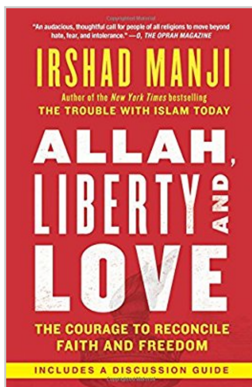

Allah, Liberty and Love: The Courage to Reconcile Faith and Freedom

By Irshad Manji

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The *New York Times* bestselling author to whom Oprah gave her first ever "Chutzpah" Award, Irshad Manji writes a bridge-building book that is both a stirring reflection and a path to action.

In *Allah, Liberty and Love,* Irshad Manji paves a path for Muslims and non-Muslims to transcend the fears that stop so many of us from living with honest-to- God integrity: the fear of offending others in a multicultural world as well as the fear of questioning our own communities. Since publishing her international bestseller, *The Trouble with Islam Today,* Manji has moved from anger to aspiration. She shows how any of us can reconcile faith with freedom and thus discover the Allah of liberty and love—the universal God that loves us enough to give us choices and the capacity to make them.

Among the most visible Muslim reformers of our era, Manji draws on her experience in the trenches to share stories that are deeply poignant, frequently funny and always revealing about these morally confused times. What prevents young Muslims, even in the West, from expressing their need for religious reinterpretation? What scares non-Muslims about openly supporting liberal voices within Islam? How did we get into the mess of tolerating intolerable customs, such as honor killings, and how do we change that noxious status quo? How can people ditch dogma while keeping faith? Above all, how can each of us embark on a personal journey toward moral courage—the willingness to speak up when everybody else wants to shut you up?

Allah, Liberty and Love is the ultimate guide to becoming a gutsy global citizen. Irshad Manji believes profoundly not just in Allah, but also in her fellow human beings.

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Allah, Liberty and Love: The Courage to Reconcile Faith and Freedom By Irshad Manji Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #900692 in Books
- Published on: 2012-02-07
- Released on: 2012-02-07
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 8.44" h x .80" w x 5.50" l, .57 pounds
- Binding: Paperback
- 304 pages

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Review
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—*Library Journal*

"Perhaps the most fearless advocate for reformation in Islam is Irshad Manji... She is controversial precisely because she offers hope for change - faithful dissent against a suffocating orthodoxy at odds with the facts of life in an evolving world." --Daily Beast

About the Author
Irshad Manji is the author of the *New York Times* bestseller, *The Trouble with Islam Today*, and the creator of the Emmy Award-nominated PBS documentary, *Faith Without Fear*. She is Director of the Moral Courage Project at New York University’s Robert F. Wagner School of Public Service. For more information: IrshadManji.com.

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Allah, Liberty and Love

INTRODUCTION

FROM ANGER TO ASPIRATION

On a chilly afternoon in February 2007, I arrived in Texas for the first time ever. Houston’s Rice University had invited me to speak about my book The Trouble with Islam Today: A Muslim’s Call For Reform in Her Faith. En route to the interfaith center, my host and I discussed (what else?) science. We marveled at the theory that physicists have come up with to explore a world beyond the material, and we exulted in the fact that “superstring theory,” like a spiritual quest marinated in mystery, has its doubters as well as its defenders. A short while later, in a state-of-the-art auditorium named for Shell Oil, I stood before rows of people who reflected a Bible Belt throbbing with diversity: Muslims, Christians, Jews, Buddhists, polytheists, atheists and—Lord love us all—misfits.

Jazzed by what he witnessed, my host pushed the envelope of diversity and introduced me as the Muslim to whom Oprah Winfrey, an African American, had given her Chutzpah Award—chutzpah being the Yiddish word for courage bordering on craziness. The audience laughed. Timidly. Everyone could feel the apprehension. Writing about the need for change in Islam doesn’t win you points for diplomacy, not even in Texas. I consider myself a truth-teller, but many in the crowd feared a flamethrower.

“I’m here to have a conversation,” I assured them—a conversation “about a very different story of Islam.” We all knew the Islam that jumped out of our headlines: an unholy trinity of bombings, beheadings and blood. We also knew that, according to moderate Muslims, Islam means “peace.” Anybody could have given

this audience more of the same, but that's never been my mission. The story I would tell, I promised, "revolves around a really big idea that I believe has the capacity to change the world for good."

That idea is ijtihad—Islam's own tradition of dissenting, reasoning and reinterpreting. For non-Muslims in my audience, I pronounced it carefully: ij-tee-had. It comes from the same root as jihad, "to struggle," but unlike violent struggle, ijtihad is about struggling to understand our world by using our minds. Which implies exercising the freedom to ask questions—sometimes uncomfortable ones. I spoke about why all of us, Muslim and not, need ijtihad. Burning a hole in my back pocket was an email from Jim, one of my American readers. "The message of ijtihad, of questioning, speaks to more than just Muslims," he enthused. "Throw away the confines of political correctness and discuss, debate, challenge and learn. A brown Muslim woman inspiring a white Christian man. Isn't freedom great?"

