

## Interview with Irshad Manji

Canadian feminist Muslim, author, journalist, activist against radical  
islamism

The Interview was conducted by Ernst Hebecker, director of the Berlin office of the Hanns Seidel Foundation

*Ms Manji, you argue in favor of re-opening the “Gate of Idschtihad” (the gate of interpretation) after more than a thousand years. In view of Islam turning more radical world-wide, what should stop us from considering your call for reforms as purely utopian?*

**Irshad Manji:** *(laughs)* No, this is an important question to ask. There are changes that are already happening on the ground, precisely because reform-minded Muslims are beginning to become more expert at using the technology of the 21<sup>st</sup> century in order to get our message out to the millions and millions of young people that are hungry for change. Let me give you a very quick example but a very concrete one. Immediately after my book came out and, by the way, it was published first in the world by Germany, even Canada were second, because of the international press that it received, young Muslims in the Middle East came to learn about the book. My e-mail inbox overflowed with messages of young Muslims in the Middle East asking me, ‘when are you going to get the book translated into Arabic, so that we can share these ideas with our friends?’ And my standard unimaginative response to them was, ‘please, name one Arab publisher that will have the guts to translate, let alone distribute the book.’ And most of the young people wrote back to say, ‘you are right,

but so what? You get the book translated into Arabic, then post that translation on your website and when we can download it in *pdf*-format, it means we can read it in privacy and therefore safety, something we couldn't have if we were carrying the physical copy of the book around with us.' So I took their advise, got it translated and got it posted. In only one year, there have been more than 200,000 downloads in Arabic alone. Last week, a reporter from the New York Times magazine e-mailed me to say: 'Did you know, that the Arabic translation of your book has been printed and passed around in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon among the young people there?' I did know this already, but it was very important to get this evidence from voices other than mine. I can also tell you that about this time last year I was in Cairo for the first time in my life. Young Muslims, men and not just women, approached me to say 'thank you for putting these ideas online, for making the book accessible to us. I'm reading it, my friends are reading it and it is now making the rounds of the democracy movement.' So what I am really getting at here is that we may be in the very early stages of something much bigger. But what is so different today, from what would have even been possible 15 years ago, is that, for all of the poverty in which so many young Muslims still live, they are immensely wired, they are immensely connected and they are hungry, many, many of them, for the kind of change that reform-minded Muslims are able to offer. The big question is of course, are there more of them than of the jihadists? And we won't know that until maybe ten years from now. But in those ten years reform-minded Muslims and progressive non-Muslims have really got to make every effort to get the message out. Because only when other young Muslims see that they are not alone, will they finally conquer their fear to come out of the shadows and join what we hope is a movement and not just an idea.

*Why are women's issues for you the key to a restoration of Islam?*

**Irshad Manji:** Well, women have the least to lose and the most to gain from speaking up about the need for change. We can do this in very constructive, pro-Islam ways. I will give you a quick example. One of the ideas that I write about in my book is to give micro-business loans or micro-credit loans to women in the Muslim world, not just because we can empower them economically. That is nice, but that is not even the reason. The reason is that this idea is very compatible with Islam itself. There is consensus within Islam that when a woman earns her own money she can keep a hundred percent of that money and do with it whatever she believes is necessary. So for example, she can after earning money from her business become literate, learn to read the Koran for herself, see all of those passages for dignity that it gives her that the Imams and the Mullahs usually don't tell women about. And, again because I am a journalist I like to give evidence of these things: About eight months ago a fellow journalist in Kabul called me to say, 'remember those progressive passages in the Koran that you talked about in your book?' 'Yes,' I said. He said that 'today I met a Muslim woman who took a micro-credit loan from a non-governmental organization. She started a candle-making business, earned her money, learned to read the Koran, found those very progressive passages you are talking about.' And here is the point, recited them, read them to her illiterate husband, who had been beating her ever since they got married. And when he realized that these verses are in God's book, not in the universal declaration of human rights, he did not lay an unwanted finger on her. This is the power of the Koran, this is the power of literacy, this is the power of small ideas and we need to find ways to turn them into actual policies. And so, one of the ideas that I would like to promote is why not all of the rich countries around the world, including the rich Arab countries, take just a slice of their defense

budget, pull them into a coherent series of micro-business loans for the women of the Muslim world and let us see what happens. The worst that can happen, it seems to me, is more economic empowerment of women. Well great, if that is the worst, if that's the downside, I would take that. The best that can happen is that these women then come up with the arguments and the confidence that they need to be able to stand up to the men in their societies and say: 'Remember, the prophet Mohammed's first wife Khadijah was a business woman just like I am, and he worked for her. Now, if you're not going to work for me that is fine, I don't need you as an employee. But at the very least you're going to make sure I can work for myself.'

