

Violence in the Name of Identity

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Ask anyone to define their identity and they will immediately rattle off a list of affiliations: race, gender, nationality, religion. Upon closer inspection, however, the subject of identity is much more complicated and conflicted. While an individual considers that their own identity is what makes them unique, their natural response is to define it by a characteristic that associates them with a larger group. An “us” versus “them” mentality results because whenever a person finds belonging with one group, it simultaneously separates from all other groups. Unfortunately, the tragedy in this need to belong is that it ultimately makes it impossible to identify with the largest of affiliations—the human race. Furthermore, this situation is becoming increasingly exacerbated as advancing communication technology encourages world cultures to grow more similar. This gives individuals even more reason to feel threatened because they feel that the qualities that are specific to their culture are coming under attack by this homogenization of world culture. This fear, this desperate need to belong, causes many people to commit fanatical and murderous crimes in the name of their identity.

In his book *In the Name of Identity*,¹ Amin Maalouf explores how violence can erupt between different groups of people when they limit the definition of their identity to only one facet of their being. This belief that an individual is defined essentially by their nationality, race, language, or religion “presupposes that ‘deep down inside’ everyone there is just one affiliation that really matters, a kind of ‘fundamental truth’ about each individual, an ‘essence’

determined once and for all at birth, never to change thereafter” (2). This, Maalouf explains, is “a recipe for massacres” (5). A Christian who grew up in Lebanon and later moved to France, Maalouf has personally felt the conflict that can exist between different elements of a person’s identity. Quite simply, he writes that people “often see themselves in terms of whichever one of their allegiances is most under attack” (26). Recalling the nights he spent with his pregnant wife and young son in an air-raid shelter, Maalouf knows that “fear might make anyone take to crime” (27).

His focus on the conflict between the Middle East and the West gives relevant insight to contemporary world events. However, he also emphasizes that the examples he puts forth are not special cases. Every individual is a unique combination of allegiances which have the potential to come into conflict with one another—whether they are ties to a profession, an institution, a village, a language, or a country. And whereas “each of these elements may be found separately in many individuals, the same combination of them is never encountered in different people, and it’s this that gives every individual richness and value and makes each human being unique and irreplaceable” (11). Early on in *Identity*, Maalouf argues against the skeptics who claim this tendency towards violence to be an innate characteristic of the human race. He explains that “many ideas that have been commonly accepted for centuries are no longer admissible today, among them the ‘natural’ ascendancy of men over women, the hierarchy between races, and even, closer to home, apartheid and the various other kinds of segregation” (34). Despite the fact that his suggestions are admirable and inspiring, their plausibility is sometimes doubtful.

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

Maalouf also notes differences in the development of the West and the Middle East and how this has led to conflict between the two. First, Maalouf defies the notion that Christianity is inherently good and Islam innately evil. By showing that Christianity's contemporary tolerance has arisen from centuries of violence, whereas Islam's current tendency towards violence has erupted from a long period of remarkable tolerance, Maalouf notes that while the text of a religion does not change, people's interpretations of it clearly do. In order to remain relevant and preserve its place in society, western religion relaxed and updated its doctrine. Conversely, Islam never modernized. Also, the West came to power when, for the first time, the technical means for world dominance were available. Nor can the influence of economics be ignored, as the Middle East is "poor, downtrodden and derided, while the West is rich and powerful" (64).

Citing how the past efforts of Egypt to modernize were stomped out by Great Britain, Maalouf shows that the West desires only obedience and not imitation. As a result, much of the rest of world fears that modernization is simply Americanization and that they must "admit that their ways were out of date, that everything they produced was worthless compared with what was produced by the West, that their attachment to traditional medicine was superstitious, their military glory just a memory, the great men they had been brought up to revere—the poets, scholars, soldiers, saints and travelers—disregarded by the rest of the world, their religion suspected of barbarism, their language now studied only by a handful of specialists, while they had to learn other people's languages if they wanted to survive and work and remain in contact with the rest of mankind" (74-75).

The world, Maalouf notes, is entering a unique phase in which knowledge advances at a rapid speed, but the dissemination of

knowledge is even faster, thus leading all societies to become increasingly alike. In this era of "harmonization and dissonance," humankind has never "had so many things in common—knowledge, points of reference, images, words, instruments and tools of all kinds. But this only increases their desire to assert their differences" (93). To help alleviate the danger of future conflict, Maalouf proposes a few ideas. Firstly, he explains that identity must be seen as "the sum of all our allegiances, and, within it, allegiance to the human community itself would become increasingly important, until one day it would become the chief allegiance, though without destroying our many individual affiliations" (100). Secondly, he makes the somewhat obvious point that only in "the context of democracy [can] the question of choice arises" (148) but adds depths to this observation by noting that the "law of the majority" is sometimes synonymous with "tyranny, slavery and discrimination" (152). As a remedy, he emphasizes the need for safeguards, such as the United Kingdom's special electoral system that does not depend solely on majority rule because of the problem of the Catholic minority in Northern Ireland. Maalouf also dreams of the day in which a presidential candidate will be judged for his "human qualities" rather than his religious and ethnic affiliations. Thirdly, he explains that religion will never become obsolete because human beings will always have spiritual needs—however, religion does not have to be associated with the need to belong to a group, and spiritual needs can be fulfilled without religion.

In addition, he points out that language cannot be separated from identity any more than can our nationality or religion. His intriguing proposal is that every individual should speak three languages: the language of ones origin, English, and a third language of ones choice. Knowing English is crucial, but

alone it is not enough. Knowing two languages in addition to the language of one's origin would instantly connect every person to a much vaster population of the world, and to a greater array of resources in art and literature. However, it is doubtful whether the desire or even the need exists for so many people to be multilingual. Most individuals can function in everyday life quite well knowing only one language. Also, in countries such as the United States, the educational system is only rarely structured to require or encourage the learning of multiple languages.

In a very effective way, Maalouf's *In the Name of Identity* provides us with a cultural and historical understanding of the current conflict between the Middle East and the West. Maalouf explores a number of widely discussed issues, but also adds uncommon insight to help derail several striking misconceptions about the Middle East and the West.

In the final analysis, Maalouf's hopeful projections for the future might appear overly optimistic, especially in the context of the discouraging struggle between the United States and Iraq, ongoing contestation in the Middle East, and issues concerning undocumented immigrants in the U.S.. After all, dealing with identity on an individual level can be an immense struggle in itself — indeed, we must wonder where this restructuring begins, and just whose responsibility it is to attempt it on a more massive level. The day when people can learn to forsake their tribal associations and embrace the human race as a whole appears to be a long way off, if not simply beyond reach. However, Maalouf's insights do not fail to inspire or cause the reader to question his or her own role in the global conflicts caused by the search for identity.