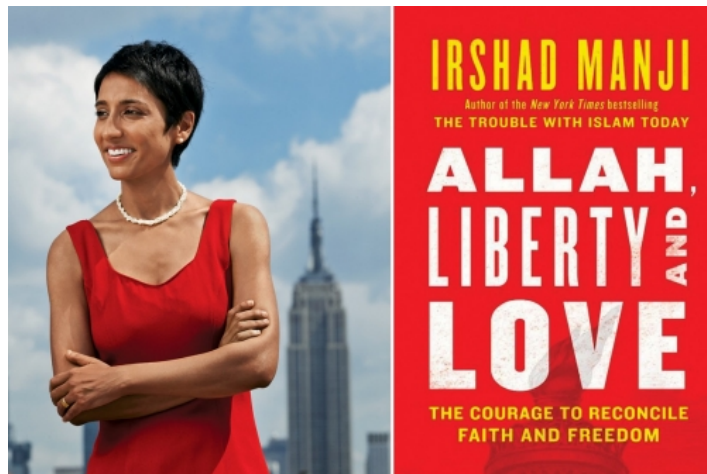


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## Islam's Pixie Provocateur Talks Allah, Liberty, and Love

By: Melik Kaylan



It's hard to believe that the bright-eyed figure with the elfin smile, sipping tea at her dining table, can provoke so much odium. One shouldn't be too specific about where Irshad Manji lives or works. Many of the death threats she's received claim to monitor her movements. Yet Manji refuses to mute her arguments or slow her pace in her fight to convince Muslims to "drop the groupthink" and follow their consciences as individuals.

As director of the Moral Courage Project at New York University, Manji teaches from a score of hefty historical texts about free speech and diversity. If there's a high likelihood of self-righteousness in such projects, one need only look at the many YouTube videos of Manji's public appearances to see that she comes across without a hint of vanity, with a transparency so disarming that she seems unaffected by fame or threats—or even her punishing schedule. She lectures frequently and is featured regularly on television with the likes of Christiane Amanpour, Salman Rushdie, and Sir David Frost. She responds to innumerable disputatious emails from her highly interactive website—one that offers, among other things, a downloadable guide for Muslims contemplating interfaith marriage. She manages a Facebook community of 10,000 members, dispensing advice via a council of experts whom she has painstakingly selected. And

she has published a new book, *Allah, Liberty and Love*, a rallying cry to Muslims—especially young ones—around the world to think and talk more freely, one that’s bound to incite great anger among authoritarian Islamists.

I catch up with Manji as she gears up for her fall book tour, which will take her across America, Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia. Her Manhattan apartment—polished, modern, functional—shows little sign of wear and tear. It’s clear she doesn’t spend much time at home. She seems apologetic about taking so long to follow up on her first book, *The Trouble With Islam*, published in 2004 and memorably called “Bin Laden’s worst nightmare” by one reviewer. “My publishers wanted me to come through quickly with a second book, but I’d encountered such a virulent reaction to my first, with people often shouting at me from the audience, that I resolved to go out and listen and meet as many Muslims in as many cultures as possible,” she says. Determined to “provoke a spirit of discussion wherever I went,” Manji spent almost a decade trying to show Muslims “that open debate was possible in their community and for others to see that Muslims could exchange ideas in a civilized atmosphere.”

In a decade where bullets and bombs, rather than ideas, dominated the contact between Islam and the West, Manji has repeatedly crossed the cultural divide. She’s chronicled parts of her adventure in a controversial 2007 documentary, *Faith Without Fear*. The film is full of startling, unforgettable moments: Manji sitting with men at the front row of a Yemeni schoolroom, while rows of veiled, faceless women sit apart and behind; Manji, also in Yemen, interviewing Osama bin Laden’s former bodyguard—a supposed convert to nonviolence via the state’s fraudulent reeducation program—who tells her that he misses every moment away from “Sheik Osama” and is training his own son to be a martyr. “As the former bodyguard spoke,” says Manji, “I was so astonished that I turned to the Yemeni government minder, and he wanted me to keep filming—he wanted the truth out despite the official line.” On that occasion, she says, she began to realize she wasn’t a “voice in the wilderness, isolated from the [Muslim] community.” As she traveled, she found that she had the support of Muslims everywhere who were being muzzled by their own kind. She had a duty, she says, to help them probe the supposed infallibility of their authorities. It is, in part, an answer to the question of why Manji—an openly lesbian advocate of preponderantly Western values such as pluralism and skepticism—remains a Muslim. She seems actuated above all by a sense of duty.

Manji’s family was driven out of Uganda during Idi Amin’s purge of the country’s Indian minority in 1972—Manji was just 4 years old—in an early and traumatizing experience of Muslims brutalizing other Muslims. The Manjis settled in Canada, where Irshad attended a mosque until, she says, she was thrown out for doubting the imam too often. She read about Islam on her own in the local library and came to her own conclusions. “I have a duty to pay back my luck in landing in a country where I could think for myself about faith. Other people elsewhere are not so lucky. I have a duty to help them.”

In *Allah, Liberty and Love*, Manji cites the Koranic precept of *ijtihad*—the right to think independently—as scriptural authority for her position. From there, the book fans out into a polemical exchange with hostile emailers, YouTube antagonists, issuers of death threats, and self-appointed silencers. She also dispenses advice for insulated Muslims desperate for outside help. Along the way, Manji pinpoints and skewers a string of polemical positions commonly embraced by Islamists to enforce conformity and submission. About the protection of the group rather than individuals, she writes, “If groups and their cultures are to be tolerated as much as individuals, what do we say to individuals who find themselves oppressed by traditions inside those groups?” She argues that such an attitude has led to “relativism, the now rampant

belief that no cultural norm is better than another." She concludes, "With culture as the new race, those who reveal a tradition's ugly underbelly can be dismissed as bigots."

When the group is prized over the individual, says Manji, the result can be a situation like that of a Jordanian man who killed his sister for being raped—not an uncommon tradition in many tribal Muslim communities. "I do not regret killing [her]," he says, though if given the chance to do it over, he adds, "I would tie her up like a sheep in the house until she either died or someone married her." Manji points out that such "honor codes" have insidious similarities to codes of slave ownership in the Old South—and that they infantilize the perpetrators, allowing them to plead helplessness in the face of blind custom. In the case of the Jordanian man, he blamed his "traditions and society which inflict things on us." Manji returns to the infantilizing effect in a chapter entitled "Offense Is the Price of Diversity," where she battles against the notion that questioning the values of a minority amounts to disrespect. Disagreeing is not disrespect, she says, and adds that the "answer to hate speech is more speech."

Manji's book bristles with these snappy phrases that hover between epigrams and slogans—effective soundbites for her supporters. But Manji is also concerned that the book's tone might be misconstrued. "Do you think that the ideas in this book serve constructively for the right kind of dialogue?" she asks me. I ask her what she wishes for the book. "I hope, and I pray to God," she says, "that at its best, it could contribute to a new civil-rights movement between Muslims and non-Muslims."