

# ATHEISM AND ISLAM

## A Contemporary Discourse

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SHOAIB AHMED MALIK



# Atheism and Islam: A Contemporary Discourse

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# Introduction

THE EMERGENCE OF NEW ATHEISM brought about a global cultural shift that has drawn religion back into the centre of public discourse. The main proponents of this contemporary movement have launched an ideological onslaught against all religions alike, denouncing them as nonsensical and deeply harmful. These figures have published and sold millions of copies of their books and have increasingly been given public platforms for their speeches and debates; they have accrued a vast amount of social and political capital, and, all the while, New Atheism has gained popularity as a worldview, coming to compete aggressively with theisms all around the world.

In trying to understand the movement, some have questioned whether New Atheism actually brings anything new to the table:<sup>1</sup> its interlocutors are as well-spoken and have published as much as the self-professed atheist thinkers of the past, and the arguments they have put forward are, in large part, the same as those put forward by atheists historically—though, in some cases, much less sophisticated and more ‘evangelical’ in tone. What, then, differentiates them? One answer is the object of their opprobrium: this new wave of atheism seems to have zeroed in on Islam in particular. In the past, atheistic criticisms of religion and God in the West had generally been directed at the Judeo-Christian traditions, but one of the main features that makes New Atheism ‘new’ is the fact that, in its attacks on religion, it does not overlook Islam—indeed, Islam seems to be a central cause of concern for the New Atheists. Consider the following comments made by four different (non-Muslim) authors in describing these thinkers:

Harris is the worst; he makes Islamophobia a central part of his message. Hitchens comes second; to his credit (perhaps), he recognizes that the bad aspects of Islam are also found in Christianity and Judaism (in fact for Hitchens, there are no good religious traditions). And, for Dawkins, Islam is an illustration of the strange and bizarre behaviour of religious people. It is interesting to note how both Harris and Hitchens supported the American war to Iraq, primarily as a result of their deep prejudice against Islam.<sup>2</sup>

Today, the New Atheists are as hostile towards theologians as the most militant Victorian scientists were, but...in the nineteenth century, the religious other was made of all those barbarians’ and ‘savages’

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<sup>1</sup> Amarnath Amarsingam, “Introduction”, in *Religion and the New Theism*, ed. Amarnath Amarsingam (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2010), 1–10; Thomas Zenk, “New Atheism”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 245–262.

<sup>2</sup> Ian S. Markham, *Against Atheism: Why Dawkins, Hitchens and Harris are Fundamentally Wrong* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 105–106.

who littered the imperial globe with their presence. Today, it is Islam which constitutes the religious other, and it is still represented as a barbaric force to be conquered and civilised by the imperial powers of reason and progress.<sup>3</sup>

In my view the ‘newness’ of the New Atheism has very little to do with its in-your-face, aggressive nature, or its popularity, or even its scientific approach to religion; what seems to distinguish it from earlier forms of atheism is the subtle (and sometimes not so subtle) ways it critiques and attacks Islam through its ‘scattergun’ critique of religion in general. For the New Atheists, their general condemnation of religion targets not only Islamic extremism but also Islam because, in the main, they admit to no meaningful distinction between moderate and extremist Islam...Islam in the New Atheist writings is consistently depicted as irrational, immoral and, in its purest form, violent.<sup>4</sup>

For New Atheism, Islam represents both types of threats [premodern and postmodern]. As a religion founded on faith, it is a ‘premodern’ threat to scientific modernity, and it illustrates the progressive evolution of human societies, with Islamic societies representing barbarism and the West representing civilization. But it also represents the ‘postmodern’ threat in that the New Atheists believe that epistemic relativism and cultural pluralism have paradoxically rendered the West incapable of effectively dealing with the threat posed by radical Islam...Islam, indeed, is the most important element in the New Atheists’ construction of an ideal of Western civilization.<sup>5</sup>

Considering the increasing attention given to Islam by the New Atheists in their books and through their various media, as well as the unlimited access the public now has to such content on the Internet, it should be of no surprise that atheistic beliefs are on the rise in Muslim countries and are being promulgated covertly if not openly. Though statistics measuring the increasing numbers of self-declared atheists in Muslim countries are difficult to find,<sup>6</sup> a 2012 survey by Gallup reported that in Saudi Arabia, the historical heart of the Muslim world, 5% of the population identified as atheist and 19% as ‘not religious’.<sup>7</sup> More surprisingly, the Muslim response to New Atheists has been peripheral if not non-existent, with a marked paucity of engagement by Muslims in the English-speaking world and on the academic level in particular. This has left the Muslim laity exposed to atheistic attacks on their faith and susceptible to serious ideological confusion. It is against this backdrop that I write, thus I will focus specifically on points raised by New Atheists against Islam.

### Preliminary Points

Here, I would like to clarify a few introductory points and subsequently provide an overview of the entire monograph.

First, I would like to clarify my usage of the terms atheism, theism, and agnosticism: theism refers to the ontological belief that God exists; atheism refers to the ontological

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<sup>3</sup> Tina Beattie, *The New Atheists: The Twilight of Reason and the War on Religion* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2007), 54.

<sup>4</sup> William W. Emilsen, “The New Atheism and Islam”, *Expository Times* 123, no. 11 (2012): 521–528.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism: The Politics of a Modern Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 74–75.

<sup>6</sup> See the last point in the Appendix on the capability of respondents from Muslim countries (including Jordan, Palestine, Algeria, Morocco and Kuwait) to vocalize their denial of God in Ariela Keysar and Juhem Navarro-Rivera, “A World of Atheism: Global Demographics”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 553–586.

<sup>7</sup> WIN-Gallup International, “Global Index of Religion and Atheism”, 2012. To put this in perspective, the population of Saudi Arabia in 2012 numbered around 20 million; 5% would amount to 1 million people and 19% to roughly 3.8 million people.

belief in the opposite assertion, namely, that God does not exist; agnosticism refers to the epistemological position that the existence or non-existence of God is uncertain (soft agnosticism) or unknowable (hard agnosticism). Elsewhere, I have analyzed and criticized the way in which some atheists, either knowingly or unknowingly, conflate atheism and soft agnosticism in order to shift the burden of proof for the existence of God onto the camp of theism without acknowledging or realizing that atheism has a burden of proof to bear as well. This is not the place to delve into this specific enquiry, but I invite readers to view the article for further exposition.<sup>8</sup>

Second, I would like to distinguish between atheism and disbelief on the basis of the way in which the latter is perceived and understood within Islamic theology. Disbelief in Islamic theology denotes the personal denial or rejection of any of the six fundamental beliefs—that is, belief in God and His oneness, in God’s angels, in the divine revelations, in God’s prophets, in the Day of Judgement, and in preordainment. The rejection of any or all of these would bring one outside the fold of Islam. This is referred to as *kufur* in Arabic, whereas atheism is known as *ilhad* and is a subcategory of the former. Thus, all atheists are disbelievers, but the reverse is not true. For example, Islamic history is scattered with figures like ibn Al-Rawandi and Muhammad ibn Zakariya Al-Razi, who openly denied prophecy and considered religions to be a source of severe conflict. In their worldview, the faculty of reason was sufficient for belief, rendering revelation redundant.<sup>9</sup> Such individuals were declared to be disbelievers, yet, despite the fact that they shared some convictions with the New Atheists, their disbelief cannot be equated with atheism as defined earlier. Readers should be sure to make this distinction and remain vigilant when they encounter the casual use of such labels to describe thinkers in Islamic history<sup>10</sup> as well as in contemporary times.

Third, I would like to mention that, for this monograph, I have restricted my analysis and references to the English-speaking world, thereby consciously setting aside the vast scholarship by Muslims on atheism found in other languages, such as Arabic, Urdu, Turkish, and Persian. I have decided to not venture into these territories because the scope of literature in English is already extensive and because the goal of this monograph is to give an explorative introduction to this problematic. Given the wide-ranging nature of the topic at hand and my inability to take up all the available material in this short monograph, I have referenced an extensive number of sources in the footnotes where relevant for the benefit of inquisitive readers.

The monograph is divided into three main sections. The first section provides a brief historical overview of atheism, as well as an introduction to the main personalities of contemporary atheism—more specifically, the well-known interlocutors sometimes called the ‘Four Horsemen’. This is an extensive review, but those who are already familiar with their work may choose to skip it. This is then followed with the oft-neglected but growing culture of ex-Muslim atheists. Several ex-Muslims have come out and written books on their departure from their faith, together with suggestions on how to reform or otherwise deal with Islam. In addition to reviewing these figures and their works, I will explain how and why their arguments are similar to the ones put forward by the New Atheists,

<sup>8</sup> Shoaib Malik, “Defining Atheism and The Burden of Proof”. *Philosophy*, 93(2): 279–301.

<sup>9</sup> M. M. Sharif, *A History of Muslim Philosophy* (Karachi: Royal Book Company, [1961] 2013), 2:465.

<sup>10</sup> Sarah Stroumsa, *Free Thinkers of Medieval Islam: Ibn Al Rawandi, Abu Bakr al-Razi, and Their Impact on Islamic Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 121–129.



except that they show more familiarity with the scriptural components of Islam, largely due to the insider-outside divide.<sup>11</sup> The second section is a systematization of the various arguments that atheists have put forward against Islam. I divide these taxonomically into philosophical, scientific, and theological contentions, and provide a critical analysis of each kind of contention. Here, I will also identify certain sociological factors that cause some Muslims to leave Islam. In connection with these points, I will discuss the various stumbling blocks that exist within and are exacerbated by Muslims societies, which are often the cause of Muslims leaving Islam. The third section examines various interactions that Muslims have had with atheism so far; here, I will suggest potential ways for Muslims to engage with atheism, with particular focus on New Atheism, more critically and representatively.

