

METRO WEEKLY

September 8, 2011

Manji's Mission

Far beyond the sound-bite "Muslim-reformist lesbian," Irshad Manji is on a mission to keep all minds open, active and questioning

By: Will O'Bryan

Irshad Manji has new pieces in her life.

There's her new book, *Allah, Liberty and Love: The Courage To Reconcile Faith and Freedom*. Then there's her new job – new, at least, since her last book, 2004's *The Trouble with Islam Today: A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith* – as director of the Moral Courage Project at New York University's Wagner School of Public Service.

It all fits together nicely.

"When I put the finishing touches on *The Trouble with Islam Today*, I really had no idea whether I was alone in having these thoughts, or whether there's actually a growing community of reformist Muslims as well," Manji, 43, says from New York.

What she found was some support. And some expected vitriol, some serious threats. She also found some clarity for moving forward, especially in the aspirations of young Muslims for "a positive vision of Islam" who reached out to her for guidance on how reach that vision.

"I thought it was fascinating that for all the communication platforms that we've got right now, very few places exist for both young reformist Muslims and progressive non-Muslims who wish to support the reformists, but are afraid of being Islamaphobes or bigots," says Manji. "There are very few places where they can turn safely for responses to these rather uncomfortable questions."

This new book, pulling from many of the comments she's received, answers some of those questions. But it

is also more universal than her past work, as is her post with the Moral Courage Project. Manji isn't just asking for Muslims to reform Islam. Today, Manji is asking everyone to open their minds, to examine the world critically, and to take a stand. And to keep examining, with the forethought that whatever stand you take today will almost certainly be amended tomorrow. In Manji's view, the case is always open, never closed. To help others do the same, she maintains a "Guidance Council" on irshadmanji.com to field questions.

Expelled from Uganda with her Indian-Egyptian family under Idi Amin's 1972 order that all Indians leave the country, she ended up in the Vancouver suburbs. She's worked in media and academia, been celebrated and cursed. She has a charisma and charm, however, that lights up even the likes of arch conservative Pat Buchanan.

"You saw that segment on *Morning Joe*?" she asks, laughing. "There was a little bit of flirty-ness going on there. I found it hilarious. If bringing out the best in Pat Buchanan – showing that there's a better side to him than most people see – if that's one thing I can do, I'm happy to be of service."

Next Thursday, Sept. 15, she'll bring that charm and intellect to Washington's Library of Congress, where she'll discuss religious freedom with the first Muslim elected to Congress, Rep. Keith Ellison (D-Minn.) – and, more importantly, the audience.

METRO WEEKLY: *What can we expect at this appearance at the Library of Congress with Rep. Ellison. Is he a friend?*

IRSHAD MANJI: Keith is, in fact, a friend of mine. So much of a friend that, as you can see, I'm on a first-name basis with him. [Laughs.] He endorsed *Allah, Liberty and Love* with a beautiful quote, if I may just read it for you: "In the Quran, God is not offended when the angels question him. In *Allah, Liberty and Love*, Irshad Manji asks powerful questions of God's self-appointed spokespeople. They will be affronted, but God is greater. Muslims like me cheer Irshad."

Now, I must tell you – obviously this is on the record, a published quote on the back of my book – Keith has really stuck his neck out to support reformists like me. I know that he will get the backlash from moderate Muslims – who, in my view, are actually conservative Muslims – for allying himself with very liberal-minded Muslims like me. But Keith's own moral courage is something that I really admire.

MW: *He seems to be a freethinker.*

MANJI: He is a freethinker. What I'm saddened by is he, like me, has been sort of pulled through the mud by agenda-driven individuals and groups in this country who don't want to see him for all his nuance, but rather reduce his complexity to this or that label. That is something any public figure has to contend with, but in this post-9/11 time, I really hope that the kind of reconciliation that we can begin to move forward with is not just between Muslims and non-Muslims, but also between faith and freedom, recognizing that a Keith Ellison and an Irshad Manji are able to be free-thinking Muslims. That is not a contradiction in terms. Also, something I'd like to bring up, is the reconciliation between honesty and respect. In our society – and I mean globally, not just here in the United States – the word "respect" has actually come to be corrupted. It's something that gays and lesbians, people of color, women – a majority treated like a minority – minorities of all stripes, all of us tend to put up our hands to those who have challenging questions and

say, "Nope. You must respect me." But that is a very twisted version of respect: having lower expectations of yourself than what you're capable of.

