

The Reality of Islam

Sam Harris

In recent days, crowds of thousands have gathered throughout the Muslim world – burning European embassies, issuing threats, and even taking hostages, in protest over 12 cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad that were first published in a Danish newspaper last September. The problem is not merely that the cartoons were mildly derogatory. The furor primarily erupted over the fact that the Prophet had been depicted at all. Many Muslims consider any physical rendering of

Muhammad to be an act of idolatry. And idolatry is punishable by death. Criticism of Muhammad or his teaching – which was also implicit in the cartoons – is considered blasphemy. As it turns out, blasphemy is also punishable by death. So pious Muslims have two reasons to “not accept less than a severing of the heads of those responsible,” as was recently elucidated by a preacher at the Al Omari mosque in Gaza.



This fragment of the Koran (Sura 33, Verse 73-74) translates in part as “...That God may chastise the hypocrites, men and women alike, and the idolaters, men and women alike...” (A.J. Arberry translation). Idolatry is at the center of the Muslim outrage over the satirical Muhammad cartoons.

source: Wikipedia

The religious hysteria has not been confined to the “extremists” of the Muslim world. Seventeen Arab governments issued a joint statement of protest, calling for the punishment of those responsible. Pakistan’s parliament unanimously condemned the drawings as a “vicious,

outrageous and provocative campaign” that has “hurt the faith and feelings of Muslims all over the world.” Turkey’s prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, while still seeking his nation’s entry into the European Union, nevertheless declared that the cartoons were an attack upon the “spiritual values” of Muslims everywhere. The leader of Lebanon’s governing Hezbollah faction observed that the whole episode could have been avoided if only the novelist Salman Rushdie had been properly slaughtered for writing “The Satanic Verses.”

Let us take stock of the moral intuitions now on display in the House of Islam: On Aug. 17, 2005, an Iraqi insurgent helped collect the injured survivors of a car bombing, rushed them to a hospital and then detonated his own bomb, murdering those who were already mortally wounded as well as the doctors and nurses struggling to save their lives. Where were the cries of outrage from the Muslim world? Religious sociopaths kill innocents by the hundreds in the capitols of Europe, blow up the offices of the U.N. and the Red Cross, purposefully annihilate crowds of children gathered to collect candy from U.S. soldiers on the streets of Baghdad, kidnap journalists, behead them, and the videos of their butchery become the most popular form of pornography in the Muslim world, and no one utters a word of protest because these atrocities have been perpetrated “in defense of Islam.” But draw a picture of the Prophet, and pious mobs convulse with pious rage. One could hardly ask for a better example of religious dogmatism and its pseudo-morality eclipsing basic, human goodness.

It is time we recognized – and obliged the Muslim world to recognize – that “Muslim extremism” is not extreme among Muslims. Mainstream Islam itself represents an extremist rejection of intellectual honesty, gender equality, secular politics and genuine pluralism. The truth about Islam is as politically incorrect as it is terrifying: Islam is all fringe and no center. In Islam, we confront a civilization with an arrested history. It is as though a portal in time has opened, and the Christians of the 14th century are pouring into our world.

Islam is the fastest growing religion in Europe. The demographic trends are ominous: Given current birthrates, France could be a majority Muslim country in 25 years, and that is if immigration were to stop tomorrow. Throughout Western Europe, Muslim immigrants show little inclination to acquire the secular and civil values of their host countries, and yet exploit these values to the utmost – demanding tolerance for their backwardness, their misogyny, their anti-Semitism, and the genocidal hatred that is regularly preached in their mosques. Political correctness and fears of racism have rendered many secular Europeans incapable of opposing the terrifying religious commitments of the extremists in their midst. In an effort to appease the lunatic furor arising in the Muslim world in response to the publication of the Danish cartoons, many Western leaders have offered apologies for exercising the very freedoms that are constitutive of civil society in the 21st century. The U.S. and British governments have chastised Denmark and the other countries that published the cartoons for privileging freedom of speech over religious sensitivity. It is not often that one sees the most powerful countries on Earth achieve new depths of weakness, moral exhaustion and geopolitical stupidity with a single gesture. This was appeasement at its most abject.

The idea that Islam is a “peaceful religion hijacked by extremists” is a dangerous fantasy – and it is now a particularly dangerous fantasy for Muslims to indulge. It is not at all clear how we should proceed in our dialogue with the Muslim world, but deluding ourselves with euphemisms is not the answer. It now appears to be a truism in foreign policy circles that real reform in the Muslim world cannot be imposed from the outside. But it is important to recognize why this is so – it is so because the Muslim world is utterly deranged by its religious tribalism. In confronting the religious literalism and ignorance of the Muslim world, we must appreciate how terrifyingly isolated Muslims have become in intellectual terms. The problem is especially acute in the

Arab world. Consider: According to the United Nations' Arab Human Development Reports, less than 2% of Arabs have access to the Internet. Arabs represent 5% of the world's population and yet produce only 1% of the world's books, most of them religious. In fact, Spain translates more books into Spanish each year than the entire Arab world has translated into Arabic since the ninth century.

