

Don't Lable Me: How to Do Diversity Without Inflaming the Culture Wars | Irshad Manji

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INTRODUCTION

Irshad Manji is a Canadian educator and the author of *The Trouble with Islam Today* (2004) and *Allah, Liberty and Love* (2011), both of which have been banned in several Muslim countries. Her latest book, *Don't Label Me*, was published in February 2019. Manji is a senior fellow at the Annenberg Center on Communication Leadership & Policy of the University of Southern California. Manji also produced a PBS documentary in the America at a Crossroads series, titled *Faith Without Fear*, which was nominated for an Emmy Award in 2008. A former journalist and television presenter, Manji is an advocate of a reformist interpretation of Islam and a critic of literalist interpretations of the Qur'an. In 2016, Manji and her partner, Laura Albano, were married in Hawaii. They live there with their rescue dogs.

WHY DO I CARE?

I've now done several episodes dealing directly with the issue we will be exploring today and many more where the subject has been discussed informally. I don't have a simple answer for why this subject matters to me or why I have cared enough about it to have devoted so many episodes to it. What I can say is that I despise cancel culture and its practices of moral shaming, online bullying, & viewpoint intolerance. My disgust with these practices has consumed more of my emotional energy (when I allow it) than the actual causes that cancel culture claims to be fighting for. How can this be? I'm not an illiberal person. Quite the opposite. I'm very liberal. Part of the disconnect here is that the term "liberal" has long been abused and misused by its detractors to mean something totally different. In my view (and in my reading of intellectual giants of liberalism like John Stewart Mill, who wrote as close to authoritatively on this subject as anyone), being a liberal is synonymous with supporting the freedom of expression in all its manifestations. This freedom is enshrined in our constitution as the first amendment in the Bill of Rights. Critics will argue that the constitution concerns itself only with what the government may or may not do and therefore, is



silent on the question of speech when it comes to angry mobs or PR sensitive employers who seem to trample upon it with unbridled indifference today. True, but I would respond to such critics by saying that (1) we have passed laws meant to reduce the incidence of racial profiling in corporate America despite the fact that the word “racism” does not appear once in any amendment to the constitution and (2) the fact that the constitution is silent on the question of how corporations or individuals should behave in private does not mean that we, as a society, have not developed norms to that effect over time. This is to say that the right to free expression is as American as apple pie, and if you have a problem with that, then our differences are likely irreconcilable.



I think this observation highlights the first, most important disconnect between people like me, Jonathan Haidt, Sam Harris, Irshad Manji, and others, which is that none of us is willing to sacrifice the freedom of people to express views that run counter to the consensus without the fear of political, social, or commercial retribution over the cause de jour of the moment, be that a movement to eliminate police violence, achieve full, racial equality, or reduce the incidence of sexual assault in the workplace. Furthermore, we take offense to the notion that our elevation of the freedom of expression above these other issues suggests that we, in any way, prefer that things remain the way that they are or that our choice is a reflection of our privilege. To begin with, we need to have the space and freedom to arrive at conclusions on our own and to feel safe that whatever our views are that we will not be punished for holding them. If I think that black lives are intrinsically worth less than white lives, it goes without question that I stand no hope of being convince otherwise since to express such a view would immediately make me a pariah in respectable society. And yet, we know that many people hold these very views. More to the point however, the slogan “black lives matter,” does not remotely begin to capture the substance of arguments in favor of racial equality and justice. Anyone can adopt such slogans, but it takes actual conversation to work through the nuance that these slogans inadequately try and capture. Working through this nuance inevitably means offending people, because my nuanced understanding of this issue and my sense of fairness around its resolution is going to be often meaningfully different than your understanding and moral position. If well-meaning people are afraid to offend others, because their understanding of an issue or their moral blueprint for right and wrong diverges from that of those in positions of power and authority then there is something deeply wrong with our marketplace of ideas. This raises two important points. (1) Intentions do (or at least should) matter. And (2) we are not being honest about power in America.