*When talking about the structure and tenets of Islam you mention an "Arabic imperialism". Could globalization and internationalization perhaps help to overcome the cultural dominance of a religion?*

**Irshad Manji:** You mean, can globalization help overcome the Arab cultural imperialism within Islam?

Yes, I think it can. I go back to mass-communications as a key element of globalization. Young Muslim women in western Europe are e-mailing me to say that they have fallen in love with a non-Muslim man, and that their Imam and their parents say that Islam absolutely forbids this. Now, the Imam who says this is saying this not because Islam forbids this, but because Arab tribal culture forbids this. And so, what I did is I went to a progressive Imam who is not Arab, by the way, who was born in Guam of all places, and who was raised outside of the Arab world, in Malaysia, but went to the Arab world for education. He is truly a global citizen. And he, exercising his critical thinking, his *Idschtihad*, used the words that are already in the Koran and reinterpreted them to come up with an argument for why in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Muslim

women are absolutely permitted to marry non-Muslim men. And so, what these young women are now able to do is, go back to their tribal-thinking Imam and say, 'here is a different opinion and it is an opinion that is as authoritative as yours, because it comes from someone who is in the same position as you.' So here we have globalization giving young Muslims like me the ability to connect with other young Muslims who would otherwise not even know where to go to ask their questions. Now they know where to go and, moreover, they know that they can get information that they were previously being prohibited from even thinking about. And, besides the many disadvantages of globalization, this is one of the advantages.

*Since 9/11 the non-Islamic world has tended to regard Islam as a predominantly aggressive and terrorist threat. Why are there so few impulses coming out of Islam for moderation and tolerance? To what extent does the as yet unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict have an impact on the reformability of Islam?*

**Irshad Manji:** First of all, it is not Islam that actually needs to be reformed since Islam already has the capacity to be humane and reasonable. It is the Muslims whose mindset needs to be reformed, and when I say reformed I mean that we need to come out of our tribal mentality, the very mentality that Arab culture has imposed upon us. And we need to recognize that Islam gives us the permission to be very pluralistic in our thinking. This is really important because 80 percent of Muslims around the world are not Arabs, in fact, fewer than 20 percent are Arabs. So why should we accept the impulses that are coming out of the Arabian peninsula as the only authentic way to practice Islam? I emphasize this because it actually goes to the heart of the question about Israel-Palestine. Israel-Palestine is a regional conflict, it is one that is intimate to the Arab world. Indonesia has nothing to do with it, Malaysia

has nothing to do with it. Muslims in Germany should have nothing to do with this nationalistic and land-based conflict. And yet, we are constantly told, by our Imams and even our intellectuals today, that the question of what it is for you to be a devout Muslim is where you stand in the Israel-Palestinian conflict. This is non-sense. I think that, obviously, a healthy solution to Israel-Palestine is in the interest of everybody. However, it is not what is going to define whether a reform-minded Islam can take hold. Because those who cite Israel-Palestine as the reason why we cannot have other debates are opportunists. And when Israel-Palestine is finally solved, they will find other reasons to say that we cannot have these debates. What was the excuse in 1993 when violent jihadists first tried to blow up the World Trade Center? Was it Israel-Palestine? No. What was the excuse in the year 2000, when violent jihadists tried to attack the USS-Cole off the shores of Yemen? Keep in mind, this happened right after military intervention from NATO which saved thousands of Muslim lives in Bosnia. What was the excuse for this? Finally, what was the excuse for killing Margaret Hassan, the head of care in Iraq, who openly declared her solidarity with the Iraqi people, and still Islamist insurgents executed her? These are all opportunists. And so, we have to remember that while it is important for its own sake to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, people who wish to crop the seeds of chaos and discord, hostility and hatred between people will always find some other excuses to do that.

*How do you explain the radicalization of young Muslims who were born in the West and who use the privilege of Western liberties to destroy those self-same liberties?*

**Irshad Manji:** This is an excellent question and there is no easy answer to it, of course, but let me give you a couple of key insights that you usually don't read in