Our press should report on the terrifying state of discourse in the Arab press, exposing the degree to which it is a tissue of lies, conspiracy theories and exhortations to recapture the glories of the seventh century. All civilized nations must unite in condemnation of a theology that now threatens to destabilize much of the Earth. Muslim moderates, wherever they are, must be given every tool necessary to win a war of ideas with their coreligionists. Otherwise, we will have to win some very terrible wars in the future. It is time we realized that the endgame for civilization is not political correctness. It is not respect for the abject religious certainties of the mob. It is reason.

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Sam Harris responds to comments and criticism

Anyone familiar with my work knows that I am extremely critical of all religious faiths. I have argued elsewhere that the ascendancy of Christian conservatism in American politics should terrify and embarrass us. I have argued that the religious dogmatism of the Jewish settlers could well be the cause of World War III. And yet, there are

gradations to the evil that is done in name of God, and these gradations must be honestly observed. So let us now acknowledge the obvious: there is a direct link between the doctrine of Islam and Muslim violence. Acknowledging this link remains especially taboo among political liberals. While liberals are leery of religious fundamentalism in general, they consistently imagine that all religions at their core teach the same thing and teach it equally well. This is one of the many delusions borne of political correctness. Rather than continue to squander precious time, energy, and good will by denying the role that Islam now plays in perpetuating Muslim violence, we should urge Muslim communities, East and West, to reform the ideology of their religion. This will not be easy, as the Koran and hadith offer precious little basis for a Muslim Enlightenment, but it is necessary. The truth that we must finally confront is that Islam contains specific notions of martyrdom and jihad that fully explain the character of Muslim violence. Unless the world's Muslims can find some way of expunging the metaphysics that is fast turning their religion into a cult of death, we will ultimately face the same perversely destructive behavior throughout much of the world. It should be clear that I am not speaking about a race or an ethnicity here; I am speaking about the logical consequences of specific ideas.

Anyone who imagines that terrestrial concerns account for Muslim terrorism must answer questions of the following sort: Where are the Tibetan Buddhist suicide bombers? The Tibetans have suffered an occupation far more brutal, and far more cynical, than any that Britain, the United States, or Israel have ever imposed upon the Muslim world. Where are the throngs of Tibetans ready to perpetrate suicidal atrocities against Chinese noncombatants? They do not exist. What is the difference that makes the difference? The difference lies in the specific tenets of Islam. This is not to say that Buddhism could not help inspire suicidal violence. It can, and it has (Japan, World War II). But this concedes absolutely nothing to the apologists for Islam. As a Buddhist, one has to work extremely hard to justify such barbarism. One need not work nearly so hard as a Muslim. If you doubt whether the comparison

is valid, ask yourself where the Palestinian Christian suicide bombers are. Palestinian Christians also suffer the indignity of the Israeli occupation. This is practically a science experiment: take the same people, speaking the same language, put them in the same horrendous circumstance, but give them slightly different religious beliefs--and then watch what happens. What happens is, they behave differently.

While the other major world religions have been fertile sources of intolerance, it is clear that the doctrine of Islam poses unique problems for the emergence of a global civilization. The world, from the point of view of Islam, is divided into the "House of Islam" and the "House of War," and this latter designation should indicate how Muslims believe their differences with those who do not share their faith will be ultimately resolved. While there are undoubtedly some moderate Muslims who have decided to overlook the irrevocable militancy of their religion, Islam is undeniably a religion of conquest. The only future devout Muslims can envisage -- as Muslims -- is one in which all infidels have been converted to Islam, politically subjugated, or killed. The tenets of Islam simply do not admit of anything but a temporary sharing of power with the "enemies of God." Devout Muslims can have no doubt about the reality of Paradise or about the efficacy of martyrdom as a means of getting there. Nor can they question the wisdom and reasonableness of killing people for what amount to theological grievances. In Islam, it is the moderate who is left to split hairs, because the basic thrust of the doctrine is undeniable: convert, subjugate, or kill unbelievers; kill apostates; and conquer the world.

It should be of particular concern to us that the beliefs of devout Muslims pose a special problem for nuclear deterrence. There is, after all, little possibility of our having a cold war with an Islamist regime armed with long-range nuclear weapons. A cold war requires that the parties be mutually deterred by the threat of death. Notions of martyrdom and jihad run roughshod over the logic that allowed the

United States and the Soviet Union to pass half a century perched, more or less stably, on the brink of Armageddon. We must come to terms with the possibility that men who are every bit as zealous to die as the September 11th hijackers may one day get their hands on nuclear weaponry. As Martin Rees, Britain's Royal astronomer, has pointed out, there is no reason to expect that we will be any more successful at stopping nuclear proliferation, in small quantities, than we have been with respect to illegal drugs. If this is true, weapons of mass destruction will eventually be available to anyone who wants them. It seems a truism to say that there is no possible future in which aspiring martyrs will make good neighbors for us.

Sam Harris, Feb. 7, 2006.