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<sup>11</sup> Kim Nott, “Insider/outsider Perspective”, In *The Routledge Companion to the Study of Religion*, ed. John R. Hinnels (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005), 243–258.

# *Atheism and Islam: A Contemporary Discourse*

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## I Contemporary Atheism

**A**LTHOUGH ATHEISM CANNOT BE CONSIDERED a modern phenomenon, to say that it has never reached its current level of global popularity is not hyperbole. Historically, atheism did not have predominance over other, more popular cultural forces, whether philosophies or religions: this is due primarily to its failure to develop a critical mass of adherents.<sup>1</sup> Given its recent nucleation and promulgation in the Western world, some have argued that the rise of atheism is strongly linked to its complicated history with Christianity.<sup>2</sup>

To paint an historical narrative in broad strokes: the original form of atheism that contemporary atheism can be traced back to arose in the late renaissance, together with the emergence of rigid scientific methods and the obliteration of Christian dogmatism. Several contributory causes have been identified in connection with the rise of atheism that support this thesis, but I will only focus on those two I consider to be most important. The first was a shift in worldview from a teleological perspective to a mechanical one—a change that marked the unravelling of the Aristotelian metaphysic so tightly intertwined with Christian theology.<sup>3</sup> This resulted in the replacement of finality with materiality (to borrow the Aristotelian terminology). The second contributing factor was the diminished status of revelation, which likely occurred due to internal strife amongst Christian

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathon Ree, “Atheism and History”. In *Religion and Atheism: Beyond the Divide*, ed. Anthony Carrol and Richard Norman (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 63–70; Terry Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 1–43; David Sedley, “From the Pre-Socratics to the Hellenistic Age”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 139–151; Mark Edwards, “The First Millenium”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 152–163; Dorothea Weltecke, “The Medieval Period”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 164–178; Denis J.-J. Robichaud, “Renaissance and Reformation”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 179–194; Alan Charles Kors, “The Age of Enlightenment”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 195–211; David Nash, “The (Long) Nineteenth Century”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 212–228; Callum G. Brown, “The Twentieth Century”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 228–244.

<sup>2</sup> See Graeme Smith, *A Short History of Secularism* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010) and Thomas Dixon, “Scientific Atheism as a Faith Tradition”, *Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences*, 33, 2002, 337–359.

<sup>3</sup> Richard DeWitt, *Worldview: An Introduction to the History and Philosophy of Science* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 164–169.

factions causing a loss of authority and legitimacy for competing papal systems.<sup>4</sup> Thus, trust in authority was no longer a uniting principle in Christianity and had to be replaced with some other universal principle cutting across all sects and denominations. It was in this context that René Descartes, the founding father of early modern philosophy, began his quest for certainty in reason alone, which he identified as the universal denominator.<sup>5</sup> Descartes' rationalistic ideology was later criticized by empiricists like John Locke, who argued that reason is not the grounding principle, but empirical sensation.<sup>6</sup> To take Descartes' or Locke's positions to their logical conclusions meant depriving religion of its ability to ground its justification for the existence of God in revelation, thus forcing it to seek God 'from the outside'. The consequence of the proliferation of their views was that God was reductively forced into philosophical frameworks that were rooted in bottom-up approaches; these approaches were doomed to failure, ultimately leading to the onset of atheism as it occurs in the works of Immanuel Kant, who, through his critiques, required God as a practical postulate to make sense of human morality. Other thinkers continued to push God to the margins of ideology: Hegel projected his *Geist* as a principle of unity to overcome all dualisms, such as God and creation, as epiphenomenal realities; Ludwig Feuerbach took God to be the maximal humanistic projection of benevolence; Sigmund Freud considered God to be a man-made father figure drawn from humanity's infantile needs; and Karl Marx saw God as a mechanism of maintaining the status quo in response to the alienation of the working class, the well-known 'opium of the masses'.<sup>7</sup> After relegating its understanding of God to the realms of distant principle, illusion, or empirical conundrum, kept at bay by the rising tides of scientific enterprise, the world finally became 'disenchanted'. It is no wonder, then, that Nietzsche infamously claimed "God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him".<sup>8</sup>

This brief historical overview is, of course, specific to the rise of atheism in the West. Although there are other historical forms of atheism equally in need of analysis, the purpose of the above review is to establish the context from which modern atheism emerged. As we shall see later, there are certain elements of the relationship between the Judeo-Christian matrix and modern atheism that have now migrated to the Muslim world; in order to understand these elements, we have to trace them to their proper source, as they did not arise organically within Islam itself. This point is particularly important to note, as many modern Muslims are adopting a kind of Christian positionality in the face of atheism and, in doing so, unconsciously taking on theological issues specific to Christianity as their own,

### 1.1 The New Atheists

Given the displacement of God as an ontological anchor and the subsequent rise of naturalism in its various forms (logical positivism, scientism, Darwinism),<sup>9</sup> atheism was the most likely eventual outcome of the deism that arose after the Renaissance. Today, we

<sup>4</sup> James Thrower, *Western Atheism: A Short History* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2000), 71–93.

<sup>5</sup> Michael J. Buckley S. J., *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 68–144.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 251–321.

<sup>7</sup> Gavin Hyman, *A Short History of Atheism* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 19–46.

<sup>8</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, ed. Bernard Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 120.

<sup>9</sup> For a nuanced view on naturalism see Andrew P. Porter, "Naturalism, Naturalism by Other Means, and Alternatives to Naturalism", *Theology and Science* 1, no.2, (2003).

have gone past the tipping point and atheism dominates the public philosophical discourse, manifesting itself through the rising voices of prominent atheist philosophers and scientists in a succession of international best-seller books. Together with much of the Western world, these figures have come to focus a considerable amount of negative attention on Islam, largely as a reaction to terrorist attacks carried out in its name, of which the most notable are the attacks of September 11th.<sup>10</sup> Muslims became a favorite scapegoat for these thinkers—the ‘New Atheists’—who, as we mentioned earlier, are individuated by their anti-Islamic vitriol. At the forefront of this movement were four public figures that came to be known as the ‘Four Horsemen’.<sup>11</sup> I will discuss them chronologically, in the order of their publications.

### 1.1.1 *Sam Harris – The End of Faith*

The first New Atheist on the list is Sam Harris, an American philosopher and neuroscientist, who launched an aggressive assault on all religions in his 2004 publication *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*.<sup>12</sup> Of the four New Atheists that I will review, Harris is the most hostile towards Islam (with Christopher Hitchens coming in at a close second), to the extent that he dedicates an entire chapter to the “Problem with Islam”—the lengthiest chapter in the book.<sup>13</sup> It must be kept in mind, however, that Harris criticizes Islam from a largely scriptural and praxeological perspective—or, at least, how *he* sees Islam in practice. The entire book reads as a criticism of religion rather than an argument for the non-existence of God, yet, it is clear from the way that Harris frames his arguments that, for him, the repudiation of religion equates to the negation of God. He writes that “most religions have merely canonized a few products of ancient ignorance and derangement and passed them down to us as though they were primordial truths”<sup>14</sup>—this would presumably include the primordial truth of the existence of God.

From the outset, Harris employs a binary in which Islam and the West are in a state of war with one another:

It is not merely that we are at war with an otherwise peaceful religion that has been ‘hijacked’ by extremists. We are at war with precisely the vision of life that is prescribed to all Muslims in the Koran, and further elaborated in the literature of the hadith...A future in which Islam and West do not stand on the brink of mutual annihilation is a future in which most Muslims have learned to ignore most of their cannon, just as most Christians have learned to do. Such a transformation is by no means guaranteed to occur, however, given the tenets of Islam.<sup>15</sup>

Harris then asserts that Islam sees the world as being divided into the two broad categories of the “House of War” and the “House of Islam”, which marks it as an intrinsically hateful religion that despises all non-believers, whoever they may be: “On almost every page, the Koran instructs observant Muslims to despise non-believers. On almost every page, it prepares the ground for religious conflict. Anyone who cannot see a link between

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<sup>10</sup> This is also observed in Stephen Bullivant’s sociological analysis of atheism where he notes that the two most proximate considerations that motivate the New Atheists is Islamic fundamentalism and the intelligent design movement. See Stephen Bullivant, “The New Atheism and Sociology: Why here? Why now? What next?”, in *Religion and the New Atheism: A Critical Appraisal*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingham (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2012), 109–124.

<sup>11</sup> I say ‘were’ because one of the members, Christopher Hitchens, passed away in 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004).

<sup>13</sup> This is the actual title of that chapter.

<sup>14</sup> Harris, *The End of Faith*, 72.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 109–110.

