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New Atheists and the Economy of Outrage

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The recent discursive assault on Islam and Muslims by the so-called “New Atheists” is another moment in the sequence of never ending vilifications of Islam that Western culture seems to have an insatiable appetite for.

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.

“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. But unlike classical atheists like Bertrand Russell and George Bernard Shaw who advocated their views and advanced the critique of religion with wit and erudition, the ‘new 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 Islam, for its sacred symbols and to generate derision towards those who believe in it.
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. 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 a few crazy 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.


5 http://thinkprogress.org/world/2014/10/10/3578515/malala-nobel-peace-prize-muslim/