

Amplified - February Dialogue - TRANSCRIPT

"IRSHAD MANJI ON MORAL COURAGE"

Aired on NPR - 2012

BOB EDWARDS: Welcome back. My next guest is Irshad Manji, author of *Allah, Liberty and Love: The Courage to Reconcile Faith and Freedom*. She is what many might call a modern-day libertine. Manji urges everyone to challenge the limits of our identities and to do so with moral courage. Manji lives by example as a Muslim, lesbian, and proud cultural dissident. She's been called a heretic by many who share her faith and received death threats for her activism, yet Manji remains vocal about her choice to live out of the closet. In addition to being an author and teacher at New York University, Manji is the founder and director of a global leadership program called The Moral Courage Project.'

IRSHAD MANJI: Well, let me begin by explaining what moral courage is, and I'm really defining it as Bobby Kennedy did. Moral courage is the willingness to speak truth to power within your community for the sake of a greater good. And why did Robert Kennedy emphasize "in your community?" Because as he pointed out, there is no backlash more painful, more searing than that which comes from your own. And that's why uhh explained moral courage as more rare, and therefore, more valuable than bravery in battle or even great intelligence. Now, Bob, we live in a time of identity politics where people define themselves in one way and often dig in their heels that "I am a pure fill-in-the-blank." "I'm a pure Jew," "I'm a pure Muslim," "I'm a pure Christian," "pure feminist", "pure capitalist", but the point is that we are all, as individuals and as human beings, so much more than just a label or two. And if we remember that, then we can actually engage one another as human beings rather than as mascots of this or that community. And that's why moral courage is so important today. It reduces dogma and it increases faith in our communities that they are capable of more than what our so-called community leaders are giving us credit for. That's what I do at New York University. I teach moral courage, and this is part of a larger leadership program called The Moral Courage Project; which came out of my own experience as the author of books about Islamic reform, speaking truth to power within my community for a greater good.

BOB EDWARDS: You write, "A sovereign creator isn't threatened by our self-knowledge. Only the creators' uptight gatekeepers are." So where and when did you learn that people are difficult and not God?

IRSHAD MANJI: I learned that very early on. You know, I grew up in Canada, in Vancouver, to be precise, and went to a secular school, public school Monday through Friday. But then, every Saturday for several hours at a stretch, I attended the madrasa, the Islamic school. And that's where I began asking seemingly simple, but apparently inconvenient questions, like, "Wait a minute. Why can't Muslims take Jews and Christians as friends?" Well, my teacher, so-called teacher, insisted that I follow his instructions and swallow uncritically what he's telling the students. And at one point, I just couldn't swallow it anymore and my teacher blew up at me and said, "Look, either you believe or you get out." And I asked myself in that moment, "Well, what am I being asked to believe? Nothing but lies." And so I got up and I straightened out my hijab, my headscarf, and walked out. And as I had to explain to my own mother, God bless her, "Mum, just because I've left the madrasa doesn't mean I've left Allah." And in fact, Bob, I took the next 20 years of my life to study Islam on my own, free of my teacher's prejudices. And that's when I realized it is possible to reconcile faith and freedom, which is what my new book is all about.

BOB EDWARDS: Lot of sections are conversations you've had with people, lectures in classrooms, on the street...

IRSHAD MANJI: Yeah. On the street, in workplaces, at community centers, in theaters. You know, this new book, *Allah: Liberty and Love*, comes ten years after a book that I wrote before it called *The Trouble with Islam Today*. Now, you can imagine with a title like *The Trouble with Islam Today*, you're gonna get a lot of people reacting for good and for ill. And that book became really a ten-year global conversation. Hate mail poured in, death threats did, too. But I'll tell you, Bob, at the same time, I heard from readers such as Aisha, a young woman who affirmed, and I'm quoting her now, "Irshad, millions of people think like you but are afraid to go public with their views." And boy, was she not exaggerating. I'll tell you something. Even in Cairo, a young anti-regime protester quietly approached me to say, "Irshad, I need some advice. I've fallen in love with a Jewish man and I don't know how to tell my own parents. Here I am putting my life on the line to achieve political change in my country of Egypt, but the scarier thing for me is to talk to my own parents about love." So you can see that there are, you know, some *amazing* conversations that will never make the headline news but that are worthy of learning about, and those are the conversations that I incorporate into this new book, *Allah: Liberty and Love*.