I was about to be reminded just how great freedom is. The evening saw its share of questions for me: What about the ills of the West? Will it be women who kick-start reform in Islam? How do you use ijtihad to beat the terrorists? At the end of the night a Muslim student quietly made his way over and told me that only when he attended university in the United States did he hear about ijtihad. "Why," he wondered, "aren't we taught about this Islamic tradition in our madrassas?" I directed him to the part of my book in which I addressed his question. He thanked me and turned away. In mid-motion, the young Muslim stopped to ask me another question: "How do I get your chutzpah?"

Over the past eight years, I've had hundreds of conversations like this. They've taken me on a surreal journey that's culminated in the book you're holding now. Let me back up.

On the morning of September 11, 2001, I was in Toronto, conducting my first meeting as the executive producer of a TV channel dedicated to spirituality. I had no idea about the World Trade Center attacks until the meeting wrapped up and I returned to an office of stunned colleagues hunched over TV sets. Soon after, I wrote a newspaper editorial about why we Muslims can no longer point fingers at non-Muslims to explain away our dysfunction. For too long we'd broken faith with chapter 13, verse 11, of the Qur'an: "God does not change the condition of a people until they change what is inside themselves." It's a 13:11 solution to a 9/11 abomination.

My editorial, "A Muslim Plea for Introspection," triggered such a flood of response that publishers wanted to make it a full-fledged book. I had to decide if I'd give up my dream job to pour my heart into something that Muslims might not be ready to hear: questions. As I had asked my madrassa teacher in Vancouver twenty years earlier, Why can't I take Christians and Jews as friends? Why can't a woman lead prayer? Why should I avoid examining the Qur'an and understanding it? Isn't this all a recipe for corruption? Before 9/11, not a single person seemed to care.

I followed my conscience, writing The Trouble with Islam Today as an open letter to fellow Muslims. The trouble, I argued, is more than the militants; even mainstream Muslims have curdled Islamic faith into an ideology of fear. Evidently, the questions I posed touched a raw nerve. When the book came out in September 2003 in my country of Canada, it hit number one, and within months it also became a bestseller in the United States. One by one, European countries released their translations, followed by the world's largest Muslim country, Indonesia.

Despite the glamour of international attention, I'd actually embarked on what the Qur'an calls "the uphill path." I found myself confronting a vice president of Iran about the atrocity of stoning women to death.

Pakistan's Pervez Musharraf instructed me to "Sit down!" because he didn't appreciate my inquiry about his human rights record. The political leader of a terrorist group, Islamic Jihad, ran me out of Gaza when he couldn't locate any justification in the Qur'an for the violent tactics that he insisted were "everywhere" in Islam's scripture.

Truth is, though, my most memorable exchanges have been with everyday people. The book tour evolved into a global conversation, taking me to all the countries of North America and western Europe, many in eastern Europe and some in the Middle East, as well as India, Australia and Indonesia, where stern Muslim puritans and a spunky Muslim transsexual showed up at my book party. (More about that later.)

In the United States alone, I visited forty-four states, engaging with fans and foes in libraries, restaurants, theaters, classrooms, gymnasiums, chapels and temples. No mosques, however. All invitations by Muslims hit the roadblock of mosque leaders who regarded me as a rabble-rouser. Still, Muslims attended each of my public events. Many came to jeer, but many others came to find solace in the fact that someone was saying what they wanted to say, yet felt they couldn't. A reader named Ayesha summed it up when she emailed, "Millions think like you but are afraid to go public with their views for fear of persecution." I heard her: Some days I received so much hate mail that I had to dance like Muhammad Ali to take the pounding and sustain the meaning.

Ayesha's email is featured on my website, irshadmanji.com. Every couple of weeks I posted several new messages, along with my replies. My site burgeoned into a hub of debate, connecting me to what people of vastly different beliefs thought and felt about reform in Islam—and about why I couldn't take the backlash too personally. "I've been reading the postings on your website," Jonathan wrote. "Even if you are everything your critics say you are—an infidel, blaspheming, self-hating, mind-poisoning, money-grubbing, Zionist dyke (have I omitted anything?), it would still not follow that your ideas have no merit." He quoted the twelfth-century Jewish philosopher Maimonides, who was himself influenced by free-thinking Muslims: "Truth does not become more true by virtue of the fact that the entire world agrees with it, or less so even if the whole world disagrees with it." My reply to Jonathan? "Yeah, but you're just a self-hating, mind-poisoning, money-grubbing, dyke-loving Jew. Enough said."

