

The Trouble with Islam (review)

Muslim Women on Islamic Reform

The Trouble with Islam: A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith, by Irshad Manji (St. Martin's Press, 2003; 230 pp) Why I Am a Muslim: An American Odyssey, by Asma Gull Hasan (Harper Collins/Element, 2004; 174 pp)

Reviewed by Charles Strohmer

Since 9/11 the capacity of Islam for renewal and change has become a central issue in the complex religious and political give-and-take that now surrounds relations between the West and the Muslim community worldwide. Because one of the focal points of Islamic reform is the role of Muslim women, whose social, economic, and political life has been curbed in the religion, it is refreshing to see two lively North American Muslim women finding their voices.

Irshad Manji's blunt and provocative The Trouble with Islam: A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith may make not make her as many friends as she'd like within what she calls "mainstream" Islam, but that did not stop her from writing the daring book. Manji, who works as a journalist and television personality in Toronto, is no happy camper within the fold. "Islam is on very thin ice with me," she states, then showing why throughout the book?in vivid color. Deeply critical, Manji takes seriously the many troubling questions that discerning non-Muslims have posed about Islamic fundamentalism. "Honesty" was the word I keep jotting in the margins as I read the book. "Honesty" was the word I keep jotting in the margins as I read the book

After recapping how her family fled religious persecution in Uganda (under Idi Amin) for British Columbia in 1972, when she was four, Irshad Manji reveals her bad experiences in Canada with Islamic religious schools. Most of the book, however, carries Manji's stinging indictments of Muslim attitudes toward women, human rights, Jews, America, and even the Koran. "First and foremost," she writes, "being self-critical means coming clean about the nasty side of the Koran, and how it informs terrorism." "Is that a heart attack you're having?" she asks her Muslim readers who may be cringing. "Make it fast. Because if we don't speak out against the imperialists within Islam, these guys will walk away with the show."

But it's not all diatribe. Manji's appeal for a mainstream return to *ijtihad* [ISH-tee-haad] forms the heart of her call for Islamic reform. *Ijtihad*, the Islamic tradition of independent thinking or critical reasoning, is what Manji considers as the answer to *jihad* (holy war). Without romanticizing Islamic history, she shows the benefits that *ijtihad* once produced for both the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds, and then she asks, "When did we stop thinking?" a complaint she directs at "an army of automatons" in the Muslim world who have stopped using the brains Allah gave them. "We don't have to be prize-winning intellectuals to practice *ijtihad*," she writes. "All we need to do is openly express our questions about Islam." All of this, she concludes, "would give Muslims a future to live for rather than a past to die for."

Much of the book suggests ways Muslims may liberalize Islam through what she calls "operation *ijtihad*," an across-the-board initiative that would empower more Muslim women economically, align Islamic human rights codes with the modern world, and reform the radio and television outlets. It would also entail creating a less militant paradigm for the relationship between mosque and state, incorporating more democracy into the Muslim world, and engaging in peaceable interfaith activity. All of this, she concludes, "would give Muslims a future to live for rather than a past to die for."

Whereas The Trouble with Islam probes what its author calls "the hidden underbelly of Islam," Asma Gull Hasan's Why I Am a Muslim: An American Odyssey virtually ignores Islam's disturbing aspects to showcase the progressive Islam that its author grew up with in Colorado, where she attended a Catholic school, a sunny experience for her. The book's positive-only approach to Islam certainly reveals to interested readers the possibilities that the moderate attitudes and beliefs of westernized Muslims bring to the table, but the net effect paints a much too rosy picture both of early and modern-day Islam.

Hasan, a graduate of New York University's School of Law, spends much of her energies combating anti-Islamic prejudices. Billed as "part memoir, part guide," Why I Am a Muslim is replete with personal anecdotes presented in a chatty Cathy style to show why its author is committed to Islam. More conservative in some of her beliefs than Manji, Hasan nevertheless makes clear that the Islam

she practices "is not the one depicted by Osama bin Laden, or by Al Jazeera, cable news, or the fear-mongers." Fair enough. Unfortunately, by soft-pedaling significant historical realities such as the violent Islamic "age of the conquests" (Bernard Lewis) and Muslim oppression of the dhimmi (the conquered and subjected Jews and Christians), and by limiting her few references to present-day extremism to dismissive statements such as "some Muslims carry out violent acts in Islam's name and use Islam to justify un-Islamic things," the book's picture of Islam seems a bit disingenuous. Both books represent telling voices that can kick-start long overdue discussions among Muslims

It also takes liberties with theological issues and draws historical and social conclusions that many readers will find disturbing, if not untrue or naive. For instance, Hasan takes issue with the common belief that Islam was "really spread by the sword." And she claims that every American Muslim she knows "feels that America is the only true Islamic country?that stands for the values Islam does?a fair and just society like the one Muhammad created in Medina." Other conclusions, such as "The Prophet Muhammad's story reads like the American Dream," or, "Muslims don't have a problem with Christians or Jews or other religions, at least not by Qur'anic standards," simply do not square with meticulously documented major books by acclaimed scholars such as Bat Ye'or.

Yet the book did have me rooting for Hasan at times. She cites common ground between Christian and Muslim belief, such as forgiveness and grace, as potential for peaceable interfaith relationships. She expresses personal sentiments that many Christians could Amen, such as that "God provides continuous light, [but] we become caught up in the confusion of daily life and either are distracted from the light or abandon the search for it altogether." She spends a full chapter describing Sufism, the Islamic mystical tradition, to show it as an attractive Muslim alternative to today's extremism. And as a practicing Muslim she is witness to the fact that one can be faithful to the Koran while being solidly an American.

Although neither *The Trouble with Islam* or *Why I am a Muslim* will satisfy the intellectual rigors of reformed-minded Islamic scholars or skeptical Americans, both books represent telling voices that can kick-start long overdue discussions among Muslims in the grassroots who seek to be faithful to Islam without falling prey to extremism. With modern day Islamic reform still in its genesis, many voices like these are urgently needed.

(Religion and political writer Charles Strohmer is the author of several books and a contributor to *Dictionary of Contemporary Religion in the Western World*. This review first published in *Sojourners*, Oct., 2004.)

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