 3, original emphasis) and reform is crucial for the world's security. Her open letter informs readers that "Islam is on very thin ice" (p. 1) with her, and asks for her charges to be heard. She then provides an autobiographical narrative that jumps from her days as a youngster in a Baptist after school program to a *madressa* and junior high school. It moves to her career as a journalist pioneering QueerTelevision then to 9/11 and its aftermath. Interwoven between these brief accounts are her indictments of Islam and Muslims. She ends the book with her bid for reform.

In a colloquial style, Manji lays her heavy charge: mainstream Muslims are "intellectually atrophied and morally impaired" (p. 55). Regardless of their location, they are universally homophobic, anti-Semitic, and misogynistic. Those arguing otherwise are ignorant, fraudulently cry racism or injustice when criticized, and are compliant in all the gross human rights violations occurring in Muslim countries. Muslims who promote Islam's egalitarian message and reconcile contradictions by engaging in discourse and contextualizing the Qur'an, the Shari`ah, and the Hadith, or cite cultural influence to renounce stoning, rape laws, or discrimination are not, according to her, following mainstream Islam as they would like to think. Rather, they are acting despite it. Islam, according to Manji, is "really" a tribal religion that is centrally controlled by Arabs who interpret the "Koran," a contradictory book suffering from "a mountain range of moods" (p. 228), to propagate "desert Islam." Globally, Muslims cling to "fundamentalism," a glorification of the Islam of the past, which actually was not as egalitarian as they claim. This, along with Arab imperialism, are responsible for the social ills of Muslims, not western imperialism, colonialism, or "the Jewish conspiracy."

Nonetheless, with Orientalist tropes and her western-cultivated commitment to fairness and the individual, which, she informs, did not evolve from Islam, Manji says there is room for Islam – as long as it reforms. "Operation *Ijtihad*" involves questioning Islam, its tenets, and proponents by reviving

the concept of *ijtihad* (independent reasoning); empowering women financially; and, ultimately, using western democratic ideals, including recruiting Oprah to head a western-based media coalition in the Middle East, to screen and develop pluralistic Islam. The result would be elevated Muslims and less “foundamentalism” in the world.

Throughout her diatribe, Manji poses legitimate questions regarding stoning, rape laws, women being barred from mosques, anti-Semitism, homophobia, the Shari`ah, and Muslim-on-Muslim oppression. However, she uses totalistic language and presents her suppositions as binary oppositions, which ultimately antagonize the reader. To confront anti-Semitism, which does rear its ugly head among some (but not all) Muslims, she trivializes the oppression faced by Palestinians, arguing that potential freedoms under Israeli law are better than what religious minorities have in Muslim countries. In other words, the oppression suffered by a disempowered individual is meaningless if they are Muslim. To highlight western tolerance, she downplays racism and discrimination, cautioning that unchecked multiculturalism will ultimately threaten western freedom. She urges non-Muslims to speak up and criticize Islam, but nowhere does she encourage them to do it with humility or respect. In her binary world, the West is fair and should police Islam.

What is most perplexing is that as Manji berates Muslims for lacking *ijtihad*, her book, ironically, prevents Muslims from engaging in any meaningful dialogue with her. She dismisses scholars, activists, and anyone who contextualizes the Qur’an or calls oppression un-Islamic cultural deviations. She further bars dialogue by writing that Islam is how Muslims behave, not the theory; therefore, she prevents any pro-faith rebuttals. It does not matter that the Qur’an advocates equality, because Muslims do not practice it. The Qur’an has no potential, because, Manji argues, it is vague. Moreover, as a rant she describes as a struggle to control and as a colloquial letter, she leaves no room for counterarguments. She acknowledges her reader’s frustration through dismissive rhetorical questions, but silences her reader through insults (hijab is a condom that “inoculate[s] ... from ‘unsafe’ intellectual activity ...” p. 12) and by blaming Muslims for the oppression they experience. While not all Muslims are oppressed, this should not negate the experiences of those who are. Consequently Muslims, particularly those who are invested in *ijtihad*, are put on the defensive in order to fight for legitimacy. Manji ultimately slams shut the door to dialogue that she claims to be fighting to open.

Interestingly Manji, who identifies herself as a tentative Muslim, has found the Qur'anic theme of humility encouraging. Humility, she states, "sets us free to ponder God's will – without any obligation to toe the dictated line" (p. 228). It is a key component of her self-labeled, dramatic call for reform. But humility, the revival of *ijtihad*, and applying it to the Qur'an and the Shari'ah are not new. Pro-faith Muslim scholars and activists have urged – and are urging – such engagement. Ironically, this is a commonality that she shares with them. However, a pro-faith perspective seeks perfection within Islam not from outside of it, and the contradictions that Manji sneers at are the grounds for engagement and reform. Moreover, the Qur'an states in several places that it is a problematic text, that the best of the believers will seek the best meaning, and that those bent on spreading mischief will not. But Manji's rules of pluralism do not make any room for this type of discussion.

Despite its numerous shortcomings, Manji's book should be a required reading. Meaningful and educated engagement is part of *ijtihad*, and Muslims, especially scholars coming from a pro-faith or activist background, need to continue to confront Orientalism and neo-Orientalism head on and seek answers to address such questions. Such questions are not a challenge to faith, but a way to assert it.

Nergis Mazid

Independent scholar and educator currently on leave from Georgian College
Barrie, Ontario Canada