

Free Speech Bites



Irshad Manji on Free Speech and Islam

Nigel Warburton: *Irshad Manji welcome to Free Speech Bites.*

Irshad Manji: Thrilled to be here!

Nigel Warburton: *The topic we are going to focus on is Islam and free expression. Now first off that sounds like two incompatible things. How can you talk about free expression in the context of Islam?*

Irshad Manji: Well, you know, I'm a person of faith: my faith is Islam. For me free expression is as much a religious obligation as it is a human right. What I mean is this: we Muslims as monotheists are to be worshipping one God - not God's self-appointed ambassadors, which means no human being can legitimately behave as if he or she owns a monopoly on truth. And what that in turn means is that it is a spiritual duty for Muslims to then help to build societies in which we can disagree with each other in peace and with civility, because anything less means that we are playing God with one another – and that is the central sin in Islam. So, here's the bottom line, a paradox if you will: devoting yourself to one God *obliges* you to defend human liberty.

Nigel Warburton: *That's not obviously how this is being played out in term of Islam...*

Irshad Manji: Boy, do I ever know that!

Nigel Warburton: *So why do so many people go down another route and think that actually there being one God demands that you follow one particular set of rules, one particular view of what that God is like and what it is for that God to be offended?*

Irshad Manji: There are many reasons for this, and no excuses, but many reasons. I know that a lot of our listeners right now will be saying to themselves 'Whatever the reasons, violence, oppression and a stifling of free expression are inherent within the faith of Islam'. I don't see it that way! You might call me a walking contradiction, but I'm still walking, and I'm still breathing, and I'm still talking. So with all of that in mind, one of the points I make, particularly to young Muslims, is that, you know, there's a difference between identity and integrity. 'Authorities' so-called authorities, will always tell us who we are, our identity, and therefore what we are to believe. They will also persuade us that our beliefs will only be sincere and pure if we adopt a particular identity. What they *never* tell us is that it's their identity that we are supposed to adopt. And I don't play that game. I called the Imams and the Muftis and the Mullahs and the clerics out on all of this, and I point out that integrity is a far more worthwhile pursuit over identity. Integrity is our wholeness, and it's the willingness to reconcile the many aspects of who we are, because - and again I come from a perspective of deep faith when I say this - each of us, you and me and all of our listeners, each of us, is a unique creature of God. Which means that we are always going to have seeming contradictions about us: in the way we think, for example, that will go against the grain of what our 'so called' community leaders are telling us is the pure way to think or believe. And by reconciling those seeming contradictions into wholeness, into integrity, what we wind up doing, from a perspective of faith, is we wind up deepening our relationship with that creator that endowed us with this uniqueness. So once again, for me identity, frankly, bites. OK. Identity is not where I'm at. Integrity is where I'm at, and I come at this from a religious point of view.

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Nigel Warburton: *Well two things occur to me there. First of all that you're proselytising for integrity in a way analogous to the people you're criticizing: you're saying 'This is the one true way'. And the other one is, Is the one true way actually there in the text as it were, is it actually in the Quran?*

Irshad Manji: It's a very interesting point you make about proselytising about the one true way. Actually don't misconstrue my passion for a belief that I have the truth. I try to abide by a beautiful passage in the Quran which states that humility is above all what's needed from human beings. Why? Because as the Quran says about itself, *the Quran says about itself*: 'There are some passages in this book that are precise and other passages that are vague, and only those with disbelief in their hearts will focus on the passages that are vague so that they can decree certain interpretations to others. Believers understand that only your Lord has the full and final meanings of these passages' - which is a clear call for humility. So I'm passionate, if you will, about the need for humility. And that means I don't claim to have The One True Way but I do believe that I have got an interpretation of Islam that allows for Islam not just to be a straight path, which Muslims love to call it, but frankly can also be a wide path, a path in which even those of us who call ourselves or know ourselves to be misfits can walk that path. My interpretation of Islam, my free speech interpretation of Islam, has a lot of corroboration within the Quran itself. Again we never hear about this, but there are plenty of passages in the text that support freedom of conscience, freedom of thought, freedom of even disbelief. And one of the great moments in recent history, the struggle for freedom of expression within Islam, was when the Imam of Egypt – obviously a liberal scholar, you'll see in a second why I say 'obviously liberal', when he came out against the death penalty for apostates, and he pointed out that all of these passages in the Quran that actually say that if you choose to disbelieve that is indeed your choice. Human beings do not have a right to penalise you for it – only God has the right to punish you. In other words, the Quran wasn't arguing against itself, that is to say that you can choose to believe or choose not to believe it's all good either way. No. What it was saying is that if you choose to disbelieve then understand that is your right, and God will deal with you. We human beings have no right to penalise you for it. That suggests to me that if a traditional authority can understand this, then I'm not so radical in my interpretation. I think among the problems is that we in contemporary society, all of us, give very little thought to what diversity actually means. Progressive people tend to reduce diversity to your skin colour and my religion. But actually when you think about it diversity is so much more than that. There's something to diversity above the neck; it doesn't just mean religion and skin colour, it means differences of opinions and viewpoints. And different ideas will naturally offend different people. So here's the great viewpoint I want to convey in this conversation: offence is not a problem to be avoided at any price in the name of diversity – quite the opposite. Offence is the price of honest diversity.