BOB EDWARDS: Plus a recipe for Chai Tea.

IRSHAD MANJI: (laughing) You found it! Did you? Well, I-I hope that you actually follow the recipe because I want your listeners to know it's a very simple recipe. And why Chai Tea? Chai Tea is a spicy Masala Indian type Tea. Well, because I first of all make great chai tea, can I just say for myself but the reason I point that out is that I found that some of the best conversations I've had with people who are often too afraid to ask really honest questions about what's going on. Not just in Islam, but also in their own hearts towards Islam. Some of the best conversations I've had, most honest, most frank. Have happened over sweet delicious cups of chai tea. So it's actually a wonderful way to break the ice, lower defenses and raise expectations of ourselves.

BOB EDWARDS : Lesson 2. Identity can trap you but integrity will set you free. What's the distinction you're making between identity and integrity?

IRSHAD MANJI: Well, you know, earlier on in this conversation, Bob, I pointed out that we live in a time of raging identity politics where people, because they're confused about who they are, often just put labels on themselves and decide that's all I am. Well, here's the problem. Authorities will always try to tell you what you are and what you are to believe. And by the way, by authorities, I just, I don't mean like a simply totalitarian government. I mean teachers. Clerics and even parents. And not only will they try to tell you what you are supposed to believe, but they'll try to convince you that the purity of your beliefs depend upon you embracing a particular identity. What they never tell us is it's their identity that they want us to embrace. Well, in this book, I show through a number of voices my own included, that you don't have to play on those terms. Identity will suffocate all that you are if you let it. The better aim is integrity. And that is the wholeness, the fullness of what you are. And you can actually embrace that wholeness when you love your real self and by extension you love the majestic God that created all that you are. So the point is that focusing on integrity, liberates you from the suffocating confines of identity.

BOB EDWARDS: And culture is not secret.

IRSHAD MANJI: Boy is it ever not. You know, we live in a multicultural society here in America and in other parts of the world. And many people say to me, oh, Eshad, you know, I can't

say anything about, you know, some of the awful crimes that are being committed against women and girls by Muslims because I can't say that because if I did then I would be accused of being a bigot. I'd be accused of being a racist and Islamophobic and, culture is sacred to those people and I say no no no hold on a second Culture is not sacred and I'll tell you why. Culture is not God-given. It is man-made. And human beings are imperfect at the best of times. Therefore, there is nothing sacred about cultures and nothing sacrilegious about seeking to reform the most malignant aspects of cultures. But Bob, I want to also just add this. Many will still hear that point and say, yeah, but only you Muslims can talk about that. I'm not allowed. First of all, let's remember. That even in the deep south of the United States some 150 years ago slave masters fed off of their culture in order to justify owning Black-skinned people. Now, are we to say that, well, I have friends in the deep south, and so if I say anything against slavery or against racial segregation, you know, I will be interfering in other people's business. Today, most people, regardless of what part of the country they come from, would say, absolutely not. I am going to speak out against racial segregation. Because I know that is just wrong. So why do so many of us stay mute about the segregation between women and men that is forcibly imposed upon people within Muslim cultures. We've really got to get over this political correctness and I think the way to do that is to bring in this analogy of slavery because when you do, you show people that you're not picking on any single culture here. You're simply pointing out that regardless of where this kind of segregation happens, I am going to expose it because I do believe in universal human rights.

BOB EDWARDS: And the other 5 lessons in moral courage?

