

POL S 334 A - Irshad Manji, interviewed by Jonathan Kay on Quillette Podcast

[00:00:00.00] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:00:02.70] - Welcome to the Quillette Podcast. My name is Claire Lehmann, and I am editor-in-chief of Quillette. Quillette is where free thought lives. We are an independent grassroots platform for heterodox ideas and fearless commentary. Our podcast is a team effort, and is jointly hosted by myself, associate editor Toby Young, and Canadian editor Jonathan Kay. You can support our podcast by visiting Patreon.com/Quillette and becoming a monthly patron. By becoming a monthly patron, you'll also receive our weekly newsletter.

[00:00:34.17] - Thank you for tuning into the Quillette Podcast. I'm Quillette's Canadian editor, Jonathan Kay. Canadian author and activist Irshad Manji has long been known as a voice of moderation and liberalism within the Muslim community. But in recent years, she has broadened her message. And in a new book entitled *Don't Label Me, An Incredible Conversation for Divided Times*, she tries to explain how everyone can benefit by engaging in calmer, more reflective forms of discourse.

[00:01:03.27] One might think that this would be an uncontroversial message. However, in an ironic twist, last month at Washington University in St. Louis, protesters encouraged a boycott of an event where Miss Manji herself appeared as keynote speaker. The protesters didn't succeed in disrupting the event, though they did demonstrate the urgency of Miss Manji's message.

[00:01:25.23] Quillette recently published an excerpt from Miss Manji's book, and last week, she spoke to me by phone from Chicago for the Quillette Podcast. Here are excerpts from that interview. Your book is cast as a dialogue with your late dog Lily. Could you explain why you chose to do that?

[00:01:44.94] - Yes, I can. And there are multiple reasons for it, knowing full well that some people might actually write off the political analysis in the book, because how can such a thing be serious, if it stars a talking mutt? But all I can say in my defense here is that my editor felt the same way, and once he finished reading it, he wrote me a jubilant email saying, we've done this.

[00:02:05.67] Lily was old and blind. And those are labels, John. She was those things, but she was so much more. She was the most independent-minded being I've ever been with, human or non-human. One time, I slathered peanut butter all over my lips just to lure a kiss from her. She loved peanut butter, just like her momma.

[00:02:27.36] And when she noticed that this was actually a ploy to get a kiss from her, she pivoted and walked right off, keeping her dignity in the teeth of my pathetic scheme. The point being that Lily demonstrated many, many of the points that I'm trying to make in this book--namely, that labels cannot capture any one of us fully, or even accurately. They come with baggage, these labels, and it's baggage that the person being labeled often doesn't buy into.

[00:02:57.15] And so in this time of hyperpolarization, we need to be clear that human beings are multifaceted, and that if we're going to have any hope of being heard by others, we've got to tap into that ironclad law of human psychology which states that you first need to hear in order to achieve that moral reciprocity. By the way, I should add that I was always afraid of dogs until I adopted Lily, which suggests that there is hope for all of us, in terms of actually transcending our anxieties about one another, including those who we fear threaten our point of view. So Lily was the perfect character in the book to challenge me and really bring out the internal debate that role models the incredible conversations I'm asking people to attempt.

[00:03:50.17] - You have a line in the book. I believe it goes, listening doesn't translate into losing. Describe what you mean by that.

[00:03:57.30] - Well, I'll tell you the story that led to me realizing this truth. As you may know, I've been a reform-minded Muslim for many, many years. And that means that I have advocated for reconciling my faith of Islam with individual liberty and human rights. After many, many years of engaging often hostile audiences, I decided one night that I would prepare for my next big debate, but prepare for it emotionally, not intellectually, so that when the other side made a good point, I would accept and acknowledge that.

[00:04:33.84] If I needed more time to think about a stumper of a question, I would say, I need more time. If I truly didn't know the answer to something, rather than fabricate BS-- which anybody can sniff out-- I would say, I actually don't know-- largely because I was exhausted, and I needed to not walk out of this debate feeling like it was yet another showdown that changed nobody's mind, least of all my own.

[00:05:01.23] Well, what happened was, when I did walk out of that debate, after applying all of these gestures to it, an imam-- Muslim priest, if you will-- came up to me and said, Irshad, you are not the persona that I was told you are. And I have to let you know that I've been thinking a lot of the same things you've been thinking, but I can't risk losing my credibility with my congregation by having you come speak to them.

[00:05:28.23] But I want your voice to be heard that much more. I want these ideas out there. So I said, I'll tell you what-- why don't you gather a bunch of imams-- young imams, who think just like you-- the need for debate, and dissent, and reinterpretation-- and I will do a Skype call with you all. That way, nobody has to be the wiser.

