

Book Review by Peter Skerry

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Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformatioby Moynan Hirsi Ali. HarperCollins, 288 pages, \$27.99

del(2007), Ayaan Hirsi Ali renounced the Islamic faith in which she was raised, and declared herself an atheist. In her new book,

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face of Islamist terrorism urge the rest of us to be nonjudgmental about the religious practices of others. Yet whom does she have in mind here? After all, the same individuals, private organizations, and governmental agencies that take care not to o end Muslims with politically incorrect terms also push aggressively for womens and gay rights around the globe. Promoted as human rights, these hardly come across as cultural relativism to Muslims, never mind to many other Americans.

Commenting on the stoning of women and homosexuals in various Muslim societies, she writes:

e ancient Aztecs and other peoples practiced human sacri ce but we dont condone it . So why do we condone the sacri ce of women or homosexuals or lapsed Muslims for crimes such as apostasy, adultery, blasphemy, marrying outside of their faith, or simply wishing to marry the partner of their choice?

Again, who exactly is condoning such practices? And what would she have the United States do to stop them?

Hirsi Ali is, ironically, herself a fundamentalist. Certainly, for her, Islam is reducible to a core of teachings and texts, and the Koran becomes the single most important, often the only, key to understanding us, she gently but rmly rejects the view of her Harvard colleague, terrorism expert Jessica Stern, that history, politics, culture, economics, and national identity all play a role in how faith is received and lived. Hirsi Ali doesn't puzzle over why Palestinians have been the most frequent proponents and practitioners of suicide bombing. For her, this is explained not by their particular history, their relations with Israel and Israelis, their prolonged consignment to refugee camps, or their corrupt leadership, but simply by what all Muslims are taught that [y]ou can be redeemed, you can salvage whatever you have lost, not by devoting yourself to improving your life in the here and now, but by following religious dictates and achieving entry into paradise.

Instead, she wants imams to make explicit that what we do in this life is more important than anything that could conceivably happen to us after we die. Contrasting life in Africa with what she experienced in the Netherlands, she marvels that in Holland no one talked about death, let alone life after death. And she enthusiastically relates the way shes heard Westerners in their eighties talking con dent-

ly as if they have decades still to live. Her reformed Islam would apparently de-emphasize not simply the notion of an afterlife but the inevitability of death.

Modern clerics, she insists, must also disabuse their fellow Muslims of the centuries-old teaching that the Koran is the last, immutable word of God. Human life, human freedom, human dignity—they all matter more than any sacred text, she writes.—e Muslim Reformation she champions must acknowledge that the right to think, to speak, and to write in freedom and without fear is ultimately a more sacred thing than any religion.

does she propose to bring about the secularized Islam she advocates? She immediately rules out any notion of military force, reminding us that we are facing a culture war that must be fought with better ideas, with positive ideas. She cites the Cold War and the Congress for Cultural Freedom, which supported intellectuals and writers defending Western democratic principles and mores against the Communist Left. And because she regards Islam and Muslims here in the United States, as well as overseas, as part of the same ideological threat, she envisions a war of ideas on two fronts.

But now things get complicated. Hirsi Ali glides past lingering controversies over such Cold War programs, which were generally funded covertly by the government, typically through the CIA. More to the point, while Communism may have been a surrogate religion for some, Islam whatever variant, and whether or not she approves is the real thing. Government-funded ideological combat with

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