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People Like Us: How arrogance is dividing Islam and the West

Waleed Aly

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For many in the West in the post-11 September world, Muslims embody the feared 'Other'. Terrorists, abusers of human rights and patriarchal oppressors, Islam's adherents are characterised as inhuman. In the Muslim World, the West is viewed as a vulgar, capitalist monolith, devoid of spirituality and, therefore, morality. Of course, these views are hyperbolic stereotypes, repudiated eloquently by Melbourne-based academic, social-commentator and lawyer Waleed Aly in his new book, *People Like Us: How arrogance is dividing Islam and the West*. By his own admission, Aly stands at the crossroads of Islam and the West. Born in Australia to Egyptian-migrant parents, Aly is uniquely placed to comment on the divide between these two civilisations.

Targeted at a predominantly Western audience, *People Like Us* is not a book about Islam, although Aly does draw on Islamic history, faith and tradition to support his argument that arrogance and ignorance are dividing Islam and the West. He explains that the problem lies in our own egocentricity and tendency to dehumanise the 'Other'. *People Like Us* appeals to those of us who seek to break down cultural and religious barriers and leaves you questioning how you can do more.

Aly does not spare anyone from his analysis. He confronts conservative commentators in Australia and the United States—Janet Albrechtsen, Ann Coulter, Mark Steyn and Robert Spencer. He takes on members of the Religious Right—Franklin Graham, Pat Robertson and Fred Nile. In the political realm, he questions the rhetoric and actions of Bronwyn Bishop, John Howard and members of the Bush administration. Even Oprah Winfrey does not escape scrutiny. And for those of us in the West, accustomed to Muslim apologia, Aly also confronts Osama bin Laden, the Taliban, radical Islamic clerics including Abu Bakr Bashir and, in Australia, Sheikh Taj al-Din al-Hilali, as

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well as the oppressive regimes in Afghanistan (under the Northern Alliance), Iran and Saudi Arabia. But it is Aly's examination of the belief in the inerrancy of the self that stimulates a dialogue between Islam and the West, which is so sorely lacking. Beginning with a study of the uproar that followed the Danish cartoon scandal, he considers the way in which Muslims are portrayed as a threat to Western civilisation. He argues that we must no longer think of Islam and the West as though they are singular entities, but instead we must first acknowledge that "we are all human." This leads into an informative discussion on the history of the Christian Church and the concomitant rise of Islam. Out of this emerges a rather frank, and dare I say necessary, conversation on the misapplication of 'fundamentalist' and 'moderate' in contemporary debate on Islam. Here, Aly is unequivocal that descriptors such as 'fundamentalist' and 'moderate' have no place in Islamic tradition (they emerge out of Christian and political discourse respectively) and are in fact insulting. Aly explains, "I cringe every time the 'moderate' label is applied to me. I understand it is probably meant to be a compliment, but the truth is that it is offensive in the way that it would be to be called a 'moderate intellect.'" He engages the reader in a discussion on the oppression of women in Islam, confronts head on the particularly prickly issues of the *Hijab* and the *Burqa* and further contends that Muslim women have become the metaphoric battleground on which the clash between Islam and the West is played out. Aly then confronts the concept of *jihad*, so thoughtlessly communicated as 'holy war' by the Western media and political leaders.

However, Aly's discussion of secularism leaves me unconvinced. The chapter is set out differently to the others and replays a question and answer panel discussion in which three female audience members challenge his convictions. Aly's arguments are intricate: secularism is "a broad church", a concept that is interpreted differently by its various adherents. It is remarkably clear, however, that the debate on secularism is difficult to transpose into discussion on Islam, as he reveals that there is no concept of the Church, within the majority Sunni strain, from which to extricate the state. I cannot do justice to Aly's arguments here; suffice to say that it took a conversation with him to clarify both his and my positions.

Aly's most valuable, if not challenging and unconventional, contribution is his argument that Islam requires renewal or renaissance. This stands in stark contrast to

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the calls for an Islamic reformation as demanded by Canadian Muslim and feminist Irshad Manji and author Salman Rushdie. As Aly explains, *People Like Us* is not intended to be a response to Manji's 2003 offering, *The Trouble with Islam: A Muslim's Call for Reform in Her Faith*, though he does devote some energy to doing just that. Islam, according to Aly, has already experienced its reformation, out of which emerged Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia and the Taliban and radical Islamic ideology of the kind bin Laden subscribes. Though he concedes that Manji does raise some genuine issues, Aly rejects Manji's claims as historical revisionism and contends that she contributes nothing to the intellectual debate within Islam. Instead, Aly's solution is to embrace a classical Islam that can respond to the challenges of modernity.

A relaxed and informal prose, *People Like Us* is easy to read, though readability would be enhanced by the use of footnotes, both for referencing purposes and in the provision of supplementary information. I found myself having to 'google' a number of references within the text in order to find bibliographic information. The book would benefit, then, from the inclusion of a full-length bibliography and also an index.

People Like Us is an honest and brave book. It is provocative and insightful without being conceited. Aly's felicitous contribution brings humility to an increasingly complex debate within Australia and is a prescient reminder that the 'Other' is really someone like us.

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