New atheists and the same old Islamophobia

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The Discourse of Contempt Ridicules Belief and Believers

“Muslim extremism is not extreme among Muslims”, “Islam is all fringe and no center”, “The idea that Islam is a “peaceful religion hijacked by extremists” is a dangerous fantasy,” and “Islam is the motherlode of bad ideas,” – these are some of the talking points proliferating the global media thanks to the popularity and celebrity of Sam Harris the new crusader against God and religion in general and Islam in particular. His British sidekick, Richard Dawkins, is not far behind, with observations such as “Islam is one of the great evils in the World”. Bill Maher an American comedian claims, “Islam is the only religion that acts like the mafia”. The blogospheres, airwaves are proliferating with anti-Islamic and anti-Muslim rhetoric that do not even pretend to veil their racism or their bigotry. These Islamophobic pronouncements are similar in intent but different in content from the old Islamophobic pronouncements made by commentators like Daniel Pipes, Steve Emerson and Robert Spencer. They reek of derision and contempt for Islam and Muslims. The old Islamophobes sought to marginalize Muslims from the public sphere, the new ones seek to mock and ridicule both belief and believers.
In the current age of globalization, through the all-consuming power of social media that can dominate the human consciousness round the clock, the masses are engaged in mutual derision and condemnation. While couched in the language of justice and invoking other higher virtues, this discourse of contempt serves only to affirm the moral superiority of one’s *value clan* over those who are deemed as others. “We are better than them, because our values are better than theirs and therefore our societies and our actions – even when we wage wars upon them or occupy their lands -- are morally justified”. Nearly everyone is guilty of partaking in this global discourse. Muslims and the West, Indians and Pakistanis, Israelis and Palestinians, Republicans and Democrats – everyone seems to be using morality and mockery as a way to assert the superiority of the self and delegitimize and demonize the other. The recent assault on Islam and Muslims by the so-called “New Atheists” is another example of this discourse of contempt that seeks to affirm the self by vilifying the other.

Admittedly, this culture of derision is an equal opportunity virus that has infected everyone. Not only are the new atheists involved in a systematic campaign of vilification of religion, Christianity and Islam in particular are their chosen targets, members of most faiths, ethnic communities and nationalities too are engaged in similar social media driven global campaigns. The campaign against the Ahmediya and Shia Muslims is just one example of how sectarian values drive the vilification of others. In fact many Muslims routinely highlight media stories that project America and Western culture in a bad light in order to assert the superiority of Muslim culture and values. The assault on Islam by the new atheists is neither a new phenomenon nor something unique or special in itself, except that it has now garnered much media attention and straddles both social
There is a perverse quality to this culture and discourse of contempt. It is to some extent “performed” for consumption by social media and cable networks to satiate the daily appetite for controversy, outrage, moral judgment and value-based affirmations of the self. The new public intellectuals, who engage in this theatre of outrage, are professionals whose bottom line depends on the frequency and intensity with which the media covers such performed cultural conflicts. The most famous and popular of all new atheists, such as Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, are full service agents of cultural outrage. They have popular books, blogs, shows, speaking engagements, publicists, agents and a steady stream of aphorisms designed to hook the consumers of this culture of conflict.

I understand that all public intellectuals are open to this criticism, including me, and I also am aware that by penning this article I too am now one of the minor actors on the stage of this theatre of outrage. But, I engage in the fond hope that I can advance a thoughtful, nuanced and contextualized discussion of the new atheists and not provide just another voice in the ongoing cacophony of outrage.

What’s New about the New Atheists?

One who seeks God through logical proof is like someone who looks for the Sun with a lamp. – Old Sufi saying.

The term ‘New Atheists’ is currently being used to refer to a clutch of atheists who have become famous because of their strong and vehement critique of the idea of God and religion. Indeed they, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, the late Christopher
Hutchins and the comedian Bill Maher, the most prominent of this cabal, have focused their sights on Islam and Muslims (Slick, 2014). Atheists have always argued that if one takes reason and science seriously then it is hard to prove the existence of God, and they have also argued that the dogmatism that often accompanies religious zealotry prevent enlightenment and also peaceful resolution of conflicts. Atheists believe that religion is a vestigial part of the early development of human reason and as humanity becomes more enlightened less will it need God to support moral and ethical issues.