But let's get back to your first question, "What can we expect at the Sept. 15 event?" This really is the invitation for your readers to come on down and participate in an honest discussion. I emphasize the word "honest" here, because I'm not about "interfaith dialogue." I'm not about a mere exchange of platitudes. I'm interested in really hearing what's going on in people's hearts. I want this space at the Library of Congress to be the one opportunity that those who do have politically incorrect questions about Islam, about multiculturalism, about faith in general, any of the issues, diversity, homosexuality.... Bring your most politically incorrect questions. Let's get them out. I would like it to be the kind of experience that even if people don't remember exactly what was said, they'll remember feeling less fearful than when they entered.

MW: *With trips to Washington, I read a 2008 profile of you in the Guardian that mentioned you spending some weeks here to advise legislators about U.S. relations with Islamic countries. What advice did you give?*

MANJI: My big point at that time, because I'd not come out with my new book yet, was to say a couple of things. One is that we have to be careful as progressives or liberals, whatever label you want to attach to yourself, not to fall into the rabbit hole of relativism. Relativists are people who fall for anything because they stand for nothing. And usually they delude themselves about standing for nothing because they don't want to offend.

My alternative to this, which allows for much more honest conversation, is to be a pluralist, somebody who happily coexists with multiple perspectives and truths. But a pluralist also accepts that she or he is an ethical being, whose existence on this Earth is about more than just them. They're part of a wider global community. So we have to make judgments, every day, about what is moral and immoral, what is conscionable and unconscionable, what is right and wrong. The beauty of being a pluralist is you also have the humility to recognize you don't own the full and final truth, and therefore you're open to changing your mind. Your judgments, in other words, are always temporary and always provisional, contingent upon a better argument coming down the road – hence the need for free speech – and also contingent upon more experiences.

There's nothing illiberal about making judgments. And not just about your own culture. Obviously American liberals are very judgmental about their own culture. [*Laughs.*] But also there's nothing illiberal about making judgments with respect to other people's cultures. The arrogance comes in deciding that that judgment is all there can be to the truth and that's it. That's what fundamentalists do. So you've got your extremes: the fundamentalists on the one hand, the relativists on the other. In between, I believe, is the reasonable compromise of being a pluralist.

MW: *That could be asking a lot of people, to both make judgments and to be ready to change one's mind.*

MANJI: Probably. And you know what? If I'm guilty of that, then I happily embrace my guilt. I say very openly and firmly in the introduction of *Allah, Liberty and Love* that right now we live in a time where, as people who affiliate with different identity groups, we often – not always – have low expectations of ourselves and high defenses against the other. My work is about trying to flip that equation, so that we can lower our defenses about the other and raise expectations, first of ourselves, then of the other.

So, yeah, I have very high expectations for myself. And I have no problem applying that same standard to others, knowing full well that I will be disappointed often, but also that I will take great joy in those few gems that step up to the plate.

MW: *But to ask people to keep a perpetually open mind....*

MANJI: It's exhausting. Sure it is. It's as exhausting for them as much as it is for those who have higher expectations of them than their peers and family often do.

But I must tell you that as a person of deep faith, this is actually key to maintaining my faith. At the end of the day, I believe that my universal creator owns the full and final truth. In fact, it's a spiritual duty for me to have the humility to keep my mind open. That is how I reconcile faith and freedom. As a Muslim, I am to worship one God, not God's self-appointed ambassadors. So I have to embrace the fact that I have very limited knowledge – which is why I can't play god with other people, because that would suggest I do have the full truth, which I don't. That, in turn, obliges me. Owning the limited nature of my knowledge obliges me to contribute to a society in which we can disagree with one another in peace and civility.

