

JUSTIN MAROZZI

TYRANNY OF TRIFLES

STRANGER TO HISTORY:
A SON'S JOURNEY THROUGH ISLAMIC LANDS

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By Aatish Taseer
(Canongate 323pp £14.99)

A MESSAGE TO married men having extra-marital affairs: beware of fathering a child with your mistress and then abandoning them. One day said child may discover literary inclinations and write a book that you may find humiliating in the extreme. Never mind the old adage. *Stranger to History* is a case of hell hath no fury like filial scorn.

Aatish Taseer is marvellously suited to writing this book about personal identity, religion and a quest to make sense of his past. With a Pakistani politician father and Indian journalist mother he neatly straddles the divide that Partition engraved across the subcontinent. And several years studying and working in the US and UK have added a powerful Western perspective, making him a fascinating cultural hybrid. Confused? He must be.

It is a convention of travel writing that each journey has its conceit. It is little criticism to say that Taseer's is slightly studied, a journey through Islamic lands conceived as a way of coming to terms with the Islamic heritage from which he feels estranged. A letter from his father, dismissing a piece of journalism he wrote about second-generation Pakistanis in Britain who represent the 'genus of Islamic extremism in Britain', is what finally spurs him to hit the road. He is shocked by his father's response (all too predictable from a notable Pakistani family): 'Do you really think you're doing the Taseer family a service by spreading this kind of invidious anti-Muslim propaganda?' And the reason he's surprised is because his father is a whisky-drinking, pork-eating, non-fasting, non-praying Muslim who once opined of the Koran, after reading it cover to cover several times in jail, 'I realised there was nothing in it for me'. So all roads lead to his father's doorstep in Lahore. Will it be a showdown between two virtual strangers or will father and son make their peace? His mother provides a clue. She warns Taseer Jr that he'll find his father charming and amusing but that ultimately he'll let him down.

In fact, contrived or not, Taseer uses this intensely personal prism to spring a

narrative that darts deftly between physical journey and childhood memoir. The paternal relationship he never had becomes the backbone of the book, which is all the better for it. Uncomfortable reading for Daddy, certainly, but gripping for the rest of us.

It is also well reported. Taseer, who considers himself one of the many 'crisis children living on the fault-line of Islam and modernity', worked as a journalist for *Time* and appears to have the enviable knack, for a hack, of being in the right place at the right time. Thus he reports on both the 7/7 bombings in London and the riots in Syria against the Danish cartoons depicting the Prophet Mohammed, and finds himself in Pakistan on the day Benazir Bhutto, his father's political leader, is assassinated.

In a sense, the physical journey is less interesting than the personal quest at its heart. Taseer travels from Venice to Istanbul, then into Syria, makes an unsatisfactory pilgrimage to Mecca and does a stint in Iran before ending his trip in Pakistan. There are many encounters, by turn illuminating and discomfiting, rarely hilarious. He hooks up with extremists in Damascus, hijab-wearing transvestites in Istanbul and Hare Krishnas in Tehran, guided by the relentless mission to understand Islam and what it means to be a cultural Muslim. In a tragically myopic remark, Abdullah, a Turkish fundamentalist, tells him: 'To be a Muslim is to be above history.' In this analysis, Islam and only Islam provides the perfect society. Not surprisingly, Taseer is unable to locate this Islamic castle in the air, particularly in Iran where he finds that religion, as manifested by the state, constitutes a 'tyranny of trifles'. Islam here is 'a violent imposition of religious perfection on the modern world, driven to illogic'.

So where does all this leave Taseer with his father? That would be ruining the story. Suffice it to say, it is not all sweetness and light:

I had begun my journey asking why my father was Muslim and this was why: I felt sure that none of Islam's once powerful moral imperatives existed within him, but he was Muslim because he doubted the Holocaust, hated America and Israel, thought Hindus were weak and cowardly, and because the glories of the Islamic past excited him.

This is a brave book, full of righteous anger, which will offend many who prefer not to lift the lid on hypocrisies within the Islamic world. It is unlikely to do much for Aatish Taseer's relations with his father, though losing contact with a man who is 'obviously a shit' may be a small price to pay.

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