

## PROBLEMS WITH

Ayaan Hirsi Ali's

*Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now* (Penguin Random House, 2015)

Reviewed by:

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The book is not only a criticism of Islam but of religion more generally. For example, Ayaan Hirsi Ali states that there is no life after death, and that God is created by mankind and not the other way around (p. 44).

More specifically to Islam, she rejects the belief that God is the author of the Quran, and she rejects Muhammad (pbuh) as a moral guide (p. 44). For her reform project, she needs credibility. So, she tries to reposition herself as a heretic as distinct from her previous posture as an infidel. Why this new posture? The reason, she explains, is that when she squarely positioned herself as an apostate and an infidel she found herself being shunned by both Muslim and non-Muslim audiences (p.17). She is thus blatantly honest about this. And for her honesty she deserves credit, though we should not be naïve about her agenda. She recalls that when she wrote her previous book, *Nomad*, she had believed that Islam was beyond reformation, and that perhaps it would be best for Muslims to pick another god (p. 74). But her present distinction between infidel and heretic is merely semantic, for she maintains even in the present book that she remains outside of the faith, and that it is too late for her to embrace the faith again (p. 75)—although I would maintain that it is never too late.

### HER GOAL

She thinks that the best choice for someone who feels trapped between their conscience and the commands of Muhammad is to leave Islam as she did. “However, it is unrealistic to expect a mass exodus from Islam.” (p. 51) Therefore she proceeds to reform Islam as the next best option.

But her proposed reformation, as she describes it, turns out to be really more like the renovation of a historic building. She proposes gutting out such a building and replacing all its internal elements with modern ones leaving only a few historical elements (p. 73).

I have seen a building like this in Toronto. Once a church, it is now a retirement residence. What remains of the old church is only the façade. The problem is that one can no longer say that this is a church. Is that what Hirsi Ali wants Islam to become—devoid

of its inner reality? So, in sum, she wants to either effect a mass exodus from Islam or to leave Muslims with an Islam which maintains only a historical façade but none of its original inner reality.

### SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS

Here are Hirsi Ali's five specific suggestions on what Muslims need to do to achieve her proposed reformation (p. 74):

1. Ensure that Muhammad and the Quran are open to interpretation and criticism.
2. Give priority to this life, not the afterlife.
3. Shackle sharia and end its supremacy over secular law.
4. End the practice of "commanding right, forbidding wrong."
5. Abandon the call to jihad.

Obviously, each of Hirsi Ali's five recommendations can be contested. Take, for example, her second point, her suggestion that we need to give priority to this life over the life hereafter. To Muslims, it is not a choice between this life and the life hereafter, but to work for both simultaneously. In fact, in the Islamic view, looking after the physical needs of this life in the right way is a way of working for the life hereafter. In this way work, study, and simply making a living and serving one's family is a way of serving God. Service to humanity is service to God.

If it comes down to a choice between this life and the hereafter, however, Muslims will choose to set their life hereafter in order rather than gain this world and lose the next. But notice that it is not only Muslims who give priority to the life hereafter. Many Christians, for example, give priority to the life hereafter, and this makes sense given the belief that the life hereafter is real. According to Hirsi Ali, Muslims need to realize that "What we do in this life is more important than anything that could conceivably happen to us after we die." (p. 235) Many Christians will disagree with her.

Hirsi Ali writes:

"Scientific and medical advances have radically modified the Christian conception of the afterlife, rendering it metaphorical for many believers. To be sure, there are still many Christians who regard the Bible as a factual account of the history of the world from the Creation to the Resurrection. But there are at least as many for whom it is a largely allegorical work, the spiritual meaning of which transcends the acts, miraculous and otherwise, that it purports to record." (p. 116)

I agree that there are many Christians who regard the afterlife as metaphorical. How the metaphorical view of the hereafter affects life on this planet is another subject. But, as Ali admits, many Christians still regard the Bible as factual. They take concepts such as Creation and Resurrection as literal. They believe that we were created by God and that after death we will be resurrected by God. Hence for many Christians also, since the hereafter is forever, and the life of this world is temporary, if it comes down to a choice between the two, the hereafter trumps this life. So, if the problem is that Islam needs a reformation on this score then some other religions likewise need a reformation on the same score.