[00:05:47.50] And that's exactly what happened a few months later. So the point is that the listening that I did and the proactive humility that I tried to embody did not result in losing anyone-- quite the opposite. There was a new-found respect and surprise because of the way I approached the debate.

[00:06:07.92] - When you talk about the persona that the imam ascribed to you, I'm guessing the imam was talking about the persona that emerged, to a certain extent, from your first book, *The Trouble with Islam Today*-- which came out I guess about 15 years ago, when I sometimes served as your editor at the National Post Newspaper.

[00:06:25.95] - Right.

[00:06:26.43] - How would you describe that persona? How were you perceived back then?

[00:06:30.21] - Scrappy. But more than scrappy-- arrogant. Here is a young woman raised in the West. My sexual orientation-- I happen to be gay-- played no small role in the defensiveness that fellow Muslims would often feel in presence. And I was told one day, John-- and this is so, so interesting-- I was told one day that, Irshad, you may have a lot of scholarship and research behind you, but what you don't have enough of is reverence.

[00:07:01.32] And I wrote it off at the time as just another lecture, but the truth is I realized, over time, that we human beings think, first and foremost, emotionally. And in order to get emotional defenses down so that you can be heard, you need to show the kind of humanity that allows the other person to relate.

[00:07:25.18] And I wasn't doing that. I was merely a public intellectual standing my ground without trying to seek common ground by genuinely listening to different points of view. And when I tried doing that, finally, in the debate I just alluded to, it made all the difference in the world. That is the persona, the upstart who doesn't listen. I wish I had known then what I know now.

[00:07:51.69] - You tell a story in your new book about a friend who was taking care of you in times of need, but who also happens to be a Trump supporter.

[00:08:02.46] - That's right.

[00:08:03.03] - Could you describe how this man-- I believe his name is Jim-- figured into a little bit of your transformation?

[00:08:09.51] - Oh, yes. Well, speaking of labels, Jim had been called by some family friends, who clearly weren't friendly enough to know him as an individual-- he had been labeled a homophobe. And to this day, he continues having labels slapped on him, such as, of course, racist, because he's a Trump supporter.

[00:08:30.27] Jim could not shake that, and yet here's the same guy who has been, in effect, my father figure for the last 15 years. He became a very close friend, and then a mentor, and ultimately, sort of the exemplar of decent manhood in my life. When I realized that Jim could not shake having been labeled a homophobe-- and remember, not because he is one, but just because he's a conservative, and now because he votes Trump-- it was a great reminder that we don't know each other.

[00:09:08.11] We only know of each other's existence, when we throw labels out to one another. And through Jim, and the many, many conversations that I've had with Americans throughout various parts of the United States, I've learned that, over the last 20, 30 years, those of us who have liberal and progressive politics, as I do, have been so quick to categorize people we don't

even know-- the Jims of this world-- as bigots, and retrograde, and cretins, that they felt quite humiliated.

[00:09:47.10] And we're not talking just once or twice, having these kinds of labels hurled at them. I'm talking about serial contempt. In many ways, that is the reason Jim voted Trump. He was sick and tired of being told that, as a straight white guy, he doesn't belong in an increasingly diverse America, and that his dignity doesn't [INAUDIBLE].

[00:10:12.96] Considering how respectfully and unassumingly he engages with all kinds of people, young and old, of various shades and different backgrounds, the least that he can expect is to be treated with the same courtesy. And he hasn't been. It was a wake up call for me, John, that I needed to write, if you will, a wake up call to my fellow liberals and progressives-- that until we change, the very people we claim are the problem will only be mirroring what we're doing.

[00:10:47.88] - When you talk about reductionist labels, one label that does get thrown around-- perhaps, even in regards to someone like Jim-- is the term privilege.

[00:10:55.82] - Yeah.

[00:10:56.52] - You yourself, you're a woman of color. You happen to be gay. You're Muslim. You're somebody who ticked a lot of boxes on the other side of the privilege spectrum. What do you think about that term and the way it's been used?

[00:11:09.01] - I think it's been abused. There's no question that privilege exists-- yes, including white privilege. But that does not mean that people of color don't have privilege of their own. For God's sake, living in North America is a privilege not to be ignored. Going to university, learning critical race theory-- so much of what young people of color today take for granted are privileges.

[00:11:40.50] Everybody has some. There's always somebody else out who can't take for granted the status that you take for granted for yourself. So instead of shaming one another for having certain privilege, why not turn that privilege into a blessing and use it to pay it forward?

