

**BOOK REVIEW:  
LES IDENTITÉS MEURTRIÈRES\* BY AMIN MAALOUF**

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**HANS ERIK NÆSS\*\***

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*Small size, major containment*

One of the major issues of modern history is that it is so extensively filled with dramatic events. The answers that follow every grand work of historic and political research seldom outnumber the questions. But with this book of Amin Maalouf, I might say that we have come a bit closer to catching up.

Amin Maalouf is born in Lebanon in 1949, and worked as a journalist in the Lebanese newspaper An-Nahar before he moved to France in 1977. Since Maalouf, a Christian Lebanese, resident in France, with Arabic as native tongue and French as everyday language, he accomplishes very special conditions to write this essay. In other words, his life expresses one of the most jammed ideological road junctions in the world.

His background has practically speaking coerced him to perform some highly detailed thinking concerning the existence of his identity, because he never has been able to take it for granted. *Les Identités meurtrières* is small in number of pages and Maalouf's thoughts are uncomplicated and concise mediated, but the containment has yet extraordinary historical value. It is a brave contribution to how we can understand the roles of violence, religion, culture and colonialism throughout history.

One of the most important points in Maalouf's book is that the cultural identity of human beings shifts in different phases of their lives. It is a great danger in getting too closely tied to one single side of cultural attachments, whether it is religious, ethnical or national. At the same time it is substantial to not explain everything seen in

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\* MAALOUF Amin (1999) *Les Identités meurtrières* Paris: Le livre de poche

\*\* Hans Erik Næss is a student at University of Oslo

light of religion, but also connect the fact that religious, historical (by this, he means political), cultural and material circumstances influence each other mutually. Maalouf deliberates this with examples from conflicts where violence and identity cleavages work together as twin mechanisms, i.e. the Middle East, South-Africa, Rwanda and Algeria.

Another inevitable point of Maalouf is when he makes us aware of that Christianity not always – if ever – has been the bearer of theological pluralism, political harmony and forgiving tolerance. For several centuries it was Islam that inhabited these particular values, while Christianity was the narrow-minded, material, violent and suppressive religion. Another author worth mention in this connection is the Norwegian Jens Bjørneboe, which with the so-called “trilogy of the history of bestiality” from the 1960s, mercilessly disclose the brutal history of Christian missionaries and “adventure expeditions” in the name of God. In academic circles may we include the work of professor in social anthropology Thomas Hylland Eriksen at the University of Oslo, and especially his book called *Bak fiendebildet - Islam og verden etter 11.september*. Also this literary contribution is remarkably readable, and based upon the new world enemy lines that occurred after September 11, 2001.

A particular strength of Amin Maalouf is his ability to never reduce a statement to a certain ideological bias. He admits instantly that Islam also represents a history of harsh violence and material greed, especially in post-colonial times. Fundamentalists, ultra-orthodoxians and extremists have during all times done their most to claim a moral right to kill in religion’s name. What religion that strongest have promoted despotism and hostility towards for example information rights alternate in history.

A third interesting theory Maalouf propose, is when he claims that social renewal and modernism the last five centuries – no matter where you live on the planet – has been synonymous with the upgrades of western civilization standards. The conditions of being the receiving part to people within the “loosing” culture become completely different than for people in western countries. To the

“loosing” part the consequences might be that they feel they must abandon elements of their own identity, and deal with deep emotional questions that contains enthusiasm, inspiration, bitterness, humiliation, self-denial and identity crisis.

It is not impossible that this may be an actual explanatory basis to what happened in de-colonized countries after world-war II. Instead of turning outwards to the rest of the world and integrating some parts of political or cultural inventions that could be useful for them, some power groups directed their energy towards internal originality. Another author of post-colonial history, Franz Fanon, phrased it in a subtle sentence: They made it honourable to wear African sandals instead of European shoes. This kind of national self-centralization was not something that they really wished for, but something they found necessary to keep the outer world’s political and cultural pressure at a balanced level.

The immediate thought is: what if the present situation in the Arabic world in their consequences is similar to the one in post-colonial countries? What if the western world through their modern cultural agenda has subdued the pan-Arabic culture to introvert itself? Are the effects of forced “westernisation” a reason to common aversion and have it made the Muslim regions turn their original openness into polarized hostility, imperialist antipathy and simplified scapegoat hate? I leave these questions open for new readers to interpret.

This little book of Amin Maalouf is all in all a solid input in the debate concerning the forced integration of nations, religions and morality. In addition to this it is a modern book with reflexive considerations about violence and religion as driving forces in historical processes. In a time where almost every field of scientific research is filled to the edge with innumerable details and intriguing accuracy, it’s relieving to read a brief and informative essay like this. We sometimes need to simplify the world, but only if the simplifications are good.