But unlike this rather sober atheism of Bertrand Russell and George Bernard Shaw who advocated their views and advanced the critique of religion with wit and erudition, the current crop of atheists, seek to ply their trade through the economy of outrage. They seek to make outrageous comments, designed to malign Islam and all Muslims and unleash a media storm that will attract attention to the most egregious elements of Muslim society with the explicit purpose of blaming Islam. They traffic in outrageous pronouncements in order to generate outrage; and thus extend their stay in the limelight. The manner in which they vilify Islam is not designed to generate thoughtful discussion with the goal of meaningful reform. Their goal, it appears, is to express contempt for the Islam, for its sacred symbols and to generate derision towards those who believe in it (Khan, 2004).

Derision not Criticism

There is much in Muslim societies that deserves criticism. There is no doubt about it. Sectarian violence, religious intolerance, terrorism, authoritarianism, gender inequity are present and have been studied extensively by scholars and media and nobody denies
that. But the New Atheists, rather than treating these conditions as aberrations and even departures from Islamic values, as most scholars of Islam do, they insist, often without any study or proof, that these social ills are the norm and represent Islamic teachings. Extremism, they claim, is not a quality of the fringe but a trait of mainstream Muslim believers. They equate the worst aspects of selective Muslim societies as Islam. Every thing that they accuse Muslims of and a few additional social ills are present in Western liberal societies. Egregious violence, gender discrimination, corruption, incessant appetite for war, religious intolerance (Islamophobia and anti-Semitism), racism, violent crime, and xenophobia plague the West too. But these ills, while they may not be present to the same degree as in some parts of the Muslim world, they certainly are social ills of the same kind. But these New Atheists, who valorize Western tolerance and culture in contrast with Muslim societies, see the same ills as abnormalities in the West and the norm in the Muslim World. The point is that they are not in principle against these social ills; they use them to justify their hatred and derision towards Islam and Muslims. Derision is not an ethical posture (Greenwald, 2013).

Intellectual Hypocrisy

Most philosophers of ethics would describe their methodology as intellectual hypocrisy. Consider this for example. Dawkins tweeted that “All the world’s Muslims have fewer Nobel Prizes than Trinity College, Cambridge.” The point he was trying to make is that all Muslims in the modern age are backward, less rational and less scientific than just one Western institution. Well if that is an argument then how about this. Muslims won six Nobel peace prizes in the past twenty years, more than Americans, the
Brits, and Israelis. Does that mean that in the past twenty years Islam has been more peaceful than Judaism and Christianity or the West? Probably. This silly causal equation between what some Muslims do and what is Islam has become the bread and butter methodology of the new atheists – despite their insistence that science and rationality is the only valid means to ascertain truth. Their arguments and public interventions about Islam and Muslims do not seem to have any higher or normative purpose or any sophisticated argumentation, beyond mocking Muslims and satisfying the cravings of religious and cultural bigots who latch on to their sound bites with delight. If there is any science in their insanity, this engineer and social scientist cannot see it.

*Anti-Liberal and Anti-liberalism*

Traditionally atheists criticized the religious point of view to either advocate for science, for liberalism or for Marxism. While it is evident that the new atheists are against religion, especially Christianity and Islam, it is not very clear what they do stand for. Unlike other atheists, this cabal is also vehemently critical of liberalism for showing tolerance towards Islam and for showing nuance by distinguishing between those Muslims who do do terrible things and those who live decent lives. The new atheists insist that liberals are betraying liberalism by not condemning Islam for among other things punishing blasphemy (against freedom of speech). But one does not catch these same atheists standing up for liberal values of freedom of religion, freedom of speech and religious tolerance, when Muslims in the West are victims of hate crimes or of state overreach. Rather than proving themselves as true liberals and standing up for liberal values against the rise of Islamophobia, the new atheists are in actuality adding fuel to
fire and are now the leading voices that are inciting religious intolerance and racism against Islam and Muslims.

*Plain Old Islamophobia*

In one episode of the 1990s iconic comedy show Seinfeld – The Yada Yada episode (8:19), Seinfeld suspects a part time comedian who is also a dentist of converting to Judaism just so that he could crack jokes about Jews and escape the allegation that he might be anti-Semitic. I suspect that the new atheist feel that their criticism of religion in general and Christianity in particular establishes their credentials and gives them the license to mock Islam without being labeled as Islamophobes or bigots. Unfortunately we live in a highly educated society and many of us, even those of us who are Muslims, can tell the difference between criticism and bigotry (Lean, 2013).