mainstream media. As a senior fellow with the European Foundation for Democracy I am constantly speaking to vulnerable young Muslim men in Europe and asking them to give me some insight into what is happening both in non-Muslim communities and in their own Muslim communities. One of the things they say to me is, that when they are radicalized they are rebelling not just against the racism of the outside community, which you read about in mainstream media all the time. But 'here is what you don't read about' they say to me, 'we are also rebelling against the tribalism within our own communities, a tribalism usually practiced by supposedly moderate Muslims, a tribalism that says "Shut up, don't think, do what you are told."' But, they say to me, 'we live in a time when we are constantly surfing the Internet, we are navigating the flood of information that is coming to us through the internet, we are already using our minds. So when our moderate Imams and our moderate parents tell us, "do as you are told," then this is not just absurd, this is not just unrealistic, it is humiliating, because we are already using our minds. Are they that disconnected from our reality?' And the truth is they are that disconnected. So the jihadists, the wahabis in particular, have been very smart. They have recruited many of these young Muslims to their side by saying, 'leave your traditional mosque where you are told not to think. Come here, to our mosque where we will engage in very good debates. We will entertain any questions that you have.' And once these young people are in that mosque, slowly but surely, the doors of questions then close as they become brainwashed. So, the tribalism is one of the things within the Muslim communities that non-Muslims really have to start paying attention to and not be afraid to talk about, because it is part of the equation.

The other thing that these vulnerable young Muslims are talking to me is that young Muslims are so enthusiastic about bending over backwards to accommodate us, that in Britain for example they will not even try to define what British identity is because

they think they are doing us a favor by not offending us. But by not defining what the leading culture is, the *Leitkultur*, they give us nothing to aspire to, they give us nothing to belong to. And so it becomes very easy when we are confused as teenagers for these radical Imams to then swoop in and say, 'Hey, this is who you are. This is where you belong, this is what you believe.' Therefore, in the name of respect we are actually being disrespected by those multiculturalists who say we cannot define even what the common values are. So we are doing these young Muslims no favor and they are the ones who are saying this.

*You just mentioned the German debate on a 'Leitkultur'. The German government has set up a conference with leading Muslim groups to get a sustainable dialogue in Germany ongoing. Is that, in your opinion, the right way towards a peaceful co-existence of religions and cultures?*

**Irshad Manji:** Not necessarily. I think that whenever something is fully organized by the government there are too many pressures on the government to sanitize the situation and to not push the dialogue further, because nobody wants to break the bonds of trust. And what tends to happen in situations like this is that a very selected group of people get appointed as spokespeople for a large constituency of Muslims. Usually it is men, and usually it is the very conservative elements within the community. Now, the problem with this is that everybody then turns to these guys as the only authentic representation of what it means to be Muslim, so that reform voices are immediately dismissed or shut out of the picture. Then the question comes from non-Muslims, 'where is the rest of you?' And we are saying, 'but wait a minute, we want to be part of this initiative, it is just that the conservative elements make the government believe that they are the only legitimate voices and the government does

not want to upset the advocates.’ Therefore the government responds by saying, ‘Ok, you are the only legitimate voices and everybody else does not matter.’ And so, it becomes, if I can put it this way, a ‘dialogue of the deaf’ and a very highly politicized dialogue.

I think that what is much more necessary than a government-backed dialogue is a media-backed dialogue which brings diverse voices from right across the Muslim and non-Muslim groups together in a very honest conversation that is even televised. For example, a very honest question to Muslims would be: Why are you here? Exactly what is it that you want from Germany or from Canada? Do you want only the material wealth that comes here from places like this? And be honest, if it is that is good we need to know this. Or do you also want the values that have helped create the material wealth? For Non-Muslims the very honest question might be: Can you imagine Muslims being contributing citizens? And what would that look like? In other words, do they always have to be wearing suits and ties and do women always have to be dressed unveiled in order for them to be contributing citizens or can you imagine them looking different from you and still being contributors? These are the kinds of questions that also need to be televised and shown to a mass-audience, because that is when the general public realizes that it has the right and the responsibility to be involved in conversations like this. Only then will we actually get the kind of sense of feeling that we are all in this together, and that we will have to figure it out together. Otherwise, once again, we all wind up looking to the higher-ups, and the higher-ups for the most part are out of touch with the reality of the young people on the ground.

I just want to say one other thing, because I didn’t answer the second one of the questions before. The question was ‘why are not more moderate voices, I would call

them reform voices, standing up?’ The answer to this is very clear, it is fear. Not just the violence, which is obvious. Fear also of dishonoring their own families. This whole concept of dishonoring is a very Arab tribal concept again. One of the things I and other reform-minded Muslims are doing is, we have started an effort, called project ‘*Idschtihad*’, *Idschtihad* referring to Islam’s own tradition of critical thinking. This project is sought to democratize and popularize *Idschtihad* so that ordinary Muslims know that they have the permission to be thoughtful and faithful at the same time. When they see that more reform-minded voices come out of the closet, they will also see that they can have faith without fear precisely because they know that they are not alone. And this is the great challenge, I think, for the next ten years, but we will need progressive, human rights loving non-Muslims who will help us acquire those platforms where we can reach those young people who would otherwise believe that the only way to properly be a Muslim is to ‘shut up.’