IRSHAD MANJI: Ahh So you mentioned, let's go through the first 3 that you mentioned, which is that some things are more important than fear. And in my case, faith is more important than fear. That's why I'm going to speak up despite the hostility and the verbal and sometimes physical abuse that I'm subjected to. Second is that identity can trap you, but integrity will set you free. We've covered that one. Third. Culture is not sacred. We've just finished talking about that one. Fourth is you define your honor. I have a nephew in Britain. I won't use his real name, I'll call him Harun. Who writes to me secretly, Bob, to say, my parents expect me to bow to the clerics even though I have a mind of my own. And Irshad, he goes on to say, they hate your book, even though they've never read it and they don't intend to. And so he says, I pledge to get my own copy of your book as a symbol that I define my own honor. I don't have to capitulate

to my family's definition of it. Very important because again, today non-Muslims as well often are succumbing to a sort of a code of honor in which they fear being called racists and bigots. And so their fear allows other people to impose on them a certain definition of propriety, one that violates the integrity of people with questions. So understand that in a democratic and open society, you define your honor and therefore you will also be responsible for owning the consequences of that. That's called growing up. Number 5, or lesson 5 of the journey to moral courage is that...offense. Giving offence and being offended is the price of diversity. Now this is a very uncomfortable one for a lot of people obviously but hear me out. You know I was in New Jersey and some Muslims were offended at the fact that I was coming to speak at their university. One of them even branded me a fascist by the way and the religious

studies professor. Who arranged this event didn't cave to their offense. Rather, he said to them, I'm going to do 2 things for you guys. First of all, I will allow you to circulate anti-earshad brochures at her event. And secondly, I'm going to give you pride of place during the Q&A at her event. So here's the point. Everybody's freedom of speech won. By coming up with a creative response to the offense rather than merely backing off because somebody is offended. Let's keep in mind, and this is the big takeaway with this particular lesson, that diversity is not merely about different skin colors and different religions. Diversity is about different ideas. And so offense is, you know, not a problem to be avoided at any price in the name of diversity. Offense is the price of honest diversity.

BOB EDWARDS: You make a strong distinction between individuality and individualism.

IRSHAD MANJI: Right, Glad you brought that up, particularly in America. It's often assumed that, you know, if you're advocating individuality, that must mean that you see no benefit in sort of the larger social good. And that's simply not true. Individualism, which is corrosive to community, states, I'm out for myself and I don't care if my society benefits. This is not what I advocate. What I am proposing is individuality. And that says that I am myself my unique self and I enrich my community and my society when I take the opportunity to express my uniqueness. For Muslims or actually for people of faith in general, this is very important to remember because, you know, any God that is worthy of worship is not so petty. That he manufactures widgets and robots and automatons. A truly magisterial God creates uniqueness in each of us. And we honor his, his creativity when we take the opportunity to express our own.

BOB EDWARDS: That was author and social activist, Arshad Manji. More from her book, Allah, Liberty, and Love. The courage to reconcile faith and freedom. When we return.

BOB EDWARDS: It's the Bob Edward show on Serious Exam Public Radio. Our era promotes conformity on various fronts. Either you're a liberal or your conservative, either you're a consumer or you're a loser. Either you swallow the orthodoxy of your ethnic, ideological, and professional tribe, or you're deemed a traitor. The pressure to identify with your own reduces pluralism to groupthink. That's dishonest diversity, according to my guest, Ershad Manji, author of Allah, Liberty, and Love, The Courage to Reconcile Faith and Freedom. Manji is also the founder and director of New York University's Moral Courage Project, a global leadership program that teaches students to engage in the difficult dialogues about culture, power, justice, and other contentious issues. You write that we has become a hug for humanity. What's wrong with a hug?