Nigel Warburton: *Isn't that where in the twenty-first century Islam has come into direct conflict with the West as it were? I mean, if you take the almost clichéd example of the Danish cartoons that brought to a head what seems from outside an extremely intolerant religion with a kind of provocative liberalism.*

Irshad Manji: Well frankly it seems from the inside as well a very intolerant religion. But one of the things I have learned in this rather surreal journey that I have taken over the last decade as an author

who is known to be arguing for reform within my faith. I've learned that there actually is a difference between Islam and Muslims. Precisely because the Quran is a text that is breathing and living and has like the Torah and the Bible many passages that seems to be contradicting one another, it is up for interpretation and reinterpretation and reinterpretation of the reinterpretation. Or as Muslims, as very flawed human beings, frankly have allowed what I've argued to be Arab culture, a very sort of tribal form of interpretation, to conquer the faith of Islam. So we are needing to grapple with imperialism from within the faith itself. The biggest threat to free expression within Islam is not American foreign policy (as bad as it may be on many occasions) and it's not Israeli Zionism (as harsh as it may be on many occasions): the biggest threat to free expression among Muslims is Arab tribal culture.

Nigel Warburton: *What you said about openness to interpretation would not be controversial to most Christians, for most Jews, for most Buddhists, and yet to say that in the context of Islam is to say something extremely controversial, and actually to put your life at risk.*

Irshad Manji: Yes. I guess I accommodated myself to the reality that, you know, I may have to die for this cause. But why would I fear that? No, seriously, why would I fear that? If I believe that Allah is a God of love, then speaking of free expression I have to then also make the wager that if I'm doing something wrong in arguing for this interpretation of Islam then this God of love will at the very least give me a fair hearing on the Day of Judgement. In other words it will be a conversation, and I might not win the argument, I'm not saying I will win that argument. But if it is a God of love then he, she or it will have recognised that I've been endowed by that very creator with the capacity to make choices, and that that creator will have to own the consequences of endowing me with that capacity. Now what if that creator is not a God of love? In that case it was never worth worshiping in the first place - so I'm no further back then I am right now.

Nigel Warburton: *Yet many people would feel that what you're saying is actually hateful not full of love. It's offensive, you knew it was going to be found offensive by some people. How is that compatible with humility that you were talking about earlier?*

Irshad Manji: Well because I am what might be termed a pluralist rather than a relativist. Now, relativists are people that fall for anything because they stand for nothing; whereas pluralists are people that are willing to take the risk of making judgments every day about what is right, what is wrong, what is tolerable and intolerable, and what is conscionable and what is unconscionable. But pluralists do so recognizing that our judgments are always ever temporary, provisional, meaning contingent on having more experiences in life and hearing better arguments down the road. Hence the centrality of free speech. Relativists don't make judgments at all; fundamentalists make judgements with arrogance; and pluralists take the view that judgment is necessary in order to live an ethical life, but that precisely because we don't as human beings own the truth we've got to be open to changing our minds to wherever the preponderance of evidence takes us. Back to the question of offence: I've experienced over the past number of years the phenomenon – and it is a phenomenon it is very widespread whether in interfaith dialogues (which give me the shivers because what good are they?), or on university campuses - yhat you must, Irshad Manji, *respect* me. Ahh there's that epic word 'respect'. But what that's come to mean is 'Don't challenge me.' Here's my question: if we avoid asking each other searching pointed questions, as you Nigel are asking me right now, if we avoid those kinds of engagements, are we not implicitly treating one another as infants? And in that case where's the respect? To me that is disrespect and, by the way, that is also dishonest diversity.

