# Islam's new voices see faith with critical eye: Scholars, activists favor democracy, gender equality

Don Lattin, Chronicle Religion Writer


Irshad Manji, a Canadian author, believes Muslims living in the West should not have to be asked to choose between it and Islam. Chronicle photo by Brant Ward

In the aftermath of Sept. 11, Muslim scholar Omid Safi found himself mouthing a well-worn defense of his faith.

"Islam is a religion of peace," he would say. "These people (the terrorists) have nothing to do with Islam."

But it didn't take long for Safi to acknowledge -- first to himself and then to other Muslims offering the same sound bite -- that they were not really telling the truth, or at least not telling the whole story.

Long before the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Safi and other Muslim spokesmen realized there was a growing, worldwide network of Muslim terrorists killing in the name of Allah. They also knew that the rights of women and non-Muslims were being routinely denied by Islamic regimes such as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

"We have our fanatics just like everyone else," said Safi, an assistant professor of Islamic Studies at Colgate University in Hamilton, N.Y. "We have to take a stand against Saudi-infected extremism."

Safi is among a small but growing movement of Islamic scholars and activists calling themselves "progressive Muslims." They include gay Muslims, peace and justice advocates, feminists advocating gender equality and Muslims working to improve Islamic relations with Jews and people of other faiths.

Islam, like other religions, changes at a glacial pace. Nevertheless, progressive Muslims at several California mosques see a significant shift. Mosques are becoming more democratic and less reliant on the sometimes extreme views of imported sheikhs and imams.

"They used to be given carte blanche authority," said Salam al-Marayati, the executive director of the Muslim Public Affairs Council and a leading member of the Islamic Society of Southern California. "Now we take a more critical view of Muslim leadership. We are not blindly obedient."

At the same time, women are starting to find a voice in the male- dominated world of Islamic scholars, whose interpretations of the Koran often dictate how Muslims practice their faith.

"There are more women, but not enough," said al-Marayati.

Kecia Ali, a research associate in the Women's Program in Religion Studies at Harvard Divinity School, said progressive Muslims are not asking for major changes in Islamic religious practice.

"We're not looking to stop fasting during Ramadan or praying five times a day," she said. "We are not even opposing segregation of the sexes during prayer. But we will raise the issue of how women are given the inferior places for prayer in many mosques."

Leaders of the progressive movement say they are not questioning the basic authority of the Koran, the Muslim scriptures revealed to the Prophet Mohammed in the seventh century. But they do challenge some early interpretations used to justify strict forms of Islamic law, especially as it relates to women, Jews, "unbelievers" and criminal justice.

Ebrahim Moosa, a professor of Islamic studies at Duke University, said Muslims who think every line in the Koran must be implemented as law have a superficial understanding of the faith. Much of the Koran, he said, is allegorical, and must be looked at in its historical context.

"People read a verse that says 'chop off the hand of a thief' and get all passionate about it," he said.

Moosa, Safi and Ali are all contributors to the manifesto of the new movement, a book of essays titled "Progressive Muslims -- On Justice, Gender and Equality," published last year by Oneworld Publications.

"It's a delicate balancing act," said Ali. "We have to both defend Islam against virulent stereotypes and offer a critique that acknowledges the oppressive practices and ideas within Islam."

One of the most radical calls for change comes from Irshad Manji, the Canadian author of "The Trouble with Islam -- A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith."

Manji, 35, said Islam needs to "give a new generation of Muslims permission to think."

"Muslims in the West are hybrids, and we resent being asked to choose between Islam and the West," said Manji, who was recently in San Francisco to promote her book. "We are living in a new world."

Manji, a self-described "liberal Muslim," is also a lesbian and very media-savvy. She has hosted two Canadian TV shows, "QueerTelevision" and "Big Ideas," a TVOntario program aimed at college students. She appeared in The Chronicle's newsroom last week with a female driver, a bald bodyguard and a forceful but flexible attitude.

"I'm openly gay, but not arrogantly gay," Manji said. "I acknowledge that my (lesbian) relationship might not be OK with Allah."

Among the labels applied to the telegenic Canadian are "Osama bin Laden's worst nightmare" and "a female Salman Rushdie."

Rushdie, the celebrated British author, lived for nearly 10 years under a kill-on-sight fatwa issued by Iran's late Ayatollah Khomeini, who was offended by Rushdie's 1989 novel "Satanic Verses." Manji said she has been the target of "concrete threats via e-mail" but knows of no fatwa issued against her.

"Rushdie's book was fiction, and the five pages that were controversial were from a dream sequence," she said.

In her book, Manji accuses her fellow Muslims of being "spiritually infantile."

"Muslims were imposing martial law and bludgeoning each other's freedoms before European colonialism took off," she writes. "To this day, Muslims use the white man as a weapon of mass distraction -- a distraction from the fact that we've never needed the 'oppressive' West to oppress our own."

Manji argues that Muslims need to foster "the spirit of inquiry" and a "culture of tolerance" in the practice of their faith, while turning away from religious fundamentalism and spiritual tyranny. "What must be stripped from Islam is its desert strain of tribalism, which takes the act of closing ranks to a crushing level," she writes.

Manji's ideas got a mixed reaction last week from Bay Area Muslims. "I don't buy her argument about there being no discourse in Islam," said Helei Omaria, executive director of the Council on American-Islamic Relations in Santa Clara. "It's a big world, and there are a lot of opinions. She is just a drop in the bucket."

Another leader in the South Bay Muslim community, Hisham Abdullah, said Manji and other liberal reformers have raised some valid issues.

"People are not as open to debate and re-evaluation as has been the case historically in Islam," said Abdullah, who works in the pharmaceutical industry and holds a degree in Islamic law. "There is intimidation of the masses. People tend to say that the right way is the strictest way."

Maha El Genaidi, who does community relations work for the Bay Area Islamic Network, said she had not read Manji's book, but didn't think there was anything that new about the message.

"The so-called progressives aren't saying anything all that different from traditional scholars," she said. "There has always been a diversity of interpretations in Islam."

But Souleiman Ghali, president of the San Francisco Islamic Society, said he agrees with many of the points raised by Islam's in-house critics.

"We need to open up and listen and learn how to take criticism," Ghali said. "The danger is not discussing these things."

Ghali said he has raised the issue of women's rights in his Tenderloin mosque, but often meets resistance from "the immigrant community and traditional people from the Middle East."

"Saudi Arabia has had the money and the leverage to spread their version of Islam in America," he added. "Many people have adopted that version of theology."

Several leaders in the progressive movement are -- ironically -- looking to Iran as a possible model for a new kind of Islamic society. Opposition to the authoritarian power of Muslim clerics in that Islamic state has in recent years sparked widespread calls for secular reform.

"Iran provides the best hope for progressive Islam," Manji said.

Moosa, the Duke professor, agreed.

"The shortest way to Islamic liberalism," he said, "is through Islamic fundamentalism."