Muslim faith and Muslim violence should probably consult a neurologist”.<sup>16</sup> He claims that, under the prerogative of jihad, “the only future devout Muslims can envisage as Muslims is one in which all infidels have been converted to Islam, subjugated or killed”.<sup>17</sup> He goes even further in describing the means that he believes Muslims utilize for this purpose, claiming that “suicide bombings have been rationalized by much of the Muslim world”,<sup>18</sup> and that, in Islam, it is “rational for Muslim women to encourage the suicides of their children, as long as they are fighting for God”.<sup>19</sup> It is on the basis of such premises that Harris believes that the majority of Muslims celebrated the death of the men who brought down the World Trade Center as martyrdom<sup>20</sup> and supported Saddam Hussein’s response to the American attacks.<sup>21</sup>

Given his hateful anti-Islamic rhetoric, it is not surprising that Harris regurgitates Samuel Huntington’s narrative of the Clash of Civilizations, which pits Islam and the West against one another in a zero-sum conflict from which only one can emerge victorious. Harris does consider it possible to avoid this otherwise inevitable conflict if Islam is either radically transformed from within or silenced by external means: “Unless Muslims can reshape their religion into an ideology that is basically benign—or outgrow it altogether—it is difficult to see how Islam and the West can avoid falling into a continual state of war, and on innumerable fronts. Nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons cannot be uninvented”.<sup>22</sup> He paints a bleak picture in summary, writing: “the West must either win the argument or win the war. All else will be bondage”.<sup>23</sup> Although he acknowledges that all religions have moderate adherents, his impression of such Muslims is that they are only benign because they display “an unwillingness to fully submit to God’s law”.<sup>24</sup> Thus, moderate believers are merely partial or failed participants in their religion, diluting their faith in order to assimilate to modern contexts.<sup>25</sup>

It is clear from his writings that Harris considers Islam to be an intrinsically malicious religion, thriving on the subjugation or destruction of the ‘Other’. Thus, in his mind, the only way to deal with Islam is to internally revolutionize or externally reform it to such an extent that it bears no resemblance to what it is today. Harris implies that if this cannot be done, the Western world needs to prepare for a military and political intervention in the Muslim world, for literal war between them would, in that case, be inevitable.

### 1.1.2 *Daniel Dennett – Breaking the Spell*

Daniel Dennett, a philosopher of mind, is the second on the list with his book *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*.<sup>26</sup> This work is primarily devoted to his arguments for a physical account of religion. Unlike Harris, Dennett does not focus specifically on Islam in his critique. Still, he implicitly and, on the rare occasion, explic-

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 131.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>26</sup> Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin Book, 2006).

itly criticizes Islam under the broader category of religion, which, for Dennett, remains a problematic phenomenon, since it represents a position of ignorance.<sup>27</sup> Harris and Dennett are more or less in agreement that once religion is ‘explained away,’ either as dangerous fanaticism or a mere natural phenomenon (their respective viewpoints), the mystery of God evaporates.

Another common denominator for these two writers is their belief that the mind—with all the notions related to it, such as morality, free will, and intentions—is reducible to matter.<sup>28</sup> Thus, *Breaking the Spell* is an affirmation of Dennett’s previously held position that the mind is a purely physical phenomenon:

There is only one sort of stuff—namely matter—the physical stuff of physics, chemistry, and physiology—and the mind is somehow nothing but a physical phenomenon. In short, the mind is the brain... [and] we can (in principle!) account for every mental phenomenon using the same physical principles, laws and raw materials that suffice to explain radioactivity, continental drift, photosynthesis, reproduction, nutrition and growth.<sup>29</sup>

On this view, anything occurring in the mind, including belief in religion, can be traced to a natural origin; there is no supernatural origin of or justification for belief.

According to Dennett, the story of the evolutionary origins of religion unfolds as follows: primitive sapiens naturally developed a mental device by which to detect agency that gave them the ability to distinguish between the movement of agents and inanimate objects (such as the rustling of leaves). This, in turn, allowed them to adopt the “intentional stance”, which is when agents have “limited *beliefs* about the world, specific *desires*, and enough common sense to do the *rational* thing given from those beliefs and desires”.<sup>30</sup> This subsequently led to the competitive landscape in which hunger and reproductive capacity were the main driving forces. However, due to economic resource management, “folk religions” started to emerge as a competitive advantage. Dennett explains this by first claiming that “our brains might have evolved a ‘god center’ that had later been adapted or exploited by religious elaborations of one sort or another”,<sup>31</sup> and the genetic tendency of the “god center” survived, because those who possessed the gene had exclusive access to what functioned as healthcare at the time:

In the days before modern medicine, shamanic healing was your only recourse if you fell ill. If you were constitutionally impervious to the ministrations that the shamans had patiently refined over the centuries (cultural evolution), you had no health-care provider to turn to. If the shamans had not existed, there would have been no selection advantage to having this variant gene, but their accumulated memes, their culture of shamanic healing, could have created a strong ridge of selection pressure in the adaptive landscape that would not otherwise have been there.<sup>32</sup>

With time, however, the shamans began to distance themselves and their healing from confirmable explanations through the mysteries of so-called higher powers. This became

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<sup>27</sup> His most famous books prior to *Breaking the Spell* were *The Intentional Stance*, (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1996); *Consciousness Explained*, (Boston: Little Brown and Co, 1991); and *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life*, (New York: Simon Schuster, 1996).

<sup>28</sup> I am referring to Harris’ other works: *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*, Black Swan Edition (London: Black Swan, 2012) and *Free Will* (New York: Free Press, 2012).

<sup>29</sup> Dennett, *Consciousness Explained*, 33.

<sup>30</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 109–110. Emphasis his.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

a means by which folk religion was codified and domesticated, and, eventually, evolved into organized religion, in which the masses were controlled by the powerful few.

Memes—the cultural unit of the human behavior parallel to a gene unit in genetics—played the role of sustaining these religions; through them, reason was subjugated for the ‘higher purpose’ of their survival:

The ultimate beneficiaries of religious adaptations are the memes themselves, but their proliferation (in competition with rival memes) depends on their ability to attract hosts *one way or another*. Once allegiance is captured, a host is turned into a rational servant, but the initial capture need not be—indeed, should not be—a rational choice by the host. Memes sometimes to be gently inserted into their new homes, overcoming “rational” resistance by encouraging a certain passivity or receptivity in the host.<sup>33</sup>

Dennett specifically mentions Islam in connection with this theory, writing: “it is worth recalling that the Arabic word Islam means ‘submission’. The idea that Muslims should put the proliferation of Islam ahead of their own interest is built right into the etymology of its name”.<sup>34</sup> From this point of view, the adherents of Islam and, by extension, all religions, are simply good hosts: machines for replicating memes. The religion and the manifestations of the religion must outlive the participants.<sup>35</sup>

### 1.1.3 Richard Dawkins – *The God Delusion*

The next figure on our list is undoubtedly the frontman of New Atheism: Richard Dawkins. Published in 2006, his book *The God Delusion* generated an aggressive momentum in the atheistic movement seeking to rid believers of the evil that is God by dividing science and religion, the rational and the irrational. Though he was already a published author in the field of evolutionary biology, with several well-known works arguing for Darwinian evolution (with his atheism couched implicitly in the background<sup>36</sup>), *The God Delusion* was an explicit outburst declaring the superiority of the atheistic worldview while simultaneously launching a scathing and provocative attack on all religions alike. The book marked a global cultural shift, completely altering the perception of religion in the public sphere, for which achievement Dawkins was granted an emblematic status and labelled one of the most defining and controversial iconoclasts of the twenty-first century. Broadly speaking, Dawkins has several problems with God and religion. Unlike Harris, however, he does

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Richard Dawkins agrees that religion was an evolutionary by-product that could have served a useful function once, but is now no longer needed. However, he differs with Dennett in some respects. In describing the physical origins of religion and God through evolutionary psychology, he likens the religious believer to a moth that flies into the flame of a candle, driven to self-destruction by the misfiring of an irrational by-product of human evolution (devotion): “The equivalent of the moth’s light-compass reaction is the apparently irrational but useful habit of falling in love with one, and only one, member of the opposite sex. The misfiring by-product—the equivalent to flying into the candle flame—is falling in love with Yahweh (or with the Virgin Mary, or with a wafer, or with God) and performing irrational acts motivated by love”. Because of this self-destructive devotion, this irrational love for God (or gods), humans reject scientific facts, die, and even kill for their religious beliefs. Though this (self-destructive devotion) may be the fundamental evolutionary pathway of the psychological development of Homo sapiens, he then suggests that meme theory explains how religions still flourish in the right memplex (a collection of memes in a given time and place). Individually, religious practices and ideas do not have any intrinsic survival value, rather, they are good or bad relative to the memplex they are situated in. Thus, religions are simply offshoots of nature carried over by the unconscious, underlying Darwinian mechanisms that drive us, which allow irrational religions to persist. *The God Delusion*, Black Swan edition (London: Transworld Publishers, 2007), 190–240.

<sup>36</sup> Some of his popular books before *The God Delusion* include *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976); *The Blind Watchmaker* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1986); and *Climbing Mount Improbable* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996).

not focus so exclusively on Islam, criticizing it only sporadically. Thus, I shall first outline his broad claims against religion, which are also applicable to Islam, and then highlight the specific points he raises against Islam and Muslims.

To prime our thinking, it should be noted that Dawkins argues vehemently against holding religion above criticism. Religion might occupy a position of sanctity amongst a large group of people, but that does not and should not insulate it from critical analysis.<sup>37</sup> External criticism, however, is only part of the solution to religion. Religion is intrinsically a self-insulating activity because adherents of faith groups, particularly children, are taught to hold on to faith as an uncontested virtue.<sup>38</sup> This, Dawkins believes, is completely antithetical to the scientific endeavour in which everything is open for revision. Taking this argument a step further, he claims that religion and all faiths are intrinsically nonsensical and pave the way for horrendous acts. It is here that he makes some seriously contentious claims; I will highlight four of these.