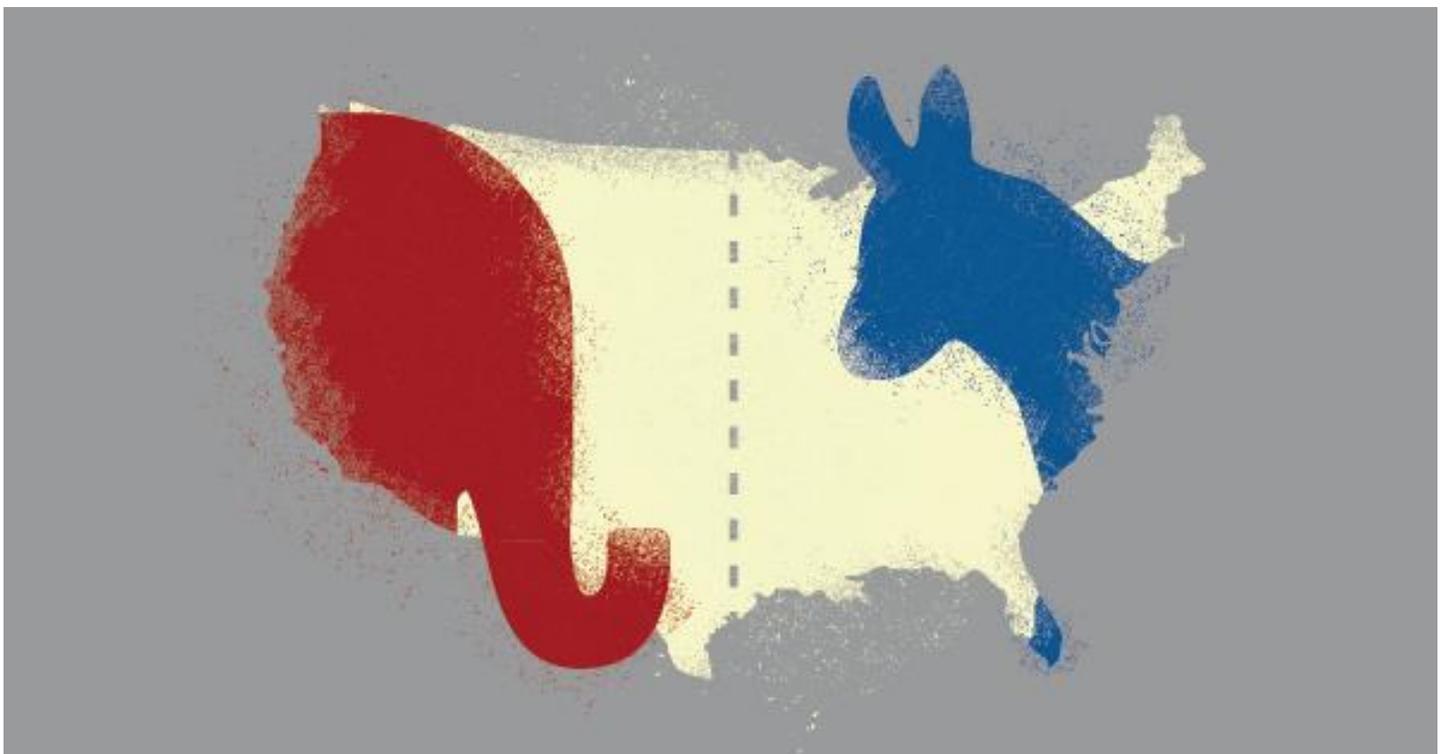
To take the second point first, the popular narrative today is that power is synonymous with privilege, the latter of which rests with biological markers of identity. If you are white, male, and heterosexual, you rest at the apex of American society, regardless of your economic or social status. To people who adopt such a view, they believe that the white, heterosexual male “incel” working at Target represents the power structure, which must be defeated. The black, gay, transwoman with her own network TV show and 2 million followers on twitter represents the oppressed minority who must be protected at all costs. This type of caustic reasoning seems absurd on its face, and yet, tens of millions of Americans would seem to agree with it. Therefore, it seems to me that a real conversation about power, where it resides, who holds it, and what it means to wield it an essential part of any conversation we are to have on this subject. And to bring it back to the first point about intentions, if the intentions of someone are not material in assessing our

response to them, then this suggests that our own intentions are not actually aligned with progress. This is to say that if we do not care what others' intentions are, then we are tyrants, not liberals.

So, just to summarize, it seems that there are a few important issues that come up when I consider this topic. One is that (1) I and others like me are unwilling to compromise on freedom of expression even if it conflicts with the cause de jour of the moment and even if I agree with that cause. (2) Power is not everywhere and at all times a function of biological markers of identity; it is wielded by all sorts of individuals in different ways and at different times with varying degrees of potency depending on the environment. (3) Intentions matter (or should matter). If I want to be a better person, have the capacity to feel empathy, and am genuinely interested in making a positive difference in society on the issues that you care about, my "imperfections" should not be grounds for stereotyping me as a moral invalid and lumped together with the moral "enemy."

