

Hirsi Ali's Call For An Islamic Reformation

I had the pleasure this week of meeting Ayaan Hirsi Ali at a most convivial social occasion, having just read her latest book, *Heretic*. Most readers will be aware that she fled an arranged marriage as a very young Somali Muslim woman and abandoned her faith, going first to Germany and then to the Netherlands. She began her new life as a factory cleaning lady and rose to be a Dutch member of parliament and a prominent activist for the victims of militant Islam. She is now a fellow at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University and the wife of eminent Anglo-American historian Niall Ferguson, and is an elegant, charming and courageous woman.

She states that Islam is "incompatible with modernity," and summarizes that it primarily requires unlimited faith in the existence and sacred authority of God, Allah, and Mohamed his prophet; prayer five times a day; day-time fasting for the whole ninth month of Ramadan; the practice of charity, and, if possible, at least one pilgrimage to Mecca in one's lifetime. Only the first of these is seriously problematical (as opposed to personally inconvenient).

Ali's five requirements for reform are revisions of Mohamed's semi-divine and infallible status and literalist reading of the Koran, particularly those allegedly revealed to the Prophet at the launch of his most radical phase in Medina in the last 10 years of his life; the de-emphasis of life after death over the present life; the abandonment of the draconian Shariah law derived from the Koran; an end to empowering individuals to enforce that law arbitrarily, and to the frequent and capricious recourse to jihad, holy war.

The author's summaries of problems and solutions is plausible,

but if her suggestions were enacted, Islam would become just a Golden Rule fellowship; her authority to recommend anything so radical, moreover, suffers for her being not just an apostate, but an atheist. This, as I gently suggested to her, is where her heartfelt argument becomes tenuous. Atheists renounce and abstain from religions; they don't reform them.

Her call for a Reformation is easy to misunderstand, as the Christian Reformation was anything but atheistic. It was a peculiar alliance between zealots like Luther, Knox and Calvin (who were almost as fervent as the Islamists Ms. Ali dislikes most), and charlatans like Henry VIII (whom, given her feminist views, she could not seriously admire). The Sunni-Shiite split was dynastic, and not doctrinal like Christian schisms.

Mohamed started out as Jesus Christ spent his whole life, as a preacher, and said that he was a continuator of Abraham, Moses, and Christ himself. He had been only moderately successful at this vocation when, aged 52, he was driven out of Mecca to Medina, transmogrified into a warrior unlike those he claimed to emulate, and became a great and often very ruthless conqueror.

Allegedly, God Himself dictated the text of the Koran to Mohamed, via that well-travelled messenger, the saint and archangel Gabriel. Though this is widely disputed by Islamic scholars not under immediate threat of execution or torture for heresy, it does constitute a sharp contrast with the origins of the Bible. The Koran was propagated as Islam spread, unlike the Bible, which was only gradually composed over centuries following the death of Christ.

While no knowledgeable person would dispute that Christianity has been invoked as an excuse for a good deal of unjustifiable militarism, it is comparatively tolerant, and has very rarely claimed the right to extort adherents under pain of death, which is unfortunately rather commonplace in the history and

current practices of Islam. As a result of its allegedly divine authorship, the Koran has stressed omnipotence over free will, the moral value of martyrdom, and a vast and ferocious definition of God's will. The author reverts to her experience in the Netherlands to explain that the tendency of the Muslim immigrants to that country to litter and not to dispose properly of garbage, when criticized by the host nationality, was ascribed (with doubtful theological authority) to God's will. Christians pray for God's guidance or intercession; Muslims recite God's alleged words as written in the Koran.

Ali says that she is an optimist, essentially because so many of militant Islam's practices are so odious, and because, despite the professed fidelity of most Muslim populations, there are scientifically canvassed majorities in all major Muslim countries that are concerned about Muslim extremism. She does not believe that militant Islam will be sustainable, as she puts it, in the "absence of reason," with its belief that there is no real distinction between secular and canon law, its requirement for endless combat and the death penalty for people of other views, and its reliance on the recruitment of martyrs to acts of terror by fantastically explicit Koranic descriptions of heaven. ("There will be two gardens containing all kinds of trees and delights... these places are built of emeralds and jewels... On each bed [there will be] a girl having sweet black eyes... Each believer will be given such strength in the morning as he can cohabit with them.")

She must be right that ultimately it will be hard to sell what sounds like an upscale bordello advertisement as the word of God. Her conferral on Mohamed of the status of "greatest lawgiver of all time" only holds where Koranic law supersedes all other law, and this departs from the criteria by which that honour has historically been contested by such legislators as Hammurabi, Justinian, Napoleon and James Madison.

She is skeptical that Islamic regimes will be able to go on maintaining authority with religious police, public executions (with executioners as talkative media personalities), and honour killings conducted in enforcement of family traditions even in liberal non-Muslim countries. She is right, too, that the West is being both unjust and unwise in not responding more strongly to the massacre and lesser harassment of Christians by Muslims (as well as Communists) in many countries, and that the tendency of Western liberals to indulge Islamist extremists as wholly unrepresentative, has the opposite effect to the one intended. But her perspective is not regard for Christianity, but a desire to mobilize the great, if sleepy, power of the traditionally Christian West against those who made her youth miserable and have tormented her ever since.

I think she asks a lot when she calls for Muslim reformers to be accorded the same renown in the West as Alexander Solzhenitsyn or Voltaire – who were, broadly, Westerners calling for reform of the West. For obvious reasons in her own harrowing experience, she exaggerates the threat of Islam to the West. Very few Muslim countries have objectively been successful and they are not a menace on the scale of Hitler or Stalin, cunning totalitarians at the head of great, militarily powerful, more or less Western nations. Islamist terrorists are a horrible nuisance, but they aren't capable of destroying our civilization and have accomplished almost nothing since the 9/11 (2001) attacks except a few random bombings and shootings. It is not the West that will reform Islam, except in so far as Muslims yield to the temptations of our supposedly decadent mores and folkways, depicted to the Muslim masses on ubiquitous modern media.

But these are relatively minor cavils. She is a remarkable personality and this is an interesting and readable book.

First published in the