MW: *You've been in New York since 2008? I'm guessing it's a pretty good fit for you.*

MANJI: Oh, my God. I say this with no shred of exaggeration: I still wake up every morning thanking God that I wound end up in New York City, whose energy totally agrees with me. And when I go to bed late at night and I hear the sirens of police or firefighters or an ambulance, and people are screaming on my street, and it's just a hullabaloo, this is music to my ears. This is part and parcel of living in a vibrant society. New York invigorates me.

MW: *So you had a front-row seat for the Park 51 debate. Did you take part in that?*

MANJI: I did. What I said was that the really sad part of the so-called debate – because it was really only a series of monologues – is that I found in real-world experiences, the emails coming to me from self-identified liberals and self-identified conservatives, that they were reacting to one another rather than actually examining the issue on its own merits.

I remember a guy named Bob, from Tennessee, who said, "Irshad, I'm really offended by the anti-mosque crusaders, of which there are plenty in this state, and I think they're un-American. For that reason alone" – literally, he said "for that reason alone" – "I support mosque building in my state." I responded, "Does that make you a liberal? Is that what you're trying to suggest? Because all you're doing is emotionally reacting to the other, or to who you presume to be the other." In other words, you're deciding this is your position on Park 51 simply because you're affronted by somebody who takes the opposite position. You haven't asked questions about Park 51. If you believe in your liberalism, how about asking the imam who's heading up the mosque project in Tennessee which side of the mosque men will be walking through. If he answers that question, you know instantly that segregation will take place at that mosque. How about asking about Park 51 whether the swimming pool will be segregated at any time of the day or night. How about asking if the sanctuary that Muslims use for prayer will also be open to Christians and Jews since, after all, that is the case at the Pentagon. Since this is the most contested site in the United States, why not also offer it up to fellow monotheists, people of the book, who are not Muslim? And, by the way, since the imam who was heading up Park 51 last year has now left on very suspicious terms, since he sort of trumpeted that this

would be based on the Jewish community center model, one of my final questions is, where then do I sign up for advance tickets for Salman Rushdie's lecture? I think it's a very reasonable question. And yet, Bob from Tennessee couldn't be bothered to ask those kinds of questions, because he just didn't like how other people were reacting. And we're better than that. We're capable of better.

MW: *You probably have some people who say, "I was a fan, but then you said X, and now I'm not so sure." It must be hard to keep an Irshad Manji Fan Club going.*

MANJI: That's very true. *[Laughs.]* There was a time when I would feel pressure to "represent." I don't feel that anymore. If I'm going to have integrity championing individuality, then let me start with myself and take the journey – albeit publicly – that I want to take. And in some respects I'm meant to take. In other words, not feel the need to conform to particular assumptions of about how I'm supposed to sound, who I'm supposed to be.

In terms of, "How does an Irshad Manji fan club even then define itself?" if you go to my Facebook community, I much more often than not launch threads that ask ethical and moral questions. It's very intentional on my part to create a forum in which individuals from across the political spectrum can know that the only thing they will ever be chewed out for is incivility, and then expect also to be challenged on their positions. Not just by me, but by fellow Facebookers.

MW: *Do you think your work might be easier if you weren't a lesbian? If you came wrapped in more conventional packaging, like a husband on your arm?*

MANJI: If you had asked me this question nine years ago, given the welter of homophobic comments that were spat at me both virtually and in person, I could only – out of exhaustion and fatigue – tell you, "Oh, my God, it makes this work so much harder."

On reflection, I'm not so sure it does make the work harder. I'll try to explain it in a couple of different ways, because I'm still grappling with this.

One is I do believe – and I conclude this from hard experience – if I wasn't gay, there would be some other rap against me, right? "She's a woman." Okay. We'll, if I was a straight man, "He's not Arab." If I was a straight, Arab man? "He grew up in the West." There's always something. I learned some time ago that there was absolutely no point in bemoaning being an out lesbian and trying to engage Muslims. It is what it is.

I don't see being lesbian as the negative that others have tried to turn it into. It's a unique aspect of what it's going to take to launch a reformation within Islam. And I'm just happy to make what little contribution I can.