The first is his argument that the existence of God is purely a matter of scientific inquiry, nothing else, and that, if material evidence cannot prove that God exists, then God is a fictional entity and religion is invalid—an obsolete enterprise.<sup>39</sup> The second is his idea that science somehow exists in opposition to religion. He suggests that science is utterly at odds with religion because religion treats its holy scriptures as fundamental axioms that cannot be reformulated: “*Fundamentalists* know they are right because they have read the truth in a holy book and they know, in advance, that nothing will budge them from their belief...When a science book is wrong, somebody eventually discovers the mistake and it is corrected in subsequent books. That conspicuously doesn’t happen with holy books” (emphasis mine).<sup>40</sup> This quote gives the impression that Dawkins acknowledges a difference between fundamentalists and religious people in general—as though it is specifically fundamentalists that are at odds with science, not necessarily all religious people. However, he later claims that there is actually very little practical difference between fundamentalists and non-fundamentalists: “Fundamentalist religion is hell-bent on ruining the scientific education of countless thousands of innocent, well-meaning, eager young minds. Non-fundamentalists, ‘sensible’ religion may not be doing that. But it is making the world safe for fundamentalism by teaching children, from their earliest years, that unquestioning faith is a virtue”.<sup>41</sup> Thus, the problems arising from religion do not only exist within its fanatic variations, in whatever capacity they may manifest, but squarely within religion itself: “The take-home message is that we should blame religion itself, not religious extremism—as though that were some kind of terrible perversion of real, decent religion.”<sup>42</sup> This is a third, highly problematic claim he makes; it is also the reason Dawkins believes that he has the right to be hostile to all kinds of religious beliefs, including moderate religion, albeit using a much more toned-down rhetoric than Harris:

As long as we accept the principle that religious faith must be respected simply because it is religious faith, it is hard to withhold respect from the faith of Osama bin Laden and the suicide bombers [of the London attack]. The alternative, one so transparent that it should need no urging, is to abandon the

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<sup>37</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 49–50.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 346.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 323.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 345.



principle of automatic respect for religious faith. This is one reason why I do everything in my power to warn against faith itself, not just against so-called 'extremist' faith. The teachings of 'moderate' religion, though not extremist in themselves, are an open invitation to extremism.<sup>43</sup>

Dawkins surveys and dismisses many of the traditional arguments for God's existence,<sup>44</sup> but in making his case for the (very high probability of) the non-existence of God, his main recourse is to emphasize the explanatory power of natural selection via Darwinian evolution over that of notions of design pointing to a designer (God). This is because he considers the argument from design to be the strongest dialectic weapon in the theists' arsenal. He explains the power of natural selection as the gentle and slow accumulation of species (his *Mount Improbable*) rather than a single event. This is the fourth contentious claim. Why does this line of reasoning answer the question of the existence of God for him? Because he believes it is sufficient to negate both chance *and* design as alternative answers:

The answer is that natural selection is a cumulative process, which breaks the problem of improbability up into small pieces. Each of the small pieces is slightly improbable but not prohibitively so. When large numbers of these slightly improbable events are stacked up in series, the end product of the accumulation is very very improbable indeed, improbable to be far beyond the reach of chance.<sup>45</sup>

Natural selection works because it is a cumulative one-way street to improvement. It needs some luck to get started, and the 'billions of planets' anthropic principle grants it that luck...But whatever else we may say, design certainly does not work as an explanation for life, because design is ultimately not cumulative and it therefore raises bigger questions than it answers.<sup>46</sup>

According to Dawkins, natural selection renders the probability of the random occurrence of our world more digestible. It also avoids the weakness of the argument from design, which, he claims, produces an infinite regress when one asks 'who designed the designer?'

When it comes to specific claims against Islam, Dawkins rehashes the same arguments as Harris, declaring that it was and is a barbaric religion.<sup>47</sup> However, Dawkins makes a distinctive point not mentioned by the other Horsemen: he locates what he sees as Islam's violent origins in the idea of abrogation in the Qur'an. He describes his understanding of the concept, writing:

Islamic scholars, in order to cope with the many contradictions that they found in the Qur'an, developed the principle of abrogation, whereby later texts trump earlier ones. Unfortunately, the peaceable passages in the Qur'an are mostly early, dating from Muhammad's time in Mecca. The more belligerent verses tend to date later, after his flight to Medina.<sup>48</sup>

This is, of course, imprecise at best, but its novelty makes it worth mentioning.

In light of all these points, it seems that Dawkins shares Dennett's scientific bent and Harris' praxeological and ideological concerns about religion. Thus *The God Delusion* acts as an all-inclusive critique of religions on various fronts in an easy-to-digest format,

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 345–346.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 100–136.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 58, 324–325.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 347.

which is probably why the book has become infamous on a global level. The final New Atheist we will look at wrote a similar text.

#### 1.1.4 *Christopher Hitchens – God is Not Great*

Christopher Hitchens, the final member of the Four Horsemen, was known for his strong command of rhetoric and his quick wit in public debates. Unlike the other three, Hitchens did not fit neatly into a thematic continuity by virtue of his occupation: he was neither a philosopher nor a scientist, but a political commentator and a journalist. His book, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*,<sup>49</sup> largely criticizes the monotheistic religions from a socio-political perspective, though Hitchens does not shy away from making philosophical, theological, and scientific claims in it. Hitchens' socio-political appraisal of Islam finds it to be nothing more than the practical result of the erroneous Qur'an, which can only lead to irrational and hysterical behaviour. As an example, Hitchens sneeringly mentions Muslims' aversion to pigs:

Today, ancient stupidity is upon us again. Muslim zealots in Europe are demanding that the Three Little Pigs, and Miss Piggy, Winnie-the-Pooh's Piglet, and other traditional pets and characters be removed from the innocent gaze of their children...an old statue of a wild boar, in an arboretum in Middle England, has already been threatened with mindless Islamic vandalism.<sup>50</sup>

Hitchens also expends a considerable amount of space cataloguing the atrocities caused by religious fervour:

In northern Nigeria—a country that had previously checked in as a provisionally polio free—a group of Islamic religious figures issued a ruling, or fatwa, that declared the polio vaccine to be a conspiracy by the United States (and, amazingly, the United Nations) against the Muslim faith. The drops were designed, said the mullahs, to sterilise the true believers. Their intention and effect was genocidal. Nobody was to swallow them, or administer them to infants. Within months, polio was back, and not just in northern Nigeria. Nigerian travellers and pilgrims had already taken it as far as Mecca, and spread it back to several other polio-free countries, including three African ones and also faraway Yemen.<sup>51</sup>

Amongst the senseless practices of Muslims, he lists how Bin Laden supporters were trying to use jinn (demons) for warfare purposes;<sup>52</sup> how, in Pakistani law, a woman is allowed to be gang-raped to expiate her own brother's crime;<sup>53</sup> the problem of genital mutilation of young girls in African communities;<sup>54</sup> and how the age of consent for marriage starts from nine in Iran<sup>55</sup>. He does not fail to highlight tensions he perceives in the relationship between Muslims and Jews: "Islam has never forgiven the 'the Jews' for encountering Muhammad and deciding that he was not the authentic messenger. For emphasising tribe and dynasty and racial provenance in its holy books, religion must accept the responsibility for transmitting one of mankind's most primitive illusions down through the generations".<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> The title is meant to be negation of the initial statement in the Muslim call the prayer (*Allahu akbar*, which he thinks equates to 'God is Great', though it is more correctly translated as 'God is Greater').

<sup>50</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 41.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

Hitchens thus makes it very clear that Islam is a troublesome ideology enacted by Muslims on the basis of their belief in a false revelation and calls for a new enlightenment:

Religion has run out of justifications. Thanks to the telescope and the microscope, it no longer offers an explanation of anything important. Where once it used to be able, by its total command of a world-view, to prevent the emergence of rivals, it can now only impede and retard—or try to turn back—the measurable advances we have made...Above all, we are in need of a renewed Enlightenment, which will base itself on the proposition that the proper study of mankind is man, and woman...We have to first transcend our prehistory, and escape the gnarled hands which reach out to drag us back to the catacombs and reeking altars and the guilty pleasures of subjection and abjection...To clear the mind for this project, it has become necessary to know the enemy, and to prepare to fight it.<sup>57</sup>

Again, like *the God Delusion*, Hitchens' *God is not Great* serves up most of the themes found in the works of the New Atheists on a single platter.

I will end this overview of the Four Horsemen with a final important comment: though these four individuals are leading the movement of New Atheists forward, there is another group, a 'second wave' of atheists that have also made public appearances or have written easy-to-digest books. These include theoretical physicists Lawrence Krauss<sup>58</sup> and Victor Stenger,<sup>59</sup> British philosopher A. C. Grayling,<sup>60</sup> editor-in-chief of *Skeptical Magazine* Michael Shermer,<sup>61</sup> philosopher of biology Michael Ruse,<sup>62</sup> and French philosopher Michael Onfray.<sup>63</sup> I will not be reviewing their books in this monograph, but most of these authors and their works have been examined elsewhere.<sup>64</sup>

## 1.2 The Muslim Atheists

In addition to these popular figures, the landscape of modern atheism now features a growing group of Muslim atheists. These are ex-Muslims who, after leaving Islam, have begun to disseminate material that attempts to either undermine or reform the Islamic worldview through various means. As we shall see, their arguments often resemble or are modelled on those put forward by the New Atheists. Given the current media frenzy for anti-Islamic propaganda, any such individuals will easily receive (have already received) a good deal of exposure and fame; they are perceived as emboldened individuals who were not convinced by the rational basis of the Islamic worldview, and thus made the courageous decision to leave the Muslim community. Because of this portrayal and their first-hand experience of having been a Muslim, they are immediately treated as (if not explicitly labelled as) experts on Islam and presented to non-Muslims as authorities in their ex-religion.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 282–283.

<sup>58</sup> Lawrence Krauss, *A Universe from Nothing: Why is There Something Rather than Nothing?* (New York: Free Press, 2012).