IRSHAD MANJI: Well, A hug is fine as far as it goes but it doesn't necessarily solve problems. When I say that we have become, you know, a hug for humanity, what I'm really referring to when I say we in the context of the book is non-Muslims who say, oh, you know, I just love interfaith dialogue. I love being able to explore all that we have in common. And that's wonderful, Bob, as I said earlier, as far as it goes. But what happens when the time comes to actually raise tough questions about what is happening in the name of each other's religions. Then I find that proponents of interface dialogue often back off and say, well, I can't ask that question because that's just going to undermine the trust that we've all worked so hard to build. Well, I say what is that trust for if you're not willing to touch some of the otherwise taboo questions. You know, questions like, why do so-called honor killings happen? In the name of Islam, is it a religious thing? Or is it a cultural thing and even if it's just a cultural thing not a religious thing why do so few moderate Muslims, the good guys, why do so few of you step up to the plate to do something about it. And can I just say that this actually leads very nicely to lesson number 6 of moral courage, which is that in times of moral crisis, moderation is a cop out. Now, I don't take this lesson just out of my own experience, Bob. I take this from the experience of Martin Luther King Jr. You know, in the 1960s, plenty of self-defined moderate Christians opposed Mlk's activism. Because they felt he was bringing shame upon the Christian communities of the deep south by pointing out that Christianity is being mangled to support racism. And he shot back

that folks However you feel about this, the reality is that moderation, that rooting out deep corruption is never and can never be an act of moderation. It is always an act of intense love for your community because you expect better of them and you believe they're capable of better and for humanity at large. And what I'm saying in this book with lesson number 6 is the same can be applied to Muslim communities, that it's not going to be moderation, it's going to be moral courage that addresses the grim elements of what is happening in the name of Islam. And finally, let me say about this point, that this is also important for non-Muslims to understand that moral courage is more necessary than moderation. Because non-Muslims who love universal human rights They also need to figure out, well, who am I going to ally with? The mealy-mouthed moderates or the real reformers within Islam. And this book, particularly lesson 6, will help non-Muslims figure out, Who is who?

BOB EDWARDS: You talk about information and knowledge borrowed from one generation to another. Why is that important to know? Ahh, very important to know because so many of us, especially Muslims, but I would argue even young non-Muslims who go to, you know, liberal university, assume that certain ideas are purely Western and therefore don't need to be taught to people who are outside of the West. For example, freedom, right? We're always hearing. From Muslims and from say cultural studies professors, that freedom is a Western idea. Truth of the matter is, it is not. It is an idea that has been borrowed routinely by different generations from each other boasting both in the East and the West. Let me give you a very concrete example. Henry David Thoreau, the celebrated American writer who emphasized civil disobedience, took much of his inspiration from Eastern spirituality. Generations later, Gandhi, an icon of the East. Drew inspiration from Henry David Thoreau. Later, Martin Luther King Jr. Drew inspiration from Gandhi. And today, all of them are in one way or the other influencing young reformist Muslims from Morocco to Iran. I mean, talk about a testament to the power of human integrity over tribal identity.

BOB EDWARDS: And identifying as human rather than by one's culture seems to be more important because what? Humanity is universal?

IRSHAD MANJI: Well, humanity by definition is universal. No matter which quadrant of, you know, of the globe you're talking about, they're human beings. And that doesn't mean again that we capitulate to, you know, other people's cultures because after all the people who practice, you know, some repulsive acts in

the name of culture are human. Of course they're human. But we have to understand that there is such a thing as universal values, such as human rights, individual liberty, Freedom of conscience and pluralism of peaceful ideas. And History tells us. As I've just pointed out with the Thoreau Gandhi MLK and now Young Muslim Reformers link. History tells us that good ideas, human ideas, travel, they are borderless, they transgress identity, even in the Quran, you know, for all of the nasty passages that a lot of people like to focus on. The fact is that there are plenty of freedom loving passages as well passages that say God does not create, you know, does not excuse me, create change in a people until they create change in themselves. This is a call for accountability, for personal responsibility. This is a call for moral courage. So you can see that even these values that Americans cherish personal responsibility can be found in a document like the Quran. Great ideas are human, not tribal.

BOB EDWARDS: I'm speaking with author, Eshad Manji, about identity and moral courage in her book, Allah, Liberty, and Love. The courage to reconcile faith and freedom. Our interview will conclude after a break.