MW: *Do you see your sexual orientation as a major part of you, personally or politically?*

MANJI: I don't see, really, anything with which I've been born as a defining aspect of who I am.

Some months ago I walked into the elevator of the building I live in here in New York. There was a woman in the elevator. She said, "Oh, aren't you that Muslim lesbian?" And I said, "Hmm, I guess. One of these

days I'll be multifaceted enough for you to ask me if I'm 'that thinker.'" She didn't know what to make of that, and I didn't want to sound snippy about it. As we were heading up, I said, "Don't worry. I get this all the time. And it's all good."

But the point is, I define myself by what I try to accomplish and not the labels into which I was born, whether that's person of color or woman or lesbian or, for that matter, even Muslim. Though, obviously, I know very well that the work I do has a particular application to my fellow Muslims.

I always try to make sure that my message is a much more universal one. Because, you know what? It's far more interesting to me when it's universal. If you put yourself in my shoes for just a second, imagine having to go on the road having to say the same thing over and over and over again about a very specific topic. For the most part, you get the same questions. People expect to hear the same things from you. You're expected to give a stump speech, etc., etc. Now I only do "onstage conversations," because I need to stay interested. If my message is too identity-focused, then, I'm sorry, I bore the hell out of myself. There's an incentive here to continue exploring much more uncomfortable and provocative ground, if only to keep yourself alert to how interesting it is to be human.

MW: *Do you have any memory of your childhood in Uganda? Could that have affected your psyche, being expelled from a country for one of your innate qualities? Was that much talked about in your home growing up?*

MANJI: It wasn't talked about. Not once. But I think I would be disingenuous if I said no, it doesn't matter at all to my thinking. It probably does. But I think it matters in more than one way.

It would be easy for anybody to assume that being expelled from a country because you weren't white enough for the British or black enough for native Africans, that this must've been very difficult. For my parents, it certainly was. But I grew up in the open society of Canada. I write in *Allah, Liberty and Love* that when we came to the precious soil of Canada, we were handed our freedoms along with our winter coats. We didn't fight for these freedoms. We didn't take up arms for these freedoms. We didn't shed blood for them. We barely broke a sweat for them. So I know how unbelievably privileged I am to have wound up in a relatively free part of the world.

That's why I do believe expulsion from Uganda has produced a sense of gratitude for that which I did not earn, but that from which I do benefit. Every morning, as part of my, "I can't believe I'm in New York" kind of thought, I first thank God for the opportunity to be living in this society, and secondly I ask God to continue making me worthy of living with these freedoms. Honestly, that's why I feel I do have not just the right, but the responsibility, to do the kind of work I do.

MW: *Though patriotism often turns into dogma, would you consider yourself a patriotic Canadian? A loyal Canadian?*

MANJI: Canadians have a very paradoxical sense of patriotism. It's precisely when we're not thumping our chests that we're being most patriotic. I like to think of myself as "Canadian without borders," bringing cosmopolitan, pluralistic Canadian values to whatever it is that I'm doing in New York or elsewhere. But, certainly, being patriotic doesn't mean waving a flag – in the Canadian sensibility, anyway.

MW: *Do you get into discussions about that with your American peers?*

MANJI: On concrete issues. Not so much on nationalism and what can easily become chauvinism and xenophobia, but on really practical issues like health care. Boy! American friends and colleagues come to me for my Canadian take on what our system is like. It really wasn't until I came here and experienced the health care system firsthand that I've come to realize how unbelievably inefficient this supposedly "best system in the world" is. In many ways, living in the United States has been an eye-opener for me. But, again, I would not trade anything in my life here in New York. There is simply no replacement for high energy, day in and day out.

MW: *Would you consider becoming an American?*

MANJI: It's a good question. The answer is no, for now. I've made a judgment, for now, that I will retain my Canadian citizenship. Who knows what the future holds? But I have no intention to become a U.S. citizen.