The three observations raise two more issues that I'd like to discuss today, and which come readily to mind. (4) The first deals with "white fragility," "toxic masculinity," "white privilege," "rape culture," and other concepts or labels thrown around by this popular cancel culture which carry a strong tinge of racism, judgment, and moral approbation directed at a particular group deemed unworthy of the same social protections afforded to "oppressed" groups. (5) The second deals with the emergence and embrace of protective and sheltering language that is used to buttress, envelop, and introduce conversations about hot-button social issues, themselves situated in a victim-oppressor framework.

Let's take the second point first. I find it astounding that we live during a time when people are able to expect and often receive the type of emotional codling in broader society that we once only saw practiced in grade school. When I was growing up, we were encouraged to report any incidence of bullying against us, but no self-respecting boy would go crying to his teacher or to the school principal in such incidences. If he did, it would only lead to more bullying. Social norms encouraged us to stand up for ourselves, even if that meant physical confrontation with punches thrown. This message was further communicated through popular culture. Can you recite a single movie from the 80's or 90's where the hero of the film emerges victorious from the principal's office? I can't. The classic resolution was a tête-à-tête confrontation with the bully, whether that was physical,



mental, or moral in nature. Furthermore, kids were recognized to have opinions and the spectrum of legitimate opinion was much broader than what it is today. Granted, teachers and administrators would punish students for expressing opinions or ideas that were deemed universally hurtful, but there was no culture of self-policing when I was growing up. If you said something mean or hurtful, your reputation may have suffered, but it felt much more natural and organic. Individuals took notice and slowly treated you differently. Punishment did not come in the form of stoning by the mob. (**phenomenon of “frictionless” experiences)

Finally, when considering the first point, I am again astounded that we live during a time when racism, bullying, and social expulsion is practiced by people who simultaneously assert the moral high ground by claiming that they are fighting to protect others from these vary practices. The hypocrisy is breathtaking. There’s no other way to describe it. It’s illiberal and its illogical. Concepts as unscientific and fuzzy as race are being used to protect one class of individuals at the expense of another. This is an authoritarian modus operandi that has no place in a liberal, democratic republic like ours. The way in which white people, especially white men like me who are sexually attracted to and have sexual relationships with women (imagine that!) are talked about, referred to, and demonized by this cultural movement is degrading, threatening, and offensive to our moral dignity. If progress is the goal, then this movement is totally at odds with it.

I feel like I’ve only just started to scratch the surface of why I care about this subject. In fact, all I’ve done is capture some of the things that upset me about cancel culture. I haven’t actually articulated why this phenomenon matters to me. I would probably say that I did a better job enunciating that in my rundown on Grandstanding, which I encourage subscribers to explore if interested. Now, on to the questions!

QUESTIONS

Background — **Q:** Can you fill me and my listeners in on your background? **Q:** Where did you grow up? **Q:** How did you get your start in media? **Q:** Irony aside, how would you describe yourself and what you do to a room full of strangers?

Don’t Label Me — **Q:** How did you get the idea to write a book about conversation while in dialogue with your dog? **Q:** What would you say DLM is about? **Q:** Who is this book for? **Q:** What was your aim in writing the book? **Q:** How have your life experiences informed the approach you take and your interest in writing it?

Free Expression — **Q:** How important is freedom of expression to you? **Q:** What does freedom of expression mean? **Q:** Who has the right to such expression? **Q:** How far should those rights extend (workplace, culture, etc.) **Q:** Should any one person, group, or institution have a right to curtail these freedoms or to determine what type of speech is acceptable? (If so, which institutions?) **Q:** Are there any circumstances under which these rights should be curtailed? **Q:** What should be the litmus test?



Legitimizing Views — Q: What do you make of the argument that if you engage with someone whose views you think are immoral, you are somehow validating the legitimacy of that person's views?

What is a Liberal? — When I was growing up, the democratic party and those on the political left were often derisively referred to by some people on the right as "liberals." The term liberal seemed to be synonymous with being decadent, wimpy, amoral, and privileged. Responding to this rather unfortunate popular misuse, Democrats began referring to themselves as "progressives." The word "liberal" seems to have come back into vogue, though it is now accompanied by an ideological plank that is altogether incompatible with traditional notions espoused by the same intellectual giants who are most responsible for advancing the word into the



lexicons of Westerners. This new, hard-left movement is proudly illiberal. It is authoritarian and in some sense fascist in that it seeks to legitimize the use of intimidation, public shaming, and humiliation in order to enforce a new and "social consensus" upon the population against the will of millions. Q: What is a liberal in your view? Q: Would you describe what we are seeing today as having anything in common with liberalism?