[After Break]

BOB EDWARDS: Welcome back to my conversation on moral courage with author and activist Urshad Manji. Manji believes that questions, no matter how difficult or controversial, are central to faith. We're discussing this premise and others from her book, Allah, Liberty, and Love. The courage to reconcile faith and freedom. You said Muhammad knew he'd be in for a vicious time from fellow Arabs when he received the revelations about one God. Why is it important to talk about this now?

IRSHAD MANJI: Well, it's important to talk about this because Prophet Muhammad himself had to develop moral courage in order to expose the corruption of his own people in Mecca. You see, prior to adopting Islam, Arabs in what was now Saudi Arabia, practiced idolatry. They worshiped many, many idols. And the reason that was a problem back then is that it allowed Arabs to kind of divide themselves up and decide well because I belong to a particular tribe I can say that my people are superior to everybody else and so I really don't have responsibility for those who are orphaned those who are widowed, those who are poor, those who are enslaved. And Prophet Muhammad brought a message of unity. He brought a message of one universal creator that Jews, Christians, and Muslims are to worship. And in that

way, we are to take responsibility for the least among us. Regardless of whether they're Muslims or not. Unfortunately, of course, we don't see that being practiced in many parts of the Muslim world today, which is why, you know, it's important to recognize that Islam is not in fact what is being practiced in most Muslim countries today. It is still tribal culture that is being practiced there and often confused with Islam. So this is why I'm saying to my fellow Muslims that just as the Prophet Muhammad stepped up to the plate. Took crap from his own community by developing the moral courage to speak up against the injustices within his community. So we need to follow his example and continue fighting for justice within our communities rather than merely pointing fingers at America and Israel as if those 2 countries are, you know, the alpha and the omega of what ails us as Muslims. So all those other people reading the same book that you're reading, the the Islam that taught you love and temperance? Well, they're they're reading the same book if they're reading it at all and that's key to appreciate because the fact is that, you know, literacy or illiteracy more to the point in the Muslim world is far higher than in any other religion right now. And again, it's a lack of responsibility that Muslims have taken for one another that has led to this kind of corruption and illiteracy. To the degree that Muslims are reading the Quran, they are often interpreting it in ways that are harsh and cruel because again that is what their culture has taught them. So this raises a very interesting, in my view, delicious paradox. You know, how is it, Bob, that I learned an Islam of love? I will tell you that nobody taught me that Islam of love. I took the initiative to learn it myself by reading the Quran. In English, comparing different translations and reading a whole lot of other commentaries on it. And I could only do this. In a part of the world that allows for freedom of expression, that allows for diversity of thinking, that allows for all kinds of books to be published. So the irony here is that living in a secular society actually saved my faith. In my faith. Try that one on for size.

BOB EDWARDS; Maybe you're just you were just raised a loving person and you were looking for love in the Quran.

IRSHAD MANJI: Well, maybe, and I will certainly give credit to my wonderful mother who, you know, never forced me to go back to the Madrasa teacher, the Islamic religious school teacher who booted me out and grovel for forgiveness, she didn't force me to do that but I can also tell you and I say this with the greatest of respect for my mother. She also didn't encourage, open mindedness or curiosity in me. She frankly didn't know what to

do with me, Bob. And the beauty is that because I lived in a society where I could go to a public school. And engage respectfully with a vice principal who was himself an evangelical Christian, yet who didn't impose his evangelism on me but instead saw me. As a creature of God who ought to be taken seriously. I learned love. From people other than Muslims. And that meant that I could also see them through the eyes of love.

BOB EDWARDS: How do you continue to be loving when you get death threats?

IRSHAD MANJI: Great question. I haven't always been loving in the face of death threats, but I will tell you that there is one part of the book in which I recount a poem. That my would be assassin and I actually came up with together. I, this is no joke. I got an email out of the blue from somebody who started his email saying Roses are red, violets are blue. And he went on to create a poem out of the fact that he's going to kill me. And I responded to him with the same kind of poetry. So I gave him another stanza and he then wrote back with still another stanza of the Roses are red violets are blue type of poem and we wound up together. Creating this incredible sort of chain of poetry and at a certain point he just gave up and walked away from it because he realized that he wasn't going to scare me into shutting up or into panicking. And in the meantime, there was this creativity that the both of us kind of exuded that, you know, leaves a lot of people with their jaws on the floor. The point being, and I go back to lesson number one of moral courage, some things are more important than fear.