I took the death threats seriously when they contained specifics, proving that my opponents had planned out their execution fantasies. Those emails I forwarded to the police. Counterterrorism experts advised me against using a cell phone because ill-wishers could easily exploit the technology to track me down. And for a time I had a bodyguard. He was cute, to boot. But I let him go early on because young Muslims would be watching how I handled the consequences of going public with my questions, and I didn't want them assuming that the only way to survive is to hire round-the-clock protection.

The decision to drop 24-hour security opened up communication with young Muslims—and opportunities for change. My inbox overflowed with messages from the Middle East, asking me when I'd be getting the book translated into Arabic so a new generation of reformers could share it with their friends. I'd love to, I replied, but name one Arab publisher that will distribute a book like this. A lot of the kids wrote back, "So what?" They encouraged me to post an Arabic translation on my website, which they could download free of charge. (They were young but they weren't born yesterday.) I thought, "How sassy. How subversive. How can I not go for it?"

In 2005, I uploaded the Arabic translation to my site at no cost to readers. The following year a number of democracy activists waved me down in the streets of Cairo. "Are you Irshad?" they asked. In most cases—security still being an issue—I said yes. At which point they told me they'd been reading the book online. On another occasion I sat with a journalist who'd seen photocopies of the translations being passed

around by Arab youth, which inspired me to offer the same access to readers in Iran, where the book is banned. So far, the multiple online translations have been downloaded more than two million times.

Inside the trenches, something was happening inside me. As I witnessed an intense thirst for reform among Muslims, I felt myself maturing from anger to aspiration. I remember one such moment: Hamza, a Canadian teenager with Pakistani parents, implored me in an email “not to leave Islam” because “we really need people like you.” But, he prodded, “sometimes you criticize Islam too much. Perhaps you could endorse the open-minded, forward-looking Islam more.” I embraced his challenge; it showed faith in my capacity to grow.

PBS approached me about shooting a documentary based on my book, and I counteroffered: Let’s not focus on the trouble with Islam, but on what there is to love about Islam—from the perspective of a dissident. Among other places, my crew and I filmed in Yemen. There, we interviewed Osama bin Laden’s former bodyguard, who proudly announced the hope that his five-year-old son, Habib, would one day be a martyr. I was yanked back into dismay. Over the course of filming, moderate Muslims too evaded my basic question: What are we doing to restore faith with that glorious passage in the Qur’an, “God does not change the condition of a people until they change what is inside themselves”? For all that I love about Islam, I couldn’t reconcile myself to certain Muslim practices.

Faith Without Fear, my documentary, premiered in April 2007. I took it on the road, meeting yet more people who told me that they struggle with the cultures, traditions and power structures that fence in their own religious experiences. Although Muslims have been in the spotlight since 9/11, it’s not as if other communities are sitting pretty. I listened to Christians, Jews, Hindus and Sikhs who’d resolved to leave their narrowing folds—until being energized by the fight of Muslim reformers.

Those discussions compelled me to think more about the difference between faith and dogma. Faith doesn’t forbid exploration. It’s dogma that does. Dogma, by definition, is threatened by questions, while faith welcomes questions because it trusts that God, being magisterial, can handle them. That’s a God whose grace can be felt by curious individuals everywhere.

Then an agnostic friend introduced me to the concept of “moral courage,” a phrase that I’d never heard. Robert F. Kennedy described moral courage as the willingness to speak truth to power within your community for the sake of a greater good. Moral courage allows each of us to tap our consciences, to replace conformity with individuality and to draw closer to the Source that created us by coming to know ourselves. It dawned on me how necessary moral courage is for anybody who wants to live with wholeness—integrity—whether within a religious tradition or outside of religion altogether.

Scholars at New York University picked up on the point about integrity. After my film screening at the Robert F. Wagner Graduate School of Public Service, the dean asked if I’d consider launching the Moral Courage Project with her. We would teach individuals how to speak up in a world that often wants to shut us up. In 2008, I became founding director of the Moral Courage Project. Once I settled into New York, led my first class and caught my breath, I turned to the next chapter of this journey: linking my mission of reform among Muslims with the universal message of moral courage for us all.

Surrounded by boxes of emails, handwritten letters from the public and notes that I’d scribbled to myself

over the years, I sifted and sorted. Patterns surfaced. Muslims feared dishonoring their families and God if they honestly admitted what they believed. Non-Muslims feared being dishonored as bigots if they voiced their questions about what's happening in the name of Islam.