<sup>59</sup> Victor Stenger, *God The Failed Hypothesis: How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2007).

<sup>60</sup> A. C. Grayling, *The Go Argument: The Case Against Religion and For Humanism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

<sup>61</sup> Michael Shermer, *The Moral Arc: How Science and Reason Lead Humanity Toward Truth, Justice and Freedom* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2015); *The Science of Good and Evil: Why People Cheat, Gossip, Care, Share, and Follow the Golden Rule* (Henry Holt and Company, 2004); *The Believing Brain: From Ghosts and Gods to Politics and Conspiracies—How We Construct Beliefs and Reinforce Them as Truths* (St. Martins Griffin, 2004).

<sup>62</sup> Michael Ruse, *Atheism: What Everyone Needs to Know* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>63</sup> Michel Onfray, *In Defence of Atheism: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism and Islam* (London: Serpent's Trail, 2007).

<sup>64</sup> Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism*, 46–50.

### 1.2.1 *Ayaan Hirsi Ali*

An obvious example of such a case is Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a Somali-born Dutch politician and author of four widely published books.<sup>65</sup> Hirsi has become a prominent figure across the globe and has received several awards for her activism, her vociferous rhetoric against Islam, and her bravery in the face of her negative personal experiences while growing up as a Muslim woman.<sup>66</sup> In her latest book, *Heretic*, Hirsi argues for a civilizing mission to tame Islam and remove its inherently violent aspects. Though she no longer believes in Islam and clearly acknowledges and accepts that she is not a theologian,<sup>67</sup> she is very clear about her position and the role she has to play in reforming Islam:

I am now one of you: a Westerner. I share with you the pleasures of the seminar rooms and the campus cafes. I know we Western intellectuals cannot lead a Muslim Reformation. But we do have an important role to play. We must no longer accept limitations on criticism of Islam. We must reject the notions that only Muslims can speak about Islam, and that any critical examination of Islam is inherently 'racist'. Instead of contorting Western intellectual traditions so as not to offend our Muslim fellow citizens, we need to defend Muslim dissidents who are risking their lives to promote the human rights we take for granted.<sup>68</sup>

Hirsi identifies five principles that she believes need to be either discarded from Islam or reformed. These include:

- (1) Muhammad's infallible status and literalist readings of the Qur'an, particularly those parts that were revealed in Medina;
- (2) The investment in life after death instead of life before death;
- (3) Sharia: the body of legislation derived through Islamic jurisprudence from the Qur'an and hadith literature;
- (4) The practice of empowering individuals to enforce Islamic law by commanding right and forbidding wrong;
- (5) The imperative to wage jihad, or holy war.<sup>69</sup>

Though she mentions some real problems plaguing Muslims societies, such as apostasy, widespread literalism (or, as a I prefer to call it, scriptural de-contextualization), and limitations on freedom of speech, her proposed solution is not feasible: it is very difficult to imagine how the Muslim world could accept the removal of all the above five elements, seeing that they are pillars within the structure of Islam.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation for Women and Islam* (New York: Free Press, 2006); *Infidel: My Life* (New York: Free Press, 2007); *Nomad: From Islam to America* (New York: Free Press, 2011); *Heretic: Why Islam Needs a Reformation Now* (New York: Harper Collins, 2015).

<sup>66</sup> She is also a senior fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School, where she gives talks on the intersection of religion and politics with a primary focus on Islam.

<sup>67</sup> Hirsi, *Heretic*, 75.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 27–28.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>70</sup> It should be noted that the fifth principle of jihad is very dangerously and carelessly exploited, pulled away from its theological roots, applications, and implications. For an excellent and constructive overview of jihad, see: Ghazi Bin Muhammad, Ibrahim Kalin, Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *War and Peace in Islam: The Uses and Abuses of Jihad* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2013).

### 1.2.2 *Ali Rizvi*

Though Hirsi at least sees the possibility of reforming Islam,<sup>71</sup> Ali Rizvi, a Pakistani-Canadian pathologist and a regular *Huffington Post* contributor, takes the project of secularization to its furthest extreme in his recent book, *The Atheist Muslim: A Journey From Religion to Reason*. The subtitle of the book immediately reveals the way he views Islam: an inherently irrational position. He writes: “As a rationalist, I would ideally want to see a truly enlightened world, liberated from religion and superstition entirely; this is where I diverge from my pro-reform friends and family, most of whom are believers.”<sup>72</sup> One of the ways in which he approaches his complete dismissal of Islam is by trying to identify weaknesses in the way Islamic hermeneutics work. For example, he uses the topic of fornication to demonstrate how one might “twist the text” to come to some desired conclusion. He writes:

The sin is not in fornication. It is in the *propagation* of it. As long as you don’t have four witnesses, what you do is between you and God. And being beneficent and merciful as He says He is, you can get that God understands that not all fornication is the same. I doubt sleeping a few times with your future spouse of fifty years before marriage would merit the same degree of punishment as lying to someone to get them into bed for a night. If God weren’t okay with fornication, he would’ve prescribed more than just a worldly punishment for it, much less one that requires four adult male Muslim witnesses before going into effect...And just like that, we were able to use the very words of the Qur’an itself—although selectively—to show that God was perfectly fine with premarital sex.<sup>73</sup>

Following this same line of thought, he negatively highlights how certain Islamic principles stay the same but their manifestation in action changes according to time and place, such as how amputation for the punishment of theft was a deterrent that no longer applies today, or how certain scriptural descriptions of heaven seem to be Arab-specific, mentioning carpets and lush couches, and need to be reevaluated in light of the socio-cultural context of our times. This, for him, is a weakness because it does not share the same methodological objectivity of science, thus he shares fully in the New Atheists’ passion for science at the expense of religion:

To the believer, I say only this: Even if you do believe that a god created the universe, why go to a messiah or a book from thousands of years ago to get closer to him? Why not study his creation that is all around you? This ‘creation’ is called nature—and the study of it is called science. And the language of science isn’t Hebrew, Aramaic, or Arabic. It’s mathematics—which stays the same whether you’re in Israel, the West Bank, or on the moon. Why rely on faith without evidence when the evidence is so much more breathtaking? To me, the real beauty lies in real questions, not false answers.<sup>74</sup>

### 1.2.3 *Armin Navabi*

Armin Navabi wrote a much simpler book called *Why There is No God*, which lists twenty arguments, each a few pages long, and thus seems to be a quick-fix manual for

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<sup>71</sup> Her motives and approach are in a similar vein to the publicly held conversation between the odd duo of Sam Harris and Maajid Nawaz (a very controversial Muslim figure from the Quilliam Foundation, once a member of Hizb al-Tahrir), now in book form. See: Sam Harris and Maajid Nawaz. *Islam and the Future of Tolerance: A Dialogue* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2015).

<sup>72</sup> Ali A. Rizvi, *The Atheist Muslim: A Journey from Religion to Reason* (New York, St. Martin’s Press, 2016), 202.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 129.

atheism. One example of the many arguments that he presents is a naturalistic account of the universe:

While the theistic argument claims that the First Law of thermodynamics proves that there needs to be a source for all matter and energy in the universe, in fact, there are other ways this could be true. For example, the universe, or multiple universes, could have existed forever with the same amount of matter and energy. Or the universe's, or multiple universes', positive and negative energy could add up to zero. We simply don't yet know the complete workings and laws of the universe at this point in time, but that doesn't mean that we can fill in the gaps of our knowledge with God. In fact, if God can create matter and energy, why couldn't a natural process that we do not understand yet do the same as well?<sup>75</sup>

The book is a collection of generic arguments against all religions and does not target Islam specifically. However, on some occasions, Navabi does make some points that seem to be exclusively directed at Islam. For example, in one part of the book he asserts that the Qur'an suggests a flat earth perspective<sup>76</sup> among many other scientific errors, which renders it a flawed book.

My main interest lies not in the book, but in the author himself. Navabi is an Iranian-American ex-Muslim and the founder of one of the world's largest atheist support groups, *Atheist Republic*.<sup>77</sup> With over 1.7 million followers, it has become a globally recognized hub for atheists across the world. It is through this platform that his book has been able to percolate, spreading atheism across the world and becoming one of the best-selling books arguing for atheism on Amazon.<sup>78</sup>

#### 1.2.4 *Ibn Warraq*

The most academic ex-Muslim atheist and the one who has written most widely on the subject is without a doubt the Pakistani-British author who goes by the pseudonym Ibn Warraq. To date, he has authored, co-authored, and edited twelve books in total.<sup>79</sup> In addition to this, he is the founder of the Institute for the Secularisation of Islamic Society (ISIS). His most comprehensive book is also, in my estimation, the most sophisticated and well-argued book against Islam across the board: *Why I am Not A Muslim*, published more than twenty years ago. I say this because Warraq makes a strategic effort to criticize Islam from every angle necessary to undermine it as a worldview from the academic perspective. This includes the suggestion that Islam is simply an amalgamation of prior traditions on the basis of the ideological similarities between Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and the other traditions that existed prior to Islam's origination;<sup>80</sup> the textual and

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<sup>75</sup> Armin Navabi, *Why There is No God: Simple Responses to 20 Common Arguments for the Existence of God* (USA, Atheist Republic), 73–4.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 20. This is in reference to the verse in Surat al-Kahf commenting on one of the journeys undertaken by Dhul Qarnain (Qur'an 18:86).

<sup>77</sup> "Atheist Republic," accessed July 29, 2017, <http://www.atheistrepublic.com/>.

