

A CALL FOR HERESY: WHY DISSENT IS VITAL TO ISLAM AND AMERICA. By Anouar Majid. University of Minnesota Press 2009. Pp. 304. \$14.78. ISBN: 0-816-65128-0.

In his *Call For Heresy*, Anouar Majid urges American and Muslim cultures to free themselves from the increasingly conservative forces that are drowning their ideals of progress and universalism. According to him, both cultures are risking their futures when acquiescing to the more orthodox and traditional elements in their societies. In the opening he writes, “I am interested primarily in the ways in which both peoples, each in their separate historical and cultural spheres, are increasingly being subjected to religious, political, and economic orthodoxies that suppress the intellectual legacies that once gave both traditions, however briefly, their greatest élans.” (5) Majid believes both cultures, while opposing each other, are losing ground to similar reactionary forces.

Majid’s thesis goes beyond the confines of a comparative historical approach. He places the tension between America and Islam within a larger global context and within the conflict of increasing universal challenges, whether in regard to the widening gap between North and South or the serious risks humanity faces in relation to environmental issues. He gives us a panoramic view of the impact of globalization and the connection between poverty and violence. Thus Majid succeeds in showing the reader a larger picture behind the debate, for example, on suicide bombing. He provides statistics and studies that go beyond the reductionist media representations and their tendencies to ignore the larger global context of suffering, inequalities and occupation. Majid uses this as an example of the ways violence and suicide in the world today are beyond the simple dichotomies of Islam and the West.

In his first chapter titled “Death in Cancun,” Majid takes up the political and public suicide of Lee Kyung Hae, the South Korean farmer and president of the Korean Advanced Farmer Federation, who had gone to Cancun to attend the Fifth World Trade Organization (WTO).

Kynug Hae climbed the steel barricades separating protesters from officials and stabbed himself to death, thus concluding a long attempt (including a self-stabbing in Geneva a decade earlier) to bring the world’s attention to the destructive impact of globalization on South Korea and, by extension, all the world’s farmers. (23)

Majid presents this public suicide outside the Muslim context to show the modern nature of suicide bombings and how this public and dramatic display of violence towards self and other has larger connotations and how it is used as a medium to stage economic and political grievances even if religious slogans are used. He examines recent political trends around the world and the ways in the past few years power has been shifting to those who appeal to the platforms of the more disposed and indigenous populations. He traces the rise to power figures like Hugo Chavez in Venezuela, Eva Morales in Bolivia, Michelle Bachelet in Chile and Rafael Correa in Ecuador, all either socialists or in the left camp. Majid looks also at how Mahmoud Ahmadinejadi in Iran had more appeal to the poor classes within his country than Mohammad Khatami, who was viewed as a moderate in the West. And when examining the popularity of organizations such as Hezbollah and Hamas in the Middle East, he reminds us of several studies, including that of Robert A. Pape, that argue that “religion is used as a strategy of recruitment, but the main (and secular) goal of Muslims and non-Muslims alike is the liberation of their territory from what they perceive as foreign occupation.” (32)

Showing how the defiance to Western hegemonic economic and political power goes beyond the radical rhetoric of small groups or individuals, Majid writes about how Argentina’s government chose to default on its \$100 billion plus debt and defied the economic orthodoxy of the U.S.-controlled International Monetary Fund, making Argentina regain its economic momentum and renewing the confidence of its citizens. Majid uses these examples to broaden the parameters of the debate and show the intertwined and multilayered realities of an increasingly smaller global village. He calls Muslims to new forms of inquiry and protocols of discussion in a vibrant culture of ideas and calls Americans to face the daunting challenge of retrieving their progressive heritage to counter the corrosive effects of rampant commercialism. “The brave voices of American dissent,” he writes, “have been silenced by the loud cheering for the virtues of unbridled capitalist globalization.” (14)

Majid’s chapter on Islam and its discontents provides a rich archeology of Muslim intellectual history, zooming in on Modern Muslim thought. He examines the ways the multifaceted intellectual Muslim tradition can contribute to a project of modernizing the Islamic discourse from within the culture while breaking away from limiting and ethno-centric orthodoxies, already present in the thought of contemporary people like the late Moroccan intellectual, Mohammad

'Abed al-Jabri. Throughout the book Majid traces the historical legacy of Muslim figures deemed heretics such as Al Warraq and his disciple Ibn al-Rawandi, Abul 'Ala' al-Ma'arri, Abu Bakr Razi, not to mention other more well-known figures like al-Farabi, Averroez (Ibn Rushd) and Avicenna (Ibn Sina). On the American legacy he presents the struggles and ideas of people like Thomas Paine, Robert Green Ingersoll and Walt Whitman. He also examines some of the revolutionary and progressive political thinking of Thomas Jefferson and the spiritual and radical legacy of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau.

Majid finds the term, heresy (or *zandaqa*, in the case of Islam) "a particularly useful term since for him it is "a more expansive one than the much-advocated notion of *ijtihad*, or intellectual effort." Therefore he advocates the use of this "because it is almost invariably an indigenous alternative to, not just an improvement on, mainstream thinking." (16)

Heresy is not an intellectual luxury for a few contrarians; for him it is an imperative for the future of the world. Armed conflict and other crises, according to Majid, are distracting us from the more urgent task of rescuing the planet. Intellectual heresy is vital for all sides, he argues eloquently, because heretical thought is simultaneously part and not part of a community's main ideology. "In its positive or progressive form (which is the only one I am interested in, since dissent can also take on reactionary tones), it espouses a break with orthodoxy only to bring into sharper focus the finer aspects of the faith." (17)

Majid may be alienating the very elements he is trying to address by situating his call for progress and retrieving the values of free thinking by using historically loaded terms such as heresy and *zandaqa*. His discourse exudes passion and urgency for renewal; he argues convincingly that both cultures need to step beyond their conservative and traditionalist barriers. One can see the shock value and the need for a louder approach, one that can grab attention. His vision, which accounts for the interests of both sides and the interests of the global community, is a genuine attempt to create a rational peaceful context to foster free thinking and creative solutions to a world whose fate has become one.

Majid's call for heresy echoes the Qur'anic warning against following tradition, a repetitive stance found in many passages which captures the eternal tension between the old and new. We see this in story after story in the Qur'an in the figure of the lone prophet holding a fresh perspective of truth and justice in the face of a collective community refusing the new message and saying, "Enough for us are the

ways we found our fathers following.” (5:104) However the Qur’an urges us to question their logic, “But what if their fathers were void of knowledge or incapable of finding their way.” (5:104)

Every chapter is so rich with information and history that it could be expanded into a book of its own. This is why some readers who are not intimately familiar with the history of Islam or the United States can find themselves overwhelmed by the number of events and names. In some ways, the diverse terrain the book covers takes away from the coherence of its bold argument. Yet, this is also the advantage of the book: it stands as a storehouse for anyone in search of solid scholarship on the histories of dissent in both Muslim and American cultures, dating back even to early Christianity and the founding years of Islam, while also touching upon some medieval events.

Majid’s *Call For Heresy* is a well-researched, well-written book mapping our current challenges as a global community and offering a fresh perspective to go beyond the cultural walls that have besieged our contemporary discourses. It is a book that can inform and stimulate both American and Muslim readers alike.

*Afra Jalabi**

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