Priority to this life fits well with the Atheist philosophy: there is only one life, so eat, drink, and be merry. The same philosophy can allow people to rape, rob and cheat, for, if they feel they can get away with it, then they think there is no hereafter to worry about. They can do all these things in good conscience, since on their view there is no God to guarantee the reliability of our good conscience. On the other hand, the Muslim character, shaped by Islam's concept of the hereafter, and in belief in God, prevents the Muslim from illicit gain in this life which will cause God's displeasure and, inevitably, loss in the life hereafter.

This brings us to the most fitting reply to Atheist attacks on religion. Atheism does not recognize God as the foundation of absolute morality, and hence is in need of another foundation. If religion needs reformation, Atheism needs an absolute moral foundation, and Hirsi Ali needs to criticize such a philosophy.

#### THE TERM 'REFORMATION'

The term 'reformation' in religious discourse refers primarily to the protestant reformation which began with Martin Luther's protest against papal authority. In that sense it is fallacious to say that Islam needs this, since the majority of Muslims subscribe to nothing comparable to papal authority.

But the term has come to be used more widely in the sense of revisiting religious dogma in the light of modern knowledge. In this sense, it can apply to Islam. Some people use it to speak of going back to the original core of the faith. Others, such as Hirsi Ali, use it to speak of abandoning that original core.

But this is where Hirsi Ali trades on ambiguity, thus falling into one of the standard logical fallacies in argumentation. She is using the term to abandon the core of Islam while trying to gain acceptance as a sort of Martin Luther. But Luther was not abandoning the core of Christianity but only the papacy. He was attempting to recapture the core of Pauline Christianity.

Take, for example, Luther's principle of *sola scriptura*: scripture alone. On this principle, Christians should follow the Bible alone, and not papal pronouncements. If Hirsi Ali was a Muslim Luther she would have to call us to the Quran alone. But her first thesis is that we should criticize the Quran and that we should regard it as "just a book" (p. 235). When did Luther ever say that we should criticize the Bible and regard it as "just a book?"

Similarly, Hirsi Ali writes:

"Until Islam can do what Judaism and Christianity have done—question, critique, interpret, and ultimately modernize its holy scripture—it cannot free Muslims from a host of anachronistic and at times deadly beliefs and practices." (p. 90)

But I similarly ask, "When did Luther ever modernize Christianity's holy scripture?"

Thus it becomes clear that Hirsi Ali is incorrect to suggest that she is a Muslim Luther. Rather, she betrayed the error of her approach when she argued in the same book that Islam needs a Voltaire and a John Locke (p. 209). Now let's consider Voltaire, the first of these two figures. Who was he? According to Owen Chadwick, in his *A History of Christianity*, Voltaire loved to make fun of the extraordinary stories in the Old Testament (p. 237). Do Muslims need a fellow Muslim to make fun of the Quran? But what is more important to notice is that Voltaire and John Locke were not the spearheads of the protestant reformation. Rather, they are fathers of the renaissance, the rebirth of learning after Europe's dark ages.

It then becomes clear that what Hirsi Ali wants for Islam is not a reformation like the protestant reformation, but for Islam to adopt the enlightenment ideas of the renaissance. Hence she has confused the reformation with the renaissance. She writes:

"The Enlightenment, evolution, Einstein: none has modified the overarching Islamic vision of paradise or hell, nor its centrality in Islamic theology." (p. 114)

I would argue that Islamic theology does not resist but rather welcomes the positive ideas of the enlightenment. But no discovered truth in the enlightenment has disproved the existence of paradise and hell. Hence, from a faith perspective, there is no reason to abandon these beliefs while embracing the enlightenment. Here Hirsi Ali attributes the attitudes of some Muslims to Islam itself. But we can hardly credit to Islam everything that Muslims do. Yet this is a mistake Hirsi Ali makes throughout her book. For example, when in a Muslim majority nation many women were raped, Hirsi Ali blamed this on Islam (p. 146). Thus she failed to see that in a case like this the fault is not with the faith, which forbids rape, but with the rapists for failing to follow the faith.

In sum, then, what Hirsi Ali wants for Islam is not something similar to the protestant reformation, although she spent many pages of her book asking why Islam could not follow Christianity and have its own reformation. What she really wants is for Islam to welcome those enlightenment ideas that are contrary to both Christianity and Islam. She wants Muslims and, obviously Christians as well, to abandon belief in God and in life after death. The reformation she is calling for is not a return to the religion's core, but to an abandonment of the two concepts which are most central to Islam: belief in God and belief in the hereafter.