

“I Pledge Allegiance...”

Breann Wright

“...to the Flag, the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation, under God, indivisible, with Liberty and Justice for All.”

Amin Maalouf’s *In the Name of Identity*¹ speaks compellingly of identity and the lethal complexes it can form. Identity can leap from becoming a distinguishing characteristic, a collection of ideas and experiences and beliefs, to being the tool of cultural hatred and murder. This is not, or in any event should not be, surprising. As a society we have seen it happen many times, and participated in it ourselves. What, after all, is identity? Maalouf tells us that it is a collection of allegiances, given to any number of diverse things –

“Of course, for the great majority these factors include allegiance to a religious tradition; to a nationality – sometimes two; to a profession, an institution, or a particular social milieu. But the list is much longer than that; it is virtually unlimited. A person may feel a more or less strong attachment to a province, a village, a neighborhood, a clan, a professional team or one connected with sport, a group of friends, a union, a company, a parish, a community of people with the same passions, the sexual preferences, the same physical handicaps, or who have to deal with the same kind of pollution or other nuisance” (11).

All of these, taken together, make up the unique identity of an individual; but not all of them are taken at any one point in time. Identity is not a fixed position, but rather fluid, where, at any given point, one element or another may be uppermost. Typically, this is the one element or set of characteristics that happens to be “under attack,” or perceived as that way.

Despite this fluid changeability of one’s identity as a whole, Maalouf’s book focuses on a few more specific issues. Of all the shifting components, he chooses to write on only a few: the allegiances to one’s religion, country, language, culture, and race, with heavy emphases on language and religion. Of these, he attempts to identify the problems with each in the current (and, in his opinion, long-term) trend toward globalisation. Near the end of the book, potential solutions are brought to light. For now, however, I would like to focus on just three of the different themes of allegiance running through this particular work.

The first is that of culture. While culture is a beautiful thing and changes not only from country to country but in provinces and towns, as well, many countries – France was given as an example – fear the increasing globalisation. The United States, he holds, focuses a good deal on calming its inside struggles, but is less considerate of outside neighbours, of which include the European countries as well as the varied cultures of Asia, Africa, South America. “Our” media, language, foods, shopping malls, and attitudes intrude into their spaces; what is worse, many of their own embrace the differences with glee. To many, this is sufficient cause for fear that their own ways will be marginalised and relegated to the edge of the growing global society. And, if I may borrow the phrase, “Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. And hate leads to suffering...”

The next major component of identity that he addresses is language, as much a part of culture and identity as aught else, and creates equally strong allegiances within people, bound up as it often is with affiliations such as nationalism and religion. For instance, the author says of himself that, though he is Christian and not Islamic, “Speaking Arabic

¹ Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*, trans. Barbara Bray (New York: Penguin Books, 2000)

creates bonds between me and all those who use it every day in their prayers, though most of them by far don't know it as well as I do. If you are in central Asia and meet an elderly scholar outside a Timuride *medersa*, you need only address him in Arabic for him to feel at ease. Then he will speak to you from the heart, as he'd never risk doing in Russian or English" (17). The proposed solution to the fear of a single world language is a trilingual population: the first language will be that which one is born with, the second English or Chinese, and the third one that is chosen freely to study. Supposedly this will ensure a lack of identity crisis relating to language.

Last of the three allegiances he handles is that of religion. In his ideal globalised society, religion will no longer be seen as part of the identity. This would be a major and, in my opinion, probably impossible, step for humanity as a whole. Given the various wars, crusades, and purges based on religion in the past and present, peaceful coexistence between so very many contradictory religions is an incredible amount to ask, and humans do not typically display the last, redeeming quality that Maalouf speaks of in sufficient quantities.

The final redemption for every crisis of identity is, according to the book, reciprocity. It is more than tolerance for another's identity, being an equal exchange between two separate individuals, two separate nations or cultures. If humanity could simply learn this incredible reciprocity, Maalouf seems to imply, and if people could learn to be secure in their identities, then the many problems arising from our potentially explosive identities might find less violent resolutions. If indeed we could recognize and transfer our allegiances to a global community and a wider definition of humanity, we might find we have no more reasons to conduct warfare or to engage in diplomatic threats.

Some of Maalouf's conclusions do seem to be overly optimistic, but the goals he sets out are worth pursuing. The problems are laid out for the most part in very logical patterns, and if his final proposals are not quite satisfying, the book was not intended to solve everything – it was only designed to display a perceived crisis concerning identity. Perhaps, in giving attention to this problem, future readers can help to bring more promising solutions to light.