

*Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now*, by Ayaan Hirsi Ali

This may well become a very important book. It is certainly a very controversial one. Ali's subtitle reveals the reason for both statements. In her first chapter, Ali divides Muslims—not Islam, but Muslims—into three groups and provides a list of five aspects of Islam to be reformed.

The first of the three groups she calls Medina Muslims, those who are willing to enforce Islam by violence. The second is the Mecca Muslims, those who strive to be devout Muslims and who eschew violence. The third group Ali calls reforming Muslims, those who strive to adapt “seventh century teachings to a twenty-first century world.”

Then comes Ali's bombshell—the list of five areas of Islam that she believes must be reformed: (1) Mohammed's semi-divine status and the literalist reading of the Koran, especially the verses composed in Medina; (2) the privileging of life after death over life now; (3) Shari law; (4) the authorizing individual enforcement, by violence if necessary, of Islamic belief and law; and (5) the imperative of jihad, understood as violent holy war. Ali identifies Muslim suppression of critical thinking about Islam as the biggest obstacle to the reformation she is calling for.

Quite naturally, it is Ali's life that has brought her to these positions. Born in Somalia, she was raised in Somalia, Saudi Arabia, and Kenya. She remembers being sixteen in Nairobi, wearing a hijab, and believing without question that Salman Rushdie deserved to be slain because he had dishonored the Prophet in his novel *The Satanic Verses*. The beginning of the turning point in Ali's life came when her father promised her in marriage to a much older distant cousin who lived in Canada. Flying alone toward her marriage, from Kenya to Canada, Ali did not take the onward flight from Germany to Canada. Instead she traveled to the Netherlands, asked for and was given asylum. Attending the University of Leiden, Ali was shocked to her core when her professors did not teach by rote but asked her to evaluate statements, to weigh evidence, to think critically. That was the turning point. She became a Dutch citizen and was elected to the Netherlands parliament. With her new perspective on Islam, she co-operated with a Dutch documentary film maker to create a documentary critical of Islamic treatment of women. Her collaborator, Theo van Gogh, was murdered on the street of Amsterdam by a Moslem youth who shot him multiple times and cut his throat,

the stuck a note to van Gogh's body promising death to Ali also. She came to the United States.

In the central part of *Heretic*, Ali develops her advocacy of the five reforms and her critique of related aspects of Islam. Those who respond to *Heretic* negatively take one of two approaches. Some see Ali and her book as anti-Islamic. Others see her as intolerant. This, I think, is the nub. Citing John Locke, Ali praises religious toleration as "one of the greatest achievements of the Western world." She continues, however, by asking what can we not tolerate. She answers herself with "Let us begin with the oppression of half of humanity." My answer would be "Violence or the advocacy of violence in the name of religion or under the guise of religion."