Accusations of Racism as a Weapon — Saying that racism is evil and then saying that everyone is racist is a problem. Q: If everyone who is white is inherently racist because we live in a culture of white supremacy and if being labeled as a racist can get you canceled, how is any white person supposed to participate in social change?

Ideological Extremism, Fascism, & its Dangers — Q: How does what we are seeing compare to what you've seen in terms of the radicalization of Muslim extremists? Q: Why are we seeing this movement today? Q: Where did it come from? Q: Are concerns about it overblown?

Power — Q: How do you think about the concept of power? Q: Are the powerful inherently the enemies of the weak? Q: Who are the powerful? Q: Do different people hold power in different circumstances?

For diversity defenders to shame cis white males for being cis, white, and male, then accuse them of fragility when they fight back, and ultimately resent them for not being fragile enough to wilt is beyond passive-aggressive. It's Trump-grade gaslighting. — Irshad Manji

Divide & Conquer — As someone who lives in the west village, I am stunned by how popular the popular narrative about straight, white men is. I'm left to believe that there's much more going on here than a legitimate anger against the majority. Q: Is there a larger game of divide and conquer going on here, where the people behind the curtain want us to believe that the people running the show are cisgender white men and not those hoarding the national wealth to re-make society as a playground for a new class of aristocrats? Q: How did we get to a place where this intersection of privilege is seen as the enemy?

Angry White Men — You mentioned the appearance of Jordan Peterson alongside Stephen Fry and Michael Eric Dyson, where Dyson called him a "mean, mad white man." I was also stunned by that, the hypocrisy of his racist derogation, and the fact that he was able to get away with it so easily. If the tables had been turned, I'm not sure Peterson's career could have survived respectability. As you write in the book "Designating fragility as a "white" condition, rather than a

human condition, smacks to me of a double standard—and a graceless one at that.” Q: What is the phenomenon that we are seeing with this example? Q: What does it tell us about our society that we feel it is ok to allow this type of stereotyping so long as it is of people who we label as “powerful?” Q: What do you think this type of behavior accomplishes? Q: Is this type of attitude or behavior compatible with a pluralistic society?’

Michael Eric Dyson — Dyson’s comments highlight two important things for me. (1) They are an example of how we come to associate entire groups or movements with individuals. In this case, Dyson’s comments cause me to associate all the causes that Dyson supports with him—an angry, bitter, rude, and racist man. And (2) they are an example of how individuals are often fighting their own, childhood battles in public forums. I think the same is likely true of Jordan Peterson, who seems to have his own emotional baggage that he has brought to the public arena. Q: What lessons can we draw from Michael Eric Dyson’s performance? Q: What does this tell us about the motivations of individuals? Q: What does this tell us about the importance of separating our feelings about individuals from the movements they support (the way we judge Dyson)? Q: Likewise, what does it tell us about the importance of not judging people based on stereotypes (the way Dyson judged Peterson)?

Jim — The parable of your friend Jim is one of the most instructive stories in the book. Jim is Jewish and a Trump supporter, so you would think that a Muslim, gay activist would be his mortal enemy. And yet, he walked you down the aisle to marry your wife Laura. Q: How do we make sense of what seems like a total disconnect? Q: Is Jim right to feel insulted and angry and hurt when people label him a homophobe or a racist for voting for Donald Trump?

Humility — Q: What role should humility play in helping us to have better conversations?

Template for Conversation — Q: How can we practice having better conversations and avoid turning every conversation into a gladiatorial death match of who’s right and who’s wrong (or worse, who’s good and who’s evil)?

Honest diversity vs. dishonest diversity — Q: What is the difference between honest diversity and dishonest diversity?



EXCERPTS FROM WHITE FRAGILITY

Ahead of my conversation with Irshad, I made the effort to listen to a lecture delivered by Robin DiAngelo dealing with the subject of “White Fragility.” Ms. DiAngelo quotes the book at length during the course of the lecture, so some of these excerpts will also be quotes from her book. In addition, I’ve included some quotes from John McWhorter who wrote a critical review of White Fragility in the Atlantic recently.