MW: *I've not seen a copy of your 1997 Risking Utopia, but I'd be interested to read it if only to gauge how your perspectives were affected by 9/11.*

MANJI: The big difference pre- and post-9/11 is that pre-9/11 I felt comfortable in the world of theory. Post-9/11 I am very, very much grappling with reality checks. You could argue, I guess, that *Allah, Liberty and Love* is a nice compromise between big ideas and real-world examples. *The Trouble with Islam Today* was very much of the real world, using stories left, right and center, even to illustrate Islamic history. This new book sort of continues in the tradition, my own sort of post-9/11 tradition, of not being satisfied with what theory tells us, but actually seeing how that theory translates on the ground. And let's judge the veracity of that theory by real-world standards. For example, multiculturalism. Many good people believe multiculturalism is where it's at. It is all about diversity. It's intended to celebrate people's uniqueness. But that's not what happens in the real world when multiculturalism is practiced. What happens is that people begin to see each other through the lens of group affiliations. Just because you identify with a group doesn't mean you stop being an individual in your own right. The individual tends to get lost. We fail to realize, therefore, what we're actually doing is putting each other into these slots and patting ourselves on the back for supposedly jubilating in diversity. When in fact we're doing the opposite, because we're not drilling down to see where real diversity exists, i.e. in thinking and not just in appearance. No wonder people like me are often called sellouts and traitors by liberals and progressives – not just Muslims, but by liberal and progressive non-Muslims – because they've been conditioned to see me as a mascot of some calcified culture, and that if I don't conform to the baggage of that culture, then I must be part of somebody else's culture. In other words, the individuality of the human being is papered over when multiculturalism becomes an orthodoxy. That's very tragic.

MW: *How do you know you're making an impact? Do you look at the number of times *The Trouble with Islam* has been downloaded in Farsi, or is it something more introspective?*

MANJI: It is more introspective than that. We do live in a world in which people want and often demand metrics. Of course, I won't shy from giving people solid figures where I have them. But for me, those aren't where the victories are. For me, it's knowing when I put my head on that pillow at night, I believe that I've been as honest with the world as I possibly know how. When people ask me how do I know I'm being honest with myself, it really goes back to what your conscience is telling you. If your conscience is telling

you, "You know that you're more multifaceted than what you're allowing yourself to be heard as, to be perceived as," I say listen to that voice of conscience.

It's your effort to reconcile the many facets of who you are. It is when you can celebrate in those many facets, not invest yourself in any one particular label, that I believe you will also be avoiding dogma. Whether it's queer dogma, multiculturalist dogma, feminist dogma, capitalist dogma – whatever the case may be – because you have not invested all of your emotional self into one category.

MW: *Could you do this work if you were an atheist? How much do you lean on your relationship with God?*

MANJI: For me, it's everything. I'm happily single, and I say "happily" because – without getting weird about it, because I don't feel weird about it – I really feel myself married to my creator. I had a couple students over for chai tea not long ago. One of them is Hindu and the other is an atheist. The Hindu student said, "How do you not get lonely with this mission?" And before I could even answer, the atheist jumps in and says, "Dude, she's got God in her life." [*Laughs.*] And he was right about that. Which is not to say as a human being I feel no need for companionship, for human fellowship; of course I do. Like anybody, I'm a social creature. But it is my personal relationship with God that I can lean on. I feel that there is a protective hand saying, "Go, child. Go. Do what you need to. Be as constructive about it as you can. And when you make new mistakes, I've got your back." It's not that everything – or, for that matter, anything – I do is perfect. It's not. But that I insist on learning something new, not repeating old patterns.

MW: *How is your relationship with God today different than it was yesterday, or 10 years ago?*

MANJI: Wow. That's a question, huh? You know, I can't claim to always feel the depth of the closeness, of tightness, with my creator. It isn't always an electrifying experience for me. Sometimes it is. Most times it's not. But it is the grace that allows me to believe that the talent and the potential that the Creator has endowed in me – I think in each of us – is not to be wasted. I pay tribute to God's creativity when I use my own, because I do believe that any creator worthy of worship does not manufacture widgets and automatons. This is permission to grow. And to fumble, and to stumble. But know that you're not put on this Earth to remain static.

Source: [Metro Weekly](#)