<sup>78</sup> When writing this article, the book had received 739 positive reviews with an average rating of 4.5 stars since its publication in 2014 (3 years to date). To put this into perspective, Richard Dawkins' *God Delusion* (the most highly purchased book on atheism) had 3,398 positive reviews with an average rating of 4.5 stars since its publication in 2006 (11 years to date).

<sup>79</sup> His most prominent books are Ibn Warraq, *Why I am Not a Muslim* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1995); *The Origins of the Koran: Classic Essay's on Islam's Holy Book* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), ed. Ibn Warraq; *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2000); *What the Koran Really Says: Language, Text, and Commentary* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002); *Leaving Islam: Apostates Speak Out* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2003).

<sup>80</sup> Warraq, *Why I am Not a Muslim*, 34–65.

historical problematization of the early Islamic scriptural sources, including the issue of the Qur'an's transcription and transmission;<sup>81</sup> calling into question the politicized nature of the Islamic worldview and Islam's history;<sup>82</sup> investigating the relationship between science and the Qur'an;<sup>83</sup> drawing attention to episodes from the Prophet's (peace be upon him) life that can be perceived as problematic;<sup>84</sup> and bringing examples of negative applications of Islamic jurisprudence.<sup>85</sup> It should not be surprising to note that Hitchens and Dawkins have relied heavily on Ibn Warraq's writings for their information on Islam, as can be seen in their bibliographies.

### 1.3 Summary of the Arguments

After having gathered all these criticisms levied against Islam by the New Atheists and Muslim Atheists, we can sum up their arguments in three fundamental points:

- (1) *Islam is an inherently barbaric and evil religion*: there are verses in the Qur'an and hadith literature that are either morally abhorrent or irrational, and they represent the culmination of a regressive civilization. This is borne out by all the terrorist activities carried out by Muslims around the world. Muslims who take Islamic scripture seriously are a threat to Western civilization and values, and therefore Islam and the West cannot be integrated unless Islamic teachings are forgotten altogether or reformed beyond recognition.
- (2) *The Islamic scripture is outdated*: science has become the new champion in providing powerful explanatory narratives by which the Qur'an and, indeed, every other scripture, has become redundant. Even if science does not have the answer yet, it will have them eventually. Furthermore, the Islamic scripture contains faulty information about the material world, like the flat earth perspective, which makes it obsolete and no longer worthy of intellectual respect.
- (3) *There is no proof for the existence of God*: all of the arguments for the existence of God can be dismissed either through of logical refutation or using the alternative explanations provided by science. Given the last two points, it is clear that the Qur'an is not a miracle and thus Islam is a vacuous worldview.

I do not intend to refute these points in this article, as all of them have been argued against elsewhere (though not always with modern atheists' contentions in mind).<sup>86</sup> Rather, I will use these arguments to derive certain key points that Muslims need to collectively acknowledge and work out in the debate with atheism.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 66–85; 104–115.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 163–213.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 134–44.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 86–103.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 214–40; 290–350.

<sup>86</sup> See: Muhamad M. Al-Azami, *The History of the Quranic Text From Revelation to Compilation: A Comparative Study with the Old and New Testaments*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Leicester: UK Islamic Academy, 2003); Muhammad Mohar Ali, *The Quran and The Orientalists* (Ipswich: Jamiyat Ihya al-Sunnah, 2004); Abu Ammaar Yasir Qadhi, *An Introduction to the Sciences of the Quraan* (Birmingham: Al-Hidaayah Publishing and Distribution, 1999); Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Reasoning with God: Reclaiming Shariah in the Modern Age* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015). Also see the references in Section 3.

## 2 Points of Reflection

Taking cues from the arguments mentioned in the previous section, this section will provide reflective analysis of the various issues that are raised within the atheist-theist discourse, which Muslims need to be aware of in order to engage better therein. I have divided these points thematically into three broad categories: scientific, philosophical, and theological. It should be kept in mind that this list is not meant to be exhaustive or definitive, but rather should be seen as a heuristic aid. At the end of this section, I will also highlight some of the sociological concerns within Muslim communities that spur some Muslims to leave Islam.

### 2.1 Scientific Contentions

It is not my intention to review the extensive debate concerning the relationship between science and Islam here, as this has been done elsewhere.<sup>87</sup> Rather, my goal is to highlight the central concerns that arise at the intersection of science and religion within the larger context of the discourse between atheism and theism. The two issues made out to be the biggest are evolution and cosmology with scripture. In this section I will solely focus on the former seeing, since evolution is still a fiercely contested issue amongst Muslims. I will tackle the latter in the section dealing with philosophical points, since the boundary between modern physics and metaphysics is usually very thin.

#### 2.1.1 Evolution

The New Atheists seem to be completely driven by the Darwinian narrative, as has been seen earlier with Dennett's natural account of religious belief and Dawkins' meme theory (see footnote 45); they use this theory to push back hard against religion and its believers. The Darwinian model (at least as it is portrayed by atheists) suggests that everything can be explained from a naturalistic perspective,<sup>88</sup> such that even mental and emotional phenomena like free will, morality, and thoughts are taken to be the complex or epiphenomenal results of blind natural forces, whose nature we will discover eventually if we have not already done so. This is obviously completely antithetical to the Islamic worldview, since Islam requires belief in non-observable, supernatural entities such as God, the soul, and angels. This makes the Darwinian narrative of evolution a very serious concern for Muslims, but the problematic naturalism that comes attached to it seems to be more of a philosophical position than a scientific contention. To consider *a priori* that everything can be reduced to matter is not a scientific position, it is a metaphysical claim put forward with a scientific veneer. This issue can be directed into its proper philosophical context (a discussion that we will encounter later), but is there anything within evolution itself as a scientific explanation that conflicts with Islam? To answer this question, we first need to get a broad glimpse of what both sides are actually saying.

Broadly speaking, evolution occurs in a stepwise fashion: through a successive series of distinct stages, a dialectic relationship between genetics and environmental factors leads to the differentiation of species into various branches, which are subsequently developed through time. As the species of these branches progress further, adapt to their localities, and thus diversify even more, they create more genetic differentiation,

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<sup>87</sup> See Nidhal Guessoum, *Kalam's Necessary Engagement with Modern Science*, Monograph Series 6 (n.p.: Kalam Research and Media, 2011).

<sup>88</sup> Recall that the subtitle of the Dennett's book was "Religion as a *Natural* Phenomenon".



eventually leading to our current natural context, in which humans are just one end of a parallel series of multiple, diverse evolutionary pathways. On this account, humans beings are not derived from apes, as is popularly assumed. Rather, they once shared an ancestral node, after which a genetic ‘split’ between humans and apes starts to sharpen. Thus, apes are considered to be our genealogical ‘cousins’ rather than our progenitors.

I have intentionally avoided the more scientific and technical nuances involved in discussions on evolution, as that is not my primary concern.<sup>89</sup> What I am interested in is locating the fundamental issue that engenders so much controversy in the Muslim world—as well as the Christian world. The central concern in the debate on evolution in Islam is the position of Adam and, more broadly, human beings. It is mentioned in the Qur’an that Adam was created in the best of molds,<sup>90</sup> that he was fashioned by God Himself.<sup>91</sup> and that he was made a vicegerent of God on earth.<sup>92</sup> This suggests that Adam and his offspring have an elevated status above the rest of creation. How can such an honored, noble entity have been produced from random processes and imperfect ancestors? Furthermore, Adam is referred to as the parent of humanity in the Qur’an<sup>93</sup> as well as in hadith literature,<sup>94</sup> which seems to imply that Adam was the first human being, without any parents of his own. Thus, on the one hand, we have the Qur’an and hadith literature, which point towards a creation narrative in which Adam is created and placed on earth; and, on the other hand, we have the stepwise evolutionary pathway of the Darwinian narrative. These two seem to be irreconcilable, at least after a cursory reading.

The Muslim response to evolution has been mixed: internal opinions range from complete acceptance to complete rejection of evolution, with several thinkers falling in between. Moreover, though there are multiple people on each end of the pole, their reasons for rejecting or accepting evolution also vary. A summary of these positions is given below.

Table 1: Summary of positions of various Muslim thinkers in the past century on evolution

<i>Position</i>	<i>Thinker</i>	<i>Reason</i>
Rejection	Imam Tabtabae <sup>95</sup>	Scripture indicates that mankind did not develop from another species, neither animal nor plant
	Syed Ala Maududi <sup>96</sup>	The theory of evolution is only a theory
	Dr. Tahrir al-Qadri <sup>97</sup>	There are missing links in the fossil record and scientists have various interpretations; no single unified theory has been brought forward

<sup>89</sup> For a thorough introduction on the topic see Stephen C. Stearns and Rolf F. Hoekstra, *Evolution: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>90</sup> Qur’an (95:4).

<sup>91</sup> Qur’an (38:75).

<sup>92</sup> Qur’an (2:30).

<sup>93</sup> Mankind is often collectively referred to as the ‘children of Adam’ in the Qur’an, as we see in verse (17:70).

<sup>94</sup> See footnote 126.

<sup>95</sup> Muhammad Sultan Shah, *Evolution and Creation: Islamic Perspective* (Mansehra: Society for Interaction of Religion and Science Technology, 2010), 166.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 173.