[00:12:02.85] And in case anybody who's listening right now thinks, damn, that's naive, I will tell them, no less a radical feminist than a woman named Audre Lorde, who was a brilliant activist for civil rights, women of color-- lesbian to boot-- in the '60s and '70s, talked about and wrote about her privilege, and how she was committed to using it because she had the responsibility to use it as a blessing for others.

[00:12:38.54] - You suggest in your book that traditional diversity initiatives often fail or backfire. Could you explain why that is?

[00:12:46.37] - In essence, John, because they categorize. They stuff complex individuals into group boxes, and those boxes stifle and suffocate. I'm not surprised that white men-- many-- by

no means all, but many today feel that we are practicing in this country-- and in Canada as well-- a multiculturalism that excludes, while preaching that it includes.

[00:13:18.95] And that's because anything that white guys are wanting to add to the multicultural fabric is diminished. It's made fun of. It's mocked-- again, not everywhere, but enough that there's a certain hypocrisy that we who advocate diversity are practicing, if we're not recognizing that the very same thing that has been done to us, we are now turning around and doing to others.

[00:13:47.78] And the ultimate question I have about that robotic reflexive process is, how does payback amount to progress? Help me understand. We say, for example, that the early American colonists sliced and diced individuals-- namely people of color, women, poor white folks, and others-- sliced and diced individuals, stuffed them into categories, assigned value to each of those categories, and thereby created a hierarchy.

[00:14:19.19] If that doesn't describe how diversity so often gets practiced today, I don't know what does. And yet, it's supposed to pass as an enlightened mindset? I just don't understand that.

[00:14:30.83] - Just to push back a little on the privilege angle, as a white man, I do feel I have at least a certain kind of privilege, which is the privilege just to represent myself. Like if I say something controversial or stupid, no one says, oh, John represents all white men. Do you have that privilege, or do sometimes people ascribe to the idea that you're speaking on behalf of people of color, or of Muslims, or Canadians? You live in Hawaii now. Do you ever get asked, as the token Canadian in the room, what do Trudeau supporters think?

[00:15:03.11] - Sure, sure. I sometimes get asked those questions, but far less often than you might imagine. And John, respectfully, I want to challenge your premise that, as a white guy, you have the privilege of just being yourself and not representing or carrying the burden of representing all white men. From your point of view, you are right.

[00:15:24.47] However, you and I both know that these days, many activists, if they care even to hear you, would pick apart whatever it is that you say and decide that that is the problematic nature of white men. If you disagree with something that is said about you, you embody white fragility. It is a sweeping way of looking at a swath of people who, even if they belong to categories like white and male, are-- nonetheless don't stop being individuals, when some white guys speak.

[00:16:04.49] I really do believe that we have gone to the flip side here. And rather than moderating or modulating dogma-- IE the kind of colonial and imperial dogma that once came from white people-- we have gone the exact opposite direction, but achieved the same sad, flimsy result-- which is now we, as so-called minorities, are also acting in imperious ways. And I just say that it wasn't right when it came from people like you, and it's not right when it comes from people like me.

[00:16:41.72] - You have attained the true badge of public intellectual in 2019, which is that people get mad when you come to speak at campuses. Could you explain why at least some people would be upset about you coming to speak?

[00:16:55.70] - Right. I think, again, it's the instant assumption that, if I'm participating in anything that is university-approved, then I'm a sellout. And the fact that the university leadership has invited me means that I'm already suspect, and that I should know better as-- now fill in the blanks, John.

[00:17:17.96] As a person of color, I should know better. As a lesbian, I should know better. That is to say, I should know better than to participate in these obviously colonialist attempts to brainwash.

[00:17:31.17] - So just to be specific, what were the subjects under discussion at some of these events?

[00:17:35.57] - The subjects under discussion were exactly everything having to do with engaging one another, with taking disagreement as an invitation to engagement. But that's not how some students heard it. And again, it's not the message that is the problem. It is-- this is important-- the identity of the people who are promulgating that message.

[00:18:02.32] Now, at one particular university, where there was protest, nobody was protesting me specifically. They were protesting the fact that a white male chancellor-- who, by the way, surrounds himself with people of various colors, and ethnicities, and sexualities, et cetera at the leadership level-- nonetheless, that a white male chancellor was the one promoting this event.

[00:18:32.79] After all, it was sponsored by the president's office, so no wonder he would be the one promoting the event. But notice then that it has really nothing to do with the content, at the end of the day. It has to do with young people who think of themselves as revolutionaries simply reducing this guy to his color and his gender, and deciding, on that basis, that anything having to do with him cannot be legit.

[00:19:02.07] That is why I continue to point out that, while I'm thrilled that you feel you're representing only yourself when you speak-- and that's exactly as it should be, by the way-- nonetheless, that's not how white men are viewed by a rising number of young people in this country.