Nigel Warburton: *Well in Britain we have laws which prevent so-called hate speech against racial groups, hate speech that's perceived to be homophobic, and hate speech that's seen to be targeting religion. In the states the First Amendment protection allows people to be more obnoxious, actually - do you think that's a good thing or a bad thing?*

Irshad Manji: Well, I think it's a great thing. Unfortunately, however, whether it's in America or anywhere else of the shrinking territories in which free speech is taken seriously, we human beings tend not to use our freedoms very constructively. So let me give you a quite recent but very specific example, the so-called 'Ground Zero mosque' – 'Park 51' as it's more formally known. What I've noticed is that people tend to either approve or disapprove not based on the merits of the project but rather based on how offended they feel by people with the opposite views. So that both camps wind up becoming ponds of the culture of offence, and what I try and do in my work is to point out that in fact we can use our freedoms more constructively by asking questions out loud. So for example will women and men at the Ground Zero mosque be segregated at any time of the day and night? If so, then it's not a modern facility, it's not an Enlightenment one within the liberal democratic morality that has led to us having the freedom to engage one another about this very question. And on that basis I reject the Ground Zero mosque – it's not about location for me, it's about what it actually does and what it actually represents. I come to that conclusion based on asking questions out loud. But it's a temporary conclusion: somebody, anybody, tell me where I have gone wrong? Help me understand why I should be for it. I'm willing to listen. But also as part of that reciprocity you must be willing to face my challenges. That is what freedom is all about.

Nigel Warburton: *Well, one argument that is sometimes used is that, that's all very well for the strong eloquent people, but often the people challenged in this way are the weaker minority who do not necessarily have the capacity to come back in this seminar that you're talking about.*

Irshad Manji: Yes, how boring, how dull, what a lazy argument! And it's demeaning. It's demeaning because it automatically assumes that based on some label that you've decided or someone has decided to give to me I can't handle the overwhelming logic of your point of view, therefore I will not subject you to my superior intelligence. Please! Please go for it. Hit me with it. Test me. And I find that this argument that you've made on behalf of others that actually can articulate that argument, I find that it's very much a product, a construct of multiculturalism as it's been practised for what I'd say was the last 25 to 30 years. As it's practiced, multiculturalism seduces us to treat one another as commodities or labels endowed with the baggage of our parents, rather than as human beings with the capacity for self-reflection and personal growth. And I choose – and it is a choice by the way and happily so - I choose to see people as individuals first and foremost. They will have to prove to me that they are not up for the conversation. I don't assume it right off the back and nor should it be assumed of me.

Nigel Warburton: *But some people would say this is just a very Western view of individualism inspired by, maybe even by, existentialism. It's underplaying the importance of continuity and tradition and being part of a particular cultural group.*

Irshad Manji: Yes. Bullshit! And here's why. I go back to my faith. And within Islam there has been a wonderful tradition of independent thinking, critical reasoning, debate, dissent and therefore

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reinterpretation. And that tradition has a name, and it's known as *ijtihad*. It sounds I know really like *jihad* to many non Arab ears and in fact I will be honest enough to say that it comes from the same root meaning to struggle. But unlike any concept of violent struggle *ijtihad* is all about struggling with the mind in order to comprehend the delicious complexity of the world that God has realised to us. So within the faith of Islam itself is this tradition, but what this particular tradition, what it mitigates against is traditionalism. Tradition is always evolving - traditionalism never evolves. And it is we human beings that decide when a tradition must become static and therefore traditionalism. Okay, it's not the problem of the tradition itself. It's the problem that we human beings now in our lust for power and in our insecurity to be proven wrong, it is we human beings that have to own the consequences of what we do in the name of traditions.

Nigel Warburton: *It's one thing to have the freedom of thought, it's another one to express dissent in a way which will make yourself vulnerable. Where do you think people get the courage to do that?*

Irshad Manji: It's a great question, if only because here at New York University I teach something called moral courage. A lofty phrase really popularised by Senator Robert F. Kennedy three generations ago in which he defined moral courage as the willingness to speak truth to power within your community for a greater good than just what benefits your community. Now he emphasized, as I did in this response, *within your community*. Because, as he pointed out, there is no backlash more painful, more searing than that which comes from your own people. Sure, you can point fingers at the outside world and yell 'all of you out there are responsible for my people's ills'. And you can go back to your people and wear this indictment as a badge of honour: 'Look at all I'm doing to stand up for us against them, don't I know where I belong?' But it is far more frightening to risk losing that instant security blanket by pointing out abuses of power within your community. And that is why the word 'community' itself, always in the spirit of *ijtihad*, needs to be rethought. My point of view so far in this journey of life is that community is not simply about that group into which you were born. Community can be a conglomeration of people anywhere in the world who have selected values for themselves and therefore, again, must own the consequences of those values. I remember one of the most lovely emails I've ever received was from someone who said 'I live in the Czech Republic, I'm male, I'm white, I'm heterosexual and I'm an atheist – in other words *nothing like you Irshad*. But there is something like you: I also love individual liberty, freedom of conscience, pluralism of peaceful ideas, and the universality of human rights. Those are my chosen values, and I see that I share them with you. Am I a part of your community?' For me the unequivocal answer is 'Yes!'. Muslims who do not share my values are not part of my community - they are human, I'm not disputing their humanity -but they are not part of my community.

Nigel Warburton: *Irshad Manji, thank you very much.*

Irshad Manji: God bless.

[ends]