

On identity, amin  
maalouf



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

To Be and Not To Be. In this book, Amin Maalouf, discusses one of the most vital notions of the self; identity, in an analysis of historical and contemporary contexts aiming to reveal the misconceptions and abuses of this mode of recognition. Whether national, religious, ethnical or other, identity has been the prominent element and more than often the instigator of serious upheavals in the world. He examines how we have come to define ourselves and how certain modes of identification can be dangerous. Every time identity is determined on the basis of a single form of affiliation, danger arises, since this often leads to fanaticism, whose various shades appeared throughout history and continues to exist in time. He attributes this to an ill understanding of identity and an unnecessary paranoid attempt of its preservation.

The two main themes of this work, religion and globalization, are corollary treated. The author provides a clarification of how these two affect and form one another. He addresses the matter of religion, by trying to deduce how it came to emerge as the focal proponent of identity in present times via a chain of questions, attempting to understand its significant universal reemergence. He proposes some answers, attributing this phenomenon to the descent of Communism and Marxism, for instance, and how this is a reaction to their emphasis on secularism.

The author opposes the primacy of any kind of religious affiliation and calls upon a new element of association. He advocates the separation of church and identity, and affirms that this type of identifying affiliation ought to be replaced with a more humanistic one. He does not take a stance against religion per se, for he personally, as he explains, does not oppose religious

affiliations and recognizes the perpetual significance of their nature. But as mentioned earlier he condemns the distraught tendency of shrinking identity down to one form of association. This regression of identity generates what he calls “ killer identities”.

I believe there exists another, similar form of regression, which he did not mention, one which I would call guilt identities . This is common among members of historically or currently exploited groups, who have developed a tendency to abuse such associations. Some Palestinians still do apply and obtain scholarships that were only assigned to their nationals at various higher educational institutions, for instance, when in fact they can afford to pay for the whole student body. Another example of this would be the Jews redundant reference to the Holocaust. This abuse and manipulation of history, I find to be highly despicable and disrespectful, for the only Jews that have all the right to refer to it I think are the ones who survived it. Similarly some African Americans use slavery or racism to justify their personal failure, which is absurd for while racial discrimination can definitely be the case in some instances, major inequalities that exist and persist are because of class and lack of opportunity.

Then the author turns to the issue of globalization, describing the power of its disseminating nature. In this discussion, he explains that the reason for the reemergence of religion lies in its power to gratify two of the most basic human yearnings, the need of belonging and that of spirituality. At the same time, he argues that because of this religion is being ascribed as the antidote to globalization.

The author presents a very sound analysis of religion's ascent. However, his condemnation of the primacy of its affiliations appears simply irrational, for religion, like everything else, has its extremities, varying from fanaticism to apathy. It is these that tarnish its name, and it is these that should be condemned. Although I do acknowledge Maalouf's position and his attempt to reach a much more profound and comprehensive link of association, such as humanity, I still do find it rather idealistic, almost utopian. For even though it is the only common trait across the globe, humanity has seldom succeeded in uniting nations – history is a vigilant witness of that.

In spite of its significance, people have never treated humanity with high regards. I cannot conceive of a reason that would inspire them to acknowledge it now. I do agree that this human notion Maalouf proposes would be an ultimate global bliss, yet I do not think that the world is ready for it, given the state of chaos it is in now due to political systems, materialistic notions or simply apathy. This is precisely why I think that religion, when taken for what it really is, as opposed to a set of dogmatic customized interpretations, would serve as an absolute unifier, which ever religion it might well be – I am no fanatic myself to state that my faith is the true one. We do not have to all ascribe to the same one (while that would be ideal, I am seeking to be reasonable). I know what faith is able to do to one's perception of life, and I do not think seeing the world through one's religion of choice turns a person into an extremist. Religion, when taken for what it really is, is the belief in being a part or pertaining to something bigger than one's self, a system of tolerance and preservation of the most basic rights and dignity. It can only gratify the human in you and not the opposite. We

are all in need of that kind of touch to our souls, otherwise our lives would be like frameless pictures, dull and fragile.

In addressing the tangible battle between identity and globalization, the book demonstrates how this clash has constantly been disregarded as a normal reaction to change and hence not in fact been taken seriously. It advocates that we as individuals ought to take this with real concern, since we are to the most part, subconsciously engaged in it. Knowing who we are and where we stand is something we have come to take as evident, a conception that is shaken often times when an incident occurs, significantly altering things and putting us on sides we did not know existed. It is this very specific state of consciousness that this essay is aiming to stir. The author explains that one's heritage can be divided into two types, vertical and horizontal, and affirms that our horizontal heritages have more affect on us than we realize. That is to say, when considered objectively, one actually has more commonalities with his contemporaries than with his ancestors. This point is worth contemplating deeply, I believe, since we do, by convention or denial, tend to primarily, if not exclusively, identify ourselves by our vertical heritages.

This notion of heritage incorporates the true essence of identity for people tend to often times presume that identity is something fixed that you get at birth and anything past that would be treated as treason. In fact, it is the actual opposite of that: identity is a constant state of evolution. The vertical heritage is what is bestowed upon us at birth and then everything else one encounters in his life will build up one's horizontal heritage.

These levels should be recognized and understood so one could have a solid and healthy perception of himself for as Maalouf stated; " it is necessary at this point in time to draw attention to the gulf that exists between what we are and what we think we are" (Maalouf p. 86)

In their judgment of globalization, people should not forget that like any other medium, it is inherently neutral and holds the potentiality of both good and bad in it. Any medium is in a state of neutrality until used, and hence any condemnations of globalization would not only be groundless but ridiculous as well. The author attempts to demonstrate the potential good that globalization can bring; he believes that such a phenomenon can help create a universal identity. He explains this by asserting that the only primary feature of identity that should be grasped is humanity and that this is the only type of affiliation that would never shrivel the concept since it is what we all have in common, regardless of our differences. Hence, I believe, the paranoid notion that by accepting this undeniable bond, people will risk becoming less of the individuals that they are is absurd. This specific type of union is not exclusive in nature and therefore cannot possibly cause any sort of loss.

This globophobia, I believe, stems from basic human insecurities, for fear of the unknown instigates fear of the " other", and fear of a universal identity is in reality a cling to existence. People will always try to distinguish themselves in order to prove their presence. When a group of different people meet, they usually identify themselves by nationalities , and when a group of the same nationalities meet, identification becomes on a regional basis and when those of the same region meet, it boils down to areas and

neighborhoods. These sub-levels of identity go even deeper, since every individual

is unique and will continue to defend that singularity whenever a presumed threat is perceived.

Hence, although the human universal identity that Maalouf is advocating might seem to be too unrealistic a demand from the world at present, it seems to be the more objective approach to any chance of peace, for nothing is more certain and real than humanity in its true form. Everything else is in the realm of terms and actions where intentions and motives rule, giving the international arena a complex and slippery base. Humanity, on the other hand, is the only part of us that is irrefutable for one cannot merely pretend to be a human being! (One could argue that history has produced examples of certain exceptions to that, such as seemingly inhumane tyrants practicing brutal depravity on the human race, but these are of no significance to my argument).

This human connection, that Maalouf advocates, I believe is indeed the deepest of connections, whose depth emanates from the fact that it shatters all trivial ties and is subtly effortless. It is an ability we all possess inherently by virtue of birth. And I believe that the reality of this was so adequately presented in this book. “ On Identity” has undeniably enhanced my understanding of what identity really is, and has acquainted me with a couple of new theories as well, all while bringing into my consideration certain elements that I so plainly regarded as evident, I would definitely recommend it , it was a pleasure to read.