<i>Position</i>	<i>Thinker</i>	<i>Reason</i>
Acceptance	Seyyed Hossein Nasr <sup>98</sup>	The ‘form’ of a human is fixed; transformation of species is inherently incorrect
	Nuh Ha Mim Keller <sup>99</sup>	Adam was a special creation and therefore cannot be part of evolution
	David Solomon Jalajel <sup>100</sup>	Adam was a special creation and therefore cannot be part of evolution
	Nidhal Guessoum <sup>101</sup>	Theistic evolution fits both the data and Adam’s creation story
	Rana Dajani <sup>102</sup>	The story of Adam is allegorical
	Seyyed Ahmed Khan <sup>103</sup>	The story of Adam must be allegorical because evolution is a fact
	Muhammed Iqbal <sup>104</sup>	The story of Adam is allegorical because the Qur’an, unlike the Bible, does not use proper names; Adam refers more to a concept than an individual
Accommodative	Muhammed Abduh <sup>105</sup>	Man is created from one soul, so it matters very little if their father is Adam or a monkey
	T. O. Shavanas <sup>106</sup>	Adam was the spiritual father of mankind; Adam and Eve were not the first humans
	Hussein Al Jisr <sup>107</sup>	Scripture does not contain any specific message on whether Adam came to be through spontaneous creation or evolution; if proven to be true, Muslims will have to reevaluate their position
	Ismail Fenni <sup>108</sup>	If proven to be true, Muslims will have to reevaluate their position; science must be safeguarded as a tentative enterprise

<sup>98</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “On the Question of Biological Origins,” *Islam and Science* 4, no. 2: 181–197.

<sup>99</sup> “Islam and Evolution: a Letter to Suleman Ali”, accessed January 16, 2018, <http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/nuh/evolve.htm>

<sup>100</sup> David Solomon Jalajel, *Islam and Biological Evolution* (Western Cape: University of the Western Cape, 2009), 149–156.

<sup>101</sup> Nidhal Guessoum, *Islam’s Quantum Question: Reconciling Muslim Tradition and Modern Science* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 323–324.

<sup>102</sup> Rana Dajani, “Evolution and Islam: Is There a Contradiction?” Paper presented at Islam and Science: Muslim Responses to Science’s Big Questions, London and Islamabad, 2016.

<sup>103</sup> Muhammad Sultan Shah, *Evolution and Creation*, 168.

<sup>104</sup> Muhammad Iqbal, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam* 12<sup>th</sup> Edition (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 2012), 83.

<sup>105</sup> Marwa Elshakry, *Reading Darwin in Arabic, 1860–1950* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 175.

<sup>106</sup> T. O. Shavanas, *Islamic Theory of Evolution: The Missing Link between Darwin and the Origin of Species* (USA: Brainbowpress, 2010), 153–160.

<sup>107</sup> Adel Ziadat, *Western Science in the Arab World* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1986), 94–95.

<sup>108</sup> Alper Bilgil, “An Ottoman Response to Darwinism: Ismail Fenni on Islam and Evolution”, *British Journal for the History of Science* 48, no. 4 (2015): 565–582.

The purpose of this simple summary was to show that a diversity of opinions exists amongst Muslims. Their views differ depending on how they have managed the epistemic tug of war between science, Islamic hermeneutics, and their metaphysical commitments. The question of whether there actually is an inherent conflict between evolution and Islam depends on how one manages the relationship between each of these domains; arriving at an educated opinion requires one to assess where these different positions come from and how they are argued for. Unfortunately, there have been obstacles that dilute the discussion and cause unnecessary confusion. The first of these obstacles is the wholesale adoption of the Christian fundamentalist arguments and reasoning against evolution by Muslims. There is undoubtedly a considerable amount of tension involved in Christianity's encounters with evolution; this is reflected by the rise of creationist movements, which have spread across the Western world and are particularly pervasive in America.<sup>109</sup> A similar anti-evolution impulse can also be seen in the Muslim world with the works of Adnan Oktar (more popularly known by his pen name, Harun Yahya), whose works are largely copied from Christian fundamentalist literature.<sup>110</sup> He brazenly misrepresents many points on evolution and, unfortunately, he has created a global network and an online platform where many of these misrepresentations can be found and are disseminated unreservedly as *the* Islamic understanding of evolution. This is one area where the Christian-atheist discourse has affected the Islamic-atheist discourse. Consider Jalajel's comments on this misstep:

Most of them focus their efforts less on theology and more on attacking the scientific credibility of evolution. In doing so, they tend to borrow their arguments from...American Creationist organizations. This is evident in the many inaccurate statements about evolution found in their writings that have been clearly been lifted from Creationist sources. For instance, they borrow the idea that there are no transitional forms in the fossil record, that all mutations are harmful, and that evolution somehow violates the Second Law of Thermodynamics. This group...seems motivated by the idea that evolution equates to atheism and a rejection of God's creative role in the universe.<sup>111</sup>

The second obstacle obfuscating the Muslim discussion on evolution is the wider problem of literalism now being adopted by a growing extent of the Muslim population, which it makes it difficult to imagine evolution ever being taken seriously on a large scale by Muslims (except, perhaps, by academics).<sup>112</sup> Even if it does become a widely held view, it is likely only to be accepted in the classroom or laboratory, without impinging on the Muslims' wider worldview, resulting in a fractured epistemology.<sup>113</sup>

As an illustration of the impracticality of purely literalist readings of scripture, consider the following hadith, found in Bukhari and Muslim (the two most authentic hadith canons and the primary textual authorities after the Qur'an), which is used to support the story of Adam as the father of mankind: the Prophet said, "Adam and Moses argued.

<sup>109</sup> Eugenie C. Scott, *Evolution vs. Creationism: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

<sup>110</sup> Harun Yahya's central book on evolution is *The Evolution Deceit: The Scientific Collapse of Darwinism and Its Ideological Background* (Istanbul: Global Yayincilik, 1999). See also: Damian A. Howard, *Being Human in Islam: The Impact of the Evolutionary Worldview* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2011), 9.

<sup>111</sup> Jalajel, *Islam and Biological Evolution*, 162. In the footnotes of this quote, Jalajel refers to parallels between Yahya's work and that of Christian fundamentalists.

<sup>112</sup> Nidhal Guessoum, "Religious Literalism and Science-Related Issues in Contemporary Islam", *Zygon* 45, no. 4 (2010): 817–840.

<sup>113</sup> Guessoum, *Islam's Quantum Question*, 347–355.

Moses said: ‘O Adam! You are our father, you frustrated our hope and caused our expulsion from Paradise’. Adam said: ‘You are Moses; God privileged you with His word and wrote for you with His own hand. Do you blame me for something God had predetermined for me forty years before my creation?’<sup>114</sup>

Bearing in mind that the very fact this hadith is found in both Bukhari and Muslim implies that its chain of transmission (*sanad*) is strong, which is usually considered sufficient evidence for it to be a trustworthy scripture, consider the following criticisms that have been levied against it:<sup>115</sup>

- (1) Moses addresses Adam, his father, by name and also condemns him, which runs counter to the etiquette that is required of a prophet in Islam;
- (2) Moses condemns Adam for something that God had already forgiven him for. This seems to be contrary to the behaviour expected of a prophet and runs counter to certain verses in the Qur’an;
- (3) Why did Moses blame Adam when it is explicitly mentioned in the Qur’an that it was Satan who lured Adam (and Eve) into making a mistake?

If these points cannot be dismissed offhand, this demonstrates that extra-evaluative principles are needed to discern the sensibility of the hadith, even though its chain of transmission may be sound. The point that I am trying to make is that even though hadiths in Bukhari and Muslim are to be found authentic in their transmission, that does not necessarily entail that the content is necessarily and automatically correct or that they can be taken at face value and interpreted in the absence of a solid hermeneutical foundation.

These two obstacles should be a cause for concern for the Muslim world, especially in light of the impact that the idea of evolution is likely to have on Muslim youth. The theory of evolution is a powerful narrative; it has dominated the academic world and whether they accept it or not, Muslim theologians need to acknowledge it as an established feature of the scientific enterprise that has trickled down to university and school settings around the world. There is overwhelming evidence that evolution of species has occurred over time and humans are one of its products.<sup>116</sup> Presenting it as a false narrative while simultaneously restricting Islamic hermeneutics to a very narrow literalistic reading of scripture may lead Muslim students, who are constantly being exposed to science over and above traditional religious education, to dismiss one’s arguments or even religion without further consideration.<sup>117</sup> Despite the clear necessity for further investigation, it is worrying that the limited surveys that have been put forward indicate that the majority of the Muslim world seems to be either very suspicious or apprehensive about critically engaging the concept of evolution.<sup>118</sup> In light of these points, I would like to caution against both the negligent dismissals of evolution on one extreme and the overzealous and wholesale adoption of

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<sup>114</sup> Bukhari (6684–6689).

<sup>115</sup> Israr Ahmad Khan, *Authentication of Hadith: Redefining The Criteria* (Herndon: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2010), 61–62.

<sup>116</sup> For an excellent and thorough review of evolution see Guessoum, *Islam’s Quantum Question*, 271–324.

<sup>117</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Life and Thought* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 11–15; Howard, *Being Human in Islam*, 120–156.

<sup>118</sup> See: Guessoum, *Islam’s Quantum Question*, 365–368; and Salman Hameed, “Making Sense of Islamic Creationism in Europe”, *Public Understanding of Science* 24, no. 4 (2015): 388–399.

evolution as whole, both scientifically and metaphysically, on the other. Both options may have serious theo-socio-pedagogical repercussions in the Muslim world if not taken seriously.