The result was a collective, culturally sensitive muteness in the face of heinous crimes. The murders, for example, of "dishonorable" women and girls in the Middle East, in Europe, in Asia and increasingly in North America are born of culture, not religion. But in a multicultural world, culture has become something of a god—even among secular people. Out of misplaced reverence for multiculturalism, too many of us perpetuate deadly silences.

Such injustices ate away at me. How can we be indifferent to flagrant abuses of power while defining that indifference as sensitivity? Where's the compass to guide us out of this lie? And what's the greater good as people from a breathtaking spectrum of cultures try to live together? Messages from my readers helped me connect the dots.

Wrote Helene: "You encourage Christians like me to look at Islamic society with compassion and understanding instead of fear and anger. I will now be able to speak my opinions without that huge amount of guilt about feeling intolerant, knowing that I have weighed the sides carefully and thoughtfully. We can all be instruments of change." I then zeroed in on an email from Zahur, who predicted that Muslim reformers "will teach the West how precious freedom of expression is for a healthy and functioning society. Ask the Iranian youth how they feel about that."

Reflecting on their mutual love of freedom, I flashed back to disturbing scenes from my journey. On the campuses of Western universities, good-hearted non-Muslims whispered that they wanted to support my mission but felt they had no right to get involved. At the same places, Islam-supremacists felt far more free than liberal Muslims to champion their interpretations of the Qur'an. "This is nuts," I recalled mumbling to myself. "Freedom-haters appreciate their freedoms enough to use them for the purpose of stifling others. How can the rest of us let them get away with it?"

That, I realized, is a moral courage challenge for our era. Muslims and non-Muslims who live in democracies have to develop the spine to expand individual liberty, not stunt it, because without the freedom to think and express there can be no integrity of the self or integration of society.

I threw myself into research about how previous movements for freedom had succeeded. Martin Luther King, Jr., came alive for this Muslim girl, as did some of his teachers: the philosopher Socrates, the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, the novelist Lillian Smith, who campaigned to reform a culture of "honor" in the U.S. South, the source of long-standing racial segregation. I also learned about Islam's Gandhi. (Yes, there is one! I'll tell you his story, which can be a lodestar for us.)

These and other agents of moral courage spurred my thinking about the big questions I've heard from people of every background and creed: Why should I risk my reputation to tell my truth? How do I deal with community disapproval? What's God got to do with any of it?

Even our failing economy reinforced the new direction of this journey. Ordinary folks, their financial security shattered in spite of minding their own business, began to protest that change can't be left exclusively to Wall Street insiders. After all, insiders seek to preserve their status. Exactly. This insight also applies to Islam, a global religion whose internal dynamics affect countless lives outside the religion. This is everybody's business. Muslims and non-Muslims need each other to widen the circle of the free.

In 2010, an ugly debate broke out over the proposed Islamic center and mosque near Ground Zero in New York City. The toxic politics that pits all of Islam against all of the West has roiled Europe for years; with that toxicity traveling to America, I'm receiving more hate mail. Muslim reformers have long been in the crosshairs of Islam-supremacists, but now their most vocal adversaries—Islam-bashers—are targeting reformers like me simply for remaining Muslim. "Islam is a mass-murdering Fascist ideology and you are an ignorant, barbaric, backward Mohammedan," goes an email that typifies our climate. In an emotional environment where individuals congeal into tribes, moral courage sometimes seems a pipe dream.

That's why the time is right for this book. Moral courage is urgently needed, and it starts with love. But to be truly courageous, love needs to be accompanied by questions. Today, free societies face dilemmas that demand gutsy thinking. How, for example, can we produce pluralists, people who tolerate multiple perspectives, without producing relativists, people who fall for anything because they stand for nothing? Democracies have to raise such questions, not squelch them for fear that their citizens are incapable of maturing.

If you believe as I do that our shared God gives us the grace to grow, then we're eminently capable of dealing with questions. To steady myself, I rely on two touchstones of Allah's grace. First, almost every chapter of the Qur'an opens by praising God as "the compassionate and merciful," not the capricious and malicious. Second, the Qur'an has three times as many verses urging Muslims to think than verses promoting blind worship. Combine the scripture's appeal to use my mind with its affirmation of God as supreme benevolence, and I've got a path to reconciling Allah, liberty and love.

I want to show that you too can live faithfully free—whatever your faith. Since 9/11, many of you have shaped my journey, and the growing I've done brings me to seven lessons for living with moral courage, presented in the book you're about to read. I offer these lessons with the hope that even more of you will join me in one of the signature reform efforts of our age. Along the way, you'll learn how to transform high defenses about "the Other" and low expectations of ourselves into the opposite—higher expectations of ourselves and lower defenses about the Other. You'll build the courage to ask questions of your own communities. And you'll discover the God that loves those questions. God could be your conscience, or your Creator, or the joyous integration of both, known as integrity.

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