[00:19:22.38] - In the excerpts that appeared in Quillette a few weeks ago-- this is from your book-- you urged people to listen to others, even if their friends were calling those other people hate mongers. Are there limits on the sort of people you will enter into dialogue with?

[00:19:41.07] - There really aren't any limits that I would draw for entering into a conversation. Now, the only limit that would be put on any such conversation would therefore have to come from the other person. And I can assure you that I've had all kinds of preliminary conversations with folks-- again, of various identities-- who don't actually want to be understood.

[00:20:04.69] Sometimes they're just in it for the fight. And if they're not going to get a fight, then they're not going to feel good. They're not there to solve a problem. Sure, that's what their slogans will suggest, but in fact, some activists-- whether on the so-called right or on the so-called left-- are in it to throw punches.

[00:20:25.68] And from a neurobiological perspective, makes total sense. We feel a chemical high every time we surround ourselves with like-minded people, we hear our opinions validated, we hear a premises repeated. It's just a feel-good activity, protesting and acting out against the other.

[00:20:45.84] So I get where that comes from. But I would like to hold up a mirror. If you're not part of the solution that will resolve your issue, then don't tell me that this is what you want, that you are working for a cause. Because the reality is you are not working for anybody but your own ego.

[00:21:06.69] I will give you a quick example of something I've noticed just these last few days, and it has to do with Quillette. So you posted an extract from my book, and a number of commenters seized on one sentence in which I, from their point of view, lump Donald Trump with Richard Spencer.

[00:21:28.80] And that one sentence became the excuse to take nothing else in the extract seriously. Even those who ardently argue for free speech can succumb, and often do succumb, to the same tendency to want people to shut up, rather than elevating themselves to the point where they're willing to use their free speech to engage.

[00:22:00.30] - A lot of people seem to be looking for shortcuts or pretexts to reject complex ideas that they may find challenging. To a certain extent, do you think that's people responding to the overwhelming quantity of information and views that are available on the internet, and they simply need some shortcut to eliminate most of them?

[00:22:20.83] - I speak from a neuroscientific point of view in part of Don't Label Me pointing out that we human beings really can't process all of those shards and bytes of information that fly our way every single day. Because if we try, then we will experience cognitive overload, and our brains really will just shut down.

[00:22:42.69] We'll be exhausted. Instead, we actually do need shortcuts. We need what are known in the academy as heuristics-- ways of making sense of something very quickly. The problem is, when we think we're making sense of something quickly, we're probably not thinking about it sensibly. In other words, we're probably distorting it, rather than perceiving it in any kind of an accurate way.

[00:23:10.33] So in the book, I offer many tips and tactics for people to work with our biology, or the primitive part of our brain, which is the first content-- contact, rather-- with any stimuli. And one of the things we can do-- as simple as this sounds, it still requires reminders-- is to take-- just take a breath.

[00:23:30.26] Before you react to anything, take a breath. Slow jam your brain. Decelerate the blood rush. And in that way, you're also giving your brain an opportunity to bring out the evolved side of it so that your executive decision making functions are now in charge.

[00:23:51.69] What I have found is that just even applying two, three, or four of those steps can make a world of difference. Forget even in terms of getting to know your other and hearing what they have to say so you can reframe your arguments. Put that aside for a second.

[00:24:06.58] If you have a family member whose relationship with you is seriously damaged, try some of these steps and watch what happens, in terms of the healing. It will make you, as it meet me, a much healthier, and by the way, happier human being.

[00:24:22.86] - Is this a self-help book?

[00:24:24.48] - No. I wouldn't call it a self-help book. And that too is a label that comes, again, with all kinds of baggage that I don't buy into. What it is a primer on savvy and sincere communication. And the reason I think it's so important to have something like this, and to read it, and to think about it is that we don't know, John, what the next 15 years will hold.

[00:24:51.33] We don't know where technology is taking us. And it will be taking us-- not us it. We don't know what the economy will be like. We don't know what politics will feel like. The one thing we do know is that, whatever your vision of progress, you're going to have to work with other people to make it happen.

[00:25:14.33] And by definition, people, being individuals, will have different points of view. And so you're going to need to learn how to communicate, how to build relationships, how to be experts at empathy-- and here's the trick-- to do it with no trick-- in other words, do it from a genuine and authentic place, lest you be sniffed out and busted for manipulation.

[00:25:43.22] - Irshad Manji's new book is called Don't Label Me, An Incredible Conversation For Divided Times. She spoke to me from Chicago. Irshad, thank you for being on the Quillette Podcast.

[00:25:53.96] - My sincere pleasure. Thanks for engaging.

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