The new atheists construct their arguments about Islam and Muslims based on horrible things that are happening in some parts of the Arab World and Pakistan and generalize it to all Muslims and attribute it to Islam. Female genital mutilation (FGM) is rampant in Egypt; it must be because of Islam since most Egyptians are Muslims. But they ignore the fact that more than a billion Muslims elsewhere, Turkey, Iran, South Asia, East Asia do not practice it. Nearly everything negative that the New Atheists have to say about Islam is a rehash of the Islamophobic discourse generated by neocons in the immediate aftermath of the attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001. Sam Harris’ criticism of Islam and Muslims is best summarized by his own statement, “Islam is all fringe no center”. Harris was trying to say that the claim that Islamic extremism is a fringe phenomenon is wrong since all of Islam is extreme. We have heard this before, in
1995 to be precise when Daniel Pipes penned an article in *National Interest*, titled “There are No Moderates” (Pipes, 1995).

**Political and Foreign Policy Implications**

The anti-Islam and anti-Muslim rhetoric of the New Atheists is attributing violence and all the problems in the Muslim World to Islamic beliefs. Additionally they are insisting that there is no moderation in Islam and anyone who actually believes in the faith will necessarily be an extremist. If their discourse is taken seriously then it will lead to a civilizational conflict. Since all Muslims are extremists and there is no moderate center in Islam, the only alternative left to the “liberal West” will be to wage a war against all of Islam as it does against Al-Qaeda and ISIS. Such hate filled rhetoric while being patently false and misleading can have several dangerous political and foreign policy repercussions. I will list and briefly discuss my main concerns here.

I. Their rhetoric undermines the efforts of genuine reformers from within the community who are trying to argue that, punishment for blasphemy, gender discrimination, intolersance for religious minorities, and use of terrorism are un-Islamic. True believers, if they do wish to live their lives according to Islamic principles must recognize that Islam teaches the exact opposite of what extremist organizations like ISIS and Al-Qaeda and their affiliated scholars claim are Islamic principles. When the New Atheists start mocking Islam and Muslims, it generates anger, and societies that need reform circle their wagons and the reform agenda is sidelined.
II. Muslims in Western societies who can potentially lead the battle to defend human rights and disseminate contemporary understanding of gender equality in Muslim societies are now wasting their time and resources in two fruitless and debilitating endeavors – fighting the rising tide of Islamophobia in the West and dealing with the discursive violence unleashed by the New Atheists on Islam. They are not only not recognizing the moderates but are also subverting the efforts of the moderates engaged in the struggle against extremism. Rather than engaging the extremists in Muslim societies, mainstream Muslims are now engaging the extremists in Western societies (Khan, 2011).

III. One of the biggest challenges that the US faces in the Muslim World is the rise of anti-Americanism. Anti-Americanism in the Muslim world is triggered by Muslim perceptions that America has declared war on Islam. Even though after the election of President Obama American officials have been very careful how they talk about Islam and Muslims; the widespread attention that the bigotry of the New Atheists gets and the egregiousness of their anti-Islam commentary undermines our government. Their shocking statements are seen as representative of American attitudes towards Islam and indicative of America’s animosity towards Islam and Muslims (Khan, 2007). How can the United States win the confidence and cooperation of moderate majorities, if they are also accused of the very extremism and intolerance that they fight everyday?
IV. Speech has consequences. Hateful speech against Islam and Muslims that goes viral frequently is increasing America’s hostility towards Islam and Muslims as evident from the rise in hate crimes and in legislative measures to ban Islamic Shariah. The new atheists and their rhetoric could whip the country into a frenzy just like the neocons did a few years ago and compel mainstream politicians to pass unconstitutional laws such as the Patriot Act or wage unjustified wars as in Iraq.

Conclusion

Individuals like Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins and Bill Maher, may genuinely believe in their avowed atheism, but it does not have to manifest in such a crude and ugly discourse. If their goal is to teach Muslims rationality and science, tolerance and respect for other’s values and rights, then there can be nothing more powerful than setting an example. But on the contrary they spew venom. Their hate filled rhetoric unfortunately vindicates the fears of some Muslims that the West is out to destroy their faith and rather than engage in a self-critical discourse they respond by retreating into a shell. As long as such behavior is profitable, I expect this ‘reality show’ to continue. I wish to conclude by invoking Bertrand Russell, who said (Russell, 1950):

The essence of the liberal outlook lies not in what opinions are held but in how they are held: instead of being held dogmatically, they are held tentatively, and with a consciousness that new evidence may at any moment lead to their abandonment. This is the way opinions are held in science, as opposed to the way in which they are held in theology.
The New Atheists would embarrass Russell. They are far from tentative and self-critical. They are dogmatic and self-righteous and while not in substance but in style no different from any religious bigot. They sound like the very people they despise.

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