“I want to position myself, of course, as a white person.” — Robin DiAngelo

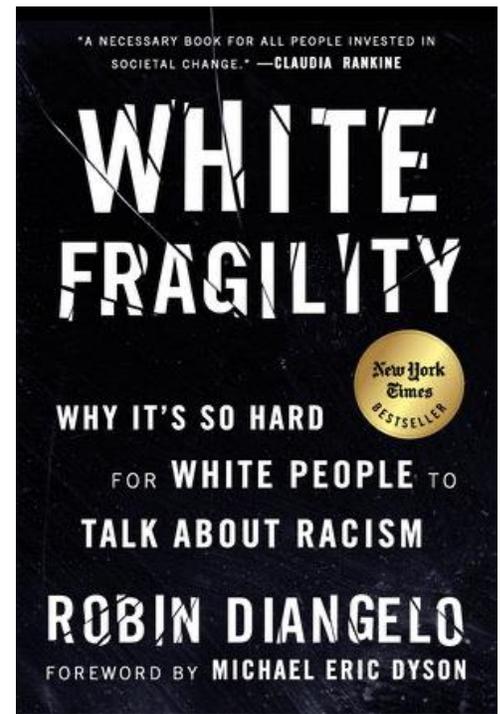
“We consider a challenge to our racial world views as a challenge to our very identities as good, moral people. Thus, we perceive any attempt to connect us to the system of racism as an unsettling and unfair moral offense. The smallest amount of racial stress is intolerable. Mere suggestion that being white has meaning often triggers a range of defensive responses that include emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt and behaviors such as argumentation, silence and withdrawal from the stress-inducing situation. These responses work to reinstate white equilibrium as they repel the challenge, return our racial comfort, and maintain our dominance within the racial hierarchy. I conceptualize this process as white fragility. Though white fragility is triggered by discomfort and anxiety, it is born of superiority and entitlement. White fragility is not weakness, per se. In fact, it is a powerful means of white racial control and the protection of white advantage.” — Robin DiAngelo

“I believe that white progressives cause the most daily damage to people of color; I define a white progressive as any white person who thinks he or she is not racist or is less racist or is in the choir or already gets it. White progressives can be the most difficult for people of color because to the degree that we think we have it, we’re going to put all of our energy into making sure you think that we have it and none of it into what we need to be doing for the rest of our lives.” — Robin DiAngelo

“If you are white and you have not devoted years of sustained study, struggle and focus on this topic [white privilege], your opinions are necessarily very limited. No, a trip to Costa Rica, multiracial nieces and nephews, these are not sustained study, struggle, and focus.” — Robin DiAngelo

“Apparently white people do not understand socialization. Because we really think we are exempt from it. Of course, the irony of this is that we are socialized to value the individual but we think that just because I say I am or want to be that I can be exempt from these forces.” — Robin DiAngelo

“After a good 20-plus years of talking day in and day out to white people about racism I feel very confident to say that there is something profoundly anti-black in this culture and that nothing seems to turn white peoples cranks of resentment like thinking ‘black people got something over on us that they didn’t deserve,’ and the deeper belief is that they’re inherently undeserving. I believe in the white mind black people are the ultimate racial other and that there are these bookends and that again, your perceived proximity to each end of that impacts how you’re going to experience your racialization.” — Robin DiAngelo



“I know white people really well. I’m talking X, and you’re like ‘Ha! I was Y.’ Ok, you were Y. Most whites are X. How did Y set you up? It did.” — Robin DiAngelo

“Damn, white people are pissy about racism. We are so pissy on this topic. We’re mean on this topic, right? And so, if you’re sitting here feeling that, just see if it isn’t rooted in this definition, and if you cannot let go of this, you’re just not going to be able to move forward.” — Robin DiAngelo

“How can I say that if you are white, your opinions on racism are most likely ignorant, when I don’t even know you? I can say so because nothing in mainstream US culture gives us the information we need to have the nuanced understanding of arguable the most complex and enduring social dynamic of the last several hundred years.” — Robin DiAngelo

“DiAngelo’s book is replete with claims that are either plain wrong or bizarrely disconnected from reality. Exactly who comes away from the saga of Jackie Robinson thinking he was the first Black baseball player good enough to compete with whites? “Imagine if instead the story,” DiAngelo writes, “went something like this: ‘Jackie Robinson, the first black man whites allowed to play major-league baseball.’” But no one need imagine this scenario, as others have pointed out, because it is something every baseball fan already knows. Later in the book, DiAngelo insinuates that, when white women cry upon being called racists, Black people are reminded of white women crying as they lied about being raped by Black men eons ago. But how would she know? Where is the evidence for this presumptuous claim?” — John McWhorter

“White Fragility is, in the end, a book about how to make certain educated white readers feel better about themselves. DiAngelo’s outlook rests upon a depiction of Black people as endlessly delicate poster children within this self-gratifying fantasy about how white America needs to think—or, better, stop thinking. Her answer to white fragility, in other words, entails an elaborate and pitilessly dehumanizing condescension toward Black people. The sad truth is that anyone falling under the sway of this blinkered, self-satisfied, punitive stunt of a primer has been taught, by a well-intentioned but tragically misguided pastor, how to be racist in a whole new way.” — John McWhorter