BOB EDWARDS: Was there ever a time in your life when you were not morally courageous when you chose to say nothing?

IRSHAD MANNJI: Certainly. Certainly I remember being in the ninth grade. I had a beautiful and brilliant English teacher by the name of Mr. Goldman. He was Jewish. One day. I walked into the class. Mr. Goldman was not there, but most of the other students were. And I saw Swastikas on the chalkboards. Notice I said chalk boards with an S, not just one, but several of the chalkboards around the classroom. And I knew this was wrong. But I simply took my seat and waited for Mr. Goldman to come into the classroom, which he did a couple of minutes later, and he looked around and tears welled up in his eyes. And he simply took a brush. Wiped the swastikas off. And proceeded with teaching class. I went back to him many years later. And I apologized for having said nothing. And he responded to me with nothing but

love. And once again, I learned that that love is the answer, but a hug is not enough. You've got to be willing to risk backlash to speak truth to power so that others can learn moral courage.

BOB EDWARDS: Why is dissidence important today?

IRSHAD MANJI: Well, when you say dissenting or dissidents, once again, we're really talking about moral courage. You know, I've never been an advocate of merely sort of dissenting for the sake of it. I'm not a contrarian for the sake of it, because it's fun to rebel. You know, rebellion has its moments, but the joy and the novelty wears off about 5 minutes later, and then you're still left with, you know, no solution. I'm interested in having people engage one another. Frankly and candidly in order to find solutions and you can only do that when the defenses are down and when you say to the other, look. You're asking me to respect you. Fine, but the way to respect you is not to close my eyes to the injustices that are being done in the name of your culture. The way I respect you is that I engage with you as an equal. As a human being, as a peer. And then I am saying to you in doing that, that I believe you are capable of hearing my questions and responding to them. That, my friend, is real respect. So in order to dissent, constructively today, we've really got to re-examine this word respect. Respect. Right now, it means don't challenge me. But I say a more accurate version of respect is to challenge with love.

BOB EDWARDS: And profits are fallible?

IRSHAD MANJI: Very much so. In fact, the once again Islamic teachings, traditional Islamic teachings have always acknowledged not just that Moses was a fallible human being, a divine messenger to be sure but but fallible, and that Jesus too was was a human being. And again, this is where Muslims differ from Christians primarily, is that we don't see Jesus as God as such, but we do see Jesus as a top-tier prophet who by the way had serious issues with his own biological family and had to develop the moral courage to speak truth to power to them. But we also recognize that the Prophet Muhammad himself was fallible in that, you know, he caved a lot to the pressure of, you know, pagan Arabs before he was able and ready to develop moral courage to call them out on their BS. What has happened these days is that Muslims have become so defensive, Bob, about what they believe is Islamophobia and what they believe is Western imperialism, that they've put the prophet Muhammad on a pedestal and they are treating the prophet as a god, which by the way is a central sin within Islam. So once again if we recognize that

the prophet himself made mistakes. We can also forgive ourselves, our mistakes, forgive each other their transgressions and learn from the prophets example, which is to trek the uphill path to integrity and develop moral courage in order to ensure justice in our communities rather than merely blaming others for our ills.

BOB EDWARDS: Irshad Manji. Her book is Allah, Liberty, and Love, the courage to reconcile faith. And freedom. The Bob Edwards show is produced by Ed Mcmelty, Dan Bloom, Chad Campbell, Kim Dawson, Andy Cubis, Christy Minors, Arianna Piccary, Jeffrey Reddick, and Shelley Tillman. For information about today's program and to read our blog go to Bob Sirius XM.com or go to Bob Edward.com. Tomorrow writer Chris Hedges and actor James Cromwell. Thanks for listening. This is Sirius XM Public Radio.