## 2.2 Philosophical Contentions

Philosophy has had a very intertwined relationship with Islamic theology, as is evidenced by the two main strands of philosophical thought found in the intellectual history of Islam. On the one hand, scholars such as al-Farabi and Ibn Rushd clung to an Aristotelian framework and tried to reinvigorate Islamic theology within that paradigm. On the other, scholars like Abu Hasan al-Ash'ari, the founder of the Ash'ari school, and Imam al-Ghazzali (also an Ash'ari) contributed to the construction of an authentic, Qur'anically inspired metaphysics of Islam under the field of *kalam*: discursive theology or Islamic scholasticism. Broadly construed, these were considered competing metaphysical perspectives and eventually the latter came to define Islamic orthodoxy, alongside the Maturidi school of thought. Though *kalam* would more appropriately be mentioned in the section of theology, I introduce and discuss it here because it is enmeshed with philosophy, and because it is necessary for addressing the questions raised by modern physics.

In the following excerpt, Nuh Keller gives a concise account of the necessity and role of *kalam* in the coming time:

The three main tasks of *kalam* consist in defining the contents of faith, showing that it contradicts neither logic nor experience, and providing grounds to be personally convinced of it, and these three are as relevant today as ever. First, the substantive knowledge of the *'aqida* each of us will die and meet God upon will remain a lasting benefit as long as there are Muslims. Second, demographers expect mankind to attain close to universal literacy within fifty years. Members of world faiths may be expected to question their religious beliefs for coherence, logicity, applicability, and adequacy, and the work of *Ahl al-Sunna* scholars will go far to show that one does not have to hang up one's mind to enter Islam. Third, universal communication will make comparisons between religions inevitable. Blind imitation of ethnic religious affiliation will become less relevant to people around the globe, and I personally believe Islam has stronger theological arguments for its truth than other world religions. Indeed, Islam is a sapiential religion, in which salvation itself rests not on vicarious atonement as in Christianity, or on ethnic origin as in Judaism, but on personal knowledge. Whoever knows that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is the Messenger of God is by that very fact saved. So in the coming century, three areas of *kalam*'s legacy will remain especially relevant for Muslims: first, the proofs for the existence of God from necessity and design, second, the rebuttal of the heresy of scientific reductionism and atheism, and third, promoting tolerance among Muslims.<sup>119</sup>

To better appreciate some of Keller's points, it will be useful to note the distinction between *jalil al-kalam* and *daqiq al-kalam*. The former can be understood as the "contents of faith" mentioned above, in which the metaphysical doctrines of Islam, such as the nature of God, His angels, and scriptural books, are reasoned, articulated, and defended. The latter can be defined as speculative metaphysics or natural theology; it takes up the characteristic understanding of the relationship of God with the natural world, including the metaphysical questions of time, space, and motion.<sup>120</sup> While *jalil al-kalam* plays a

<sup>119</sup> "Kalam and Islam", accessed 10<sup>th</sup> January 2018, <http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/nuh/kalam.htm>

<sup>120</sup> Basil Altaie, *God, Nature, and the Cause: Essays on Islam and Science* (Abu Dhabi: Kalam Research and Media), 10-11.

crucial role in defining the central tenets of Islamic faith,<sup>121</sup> it is *daqiq al-kalam* that will be referenced in examining some of the forthcoming issues, particularly when scrutinizing the interface between science and philosophy.

### 2.2.1 *Arguments for the Existence of God*

Various arguments for the existence of God have been utilized by Muslim theologians and are still being used to this day.<sup>122</sup> The two most famous of these are the *kalam* cosmological argument and the argument from design. The former has been championed by a Christian philosopher, William Lane Craig,<sup>123</sup> in contemporary times, and the latter has been argued for by various supporters (though it takes various differing forms).<sup>124</sup>

As an example of the way in which such arguments are demonstrated, consider the following syllogism:

Premise 1: Whatever begins to exist has a cause

Premise 2: The universe began to exist

Conclusion: Therefore, the universe has a cause

This is a simple deductive argument based on the rules of logic. Each premise is argued for through rational investigation (sometimes as a parenthetical dialectic of points and counter arguments in the middle of the argument) and usually supported with empirical studies. For example, the scientific evidence for the big bang is a relatively common crutch for the argument above because it empirically points to the idea that universe did actually have a starting point.

I will not delve into the strength of these two arguments, as this has been covered extensively elsewhere.<sup>125</sup> However, I would like to highlight their role within an Islamic framework. Both of these arguments are based on natural theology rather than revealed or systematic theology. Their broad mechanism involves observing specific features of nature and tracing them back to their origins. Morals lead to a moral Lawgiver, creation to Creator and design to Designer. Individually or cumulatively, these are necessary features of God (Allah) as described in Islam, but they are not sufficient. All of these arguments can equally be applied to the God of Christianity as well as Judaism. Thus, jumping from creator or designer to Allah seems to be a bit of an imaginative leap. I call this problem

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<sup>121</sup> The following are excellent references on *jalil al-kalam* arranged from basic reading to advanced: M. A. S. Abdul-haleem, "Qur'an and Hadith", in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 19–32; Amjad H. Hussain, *The Muslim Creed: A Contemporary Theological Study* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2016); and Muhammad Salih Farfur, *The Beneficial Message and the Definitive Proof in the Study of Theology* (London: Azhar Academy, 2010).

<sup>122</sup> Ayman Shihadeh, "The Existence of God", in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 197–217.

<sup>123</sup> William Lane Craig, *The Kalam Cosmological Argument* (London: Macmillan Press, 1979).

<sup>124</sup> William A. Dembski, *The Design Inference: Eliminating Chance Through Small Probabilities* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Stephen C. Meyer, *Signature in the Cell: DNA and the Evidence for Intelligent Design* (New York: HarperOne, 2009); Michael J. Behe, *The Edge of Evolution: The Search for the Limits of Darwinism* (New York: Free Press, 2007). For more nuanced anthologies on the subject, see: William A. Dembski and Michael Ruse, *Debating Design: From Darwin to DNA* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); and Neil A. Manson, *God and Design: The Teleological Argument and Modern Science* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>125</sup> William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland, *The Blackwell Companion to Natural Theology* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012); Edward Feser, *Five Proofs for the Existence of God* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2017).

the ‘theological gap’.<sup>126</sup> There must be extra-evaluative principles in which Muslims can anchor themselves sufficiently in order to maintain a clearer sense of what Islam means by God and what natural theology alone can prove. These extra-evaluative principles to which I am referring come directly from Islamic scripture. To determine the existence of God through scripture may seem tautological: the Qur’an is the word of God, the Qur’an says that God exists; because the Qur’an says that God exists, God exists. Herein lies the crucial distinction between Islam and the other Abrahamic faiths: in Islam the scripture itself provides the epistemological grounding for the existence of God, not because it says so, but because it is itself a miracle that proves its own veracity. The Qur’an, as it was revealed in Arabic, constitutes a literary miracle and it challenges anyone to reformulate such a work with the same literary mastery if they can. If atheists truly want to negate the Islamic worldview, then this is the heart of the debate that they seem to have missed entirely.

This issue will be addressed further later in the monograph, but at this stage I would like to draw attention to three points. First, Muslims need to be cautious both with over-relying on arguments from natural theology, and also falsely equivocating between the Creator whose existence is proven through those arguments and God as described in the Islamic scriptures. This is not to say that natural theology is not important, as even the Qur’an implicitly makes such arguments.<sup>127</sup> Further, naturally theology is incredible important for dispelling erroneous beliefs about the nature of God, e.g. God cannot be temporal. What I am suggesting is that Muslims treat them as secondary to and not above the actual substance of the Islamic worldview. Of course, atheists will not accept treating revelation as a valid presupposition in their engagement with theists, and rightfully so; this is why natural theology is a popular alternative in the first place. However, it is not sufficient to replace the evidentiary role played by Islamic scripture in establishing the existence of God as described therein. This may provide some food for thought as to how Muslims can or should reframe their engagement in these debates to make the Qur’an more central to their approach. Second, there is no doubt that Christian philosophers and theologians have dominated the public sphere, with booksellers like Amazon flooded with a plethora of books written against atheism on the philosophy of religion and science. The Muslim counterparts of these publications, specifically English language works, are insubstantial in comparison. Naturally, Muslim thinkers and apologists involved in the atheism-theism discourse will have to resort to consulting a lot of literature written by Christians. Here, Muslims should be careful in adopting problems faced by Christian theologies as their own. For example, the problem of evil is a big cause for concern in Christianity, because of that the theological commitment to God as Absolute Good.<sup>128</sup> Muslims have no such constraint: in traditional Islamic orthodoxy more emphasis is placed on God as being All-wise. Moreover, God is amodal from the human perspective—the nature of His being is beyond the ability of the human intellect to grasp—He thus transcends moral evaluation

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<sup>126</sup> For a good critical analysis of natural theology, see: C. Stephen Evans, *Natural Signs and Knowledge of God: A New Look at Theistic Arguments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1–17; Charles Taliaferro, “Philosophical Critique of Natural Theology”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Natural Theology*, ed. Russell Re Manning (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 385–396.

<sup>127</sup> For example, see Qur’an (52:35–38), where God asks readers to contemplate on the creation of the universe.

<sup>128</sup> For an example of this case, see: Terence Fretheim, *Creation Untamed: The Bible, God, and Natural Disasters* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010).

from the limited human viewpoint.<sup>129</sup> Yet, we still see some literature in which Muslim thinkers either pose or seem to suggest that theodicy is a serious problem for Muslims,<sup>130</sup> which is not the case. Third, Muslims should not ignore the spiritual dimension of their faith, which opens a level of reality that transcends the domains of the senses and rationality. Per the Islamic worldview, the human is a primordial spirit that can ascend to realms where God can be experienced directly, supra-empirically and supra-rationally. I shall touch more on this in a later section.

### 2.2.2 *Scientism*

Though science is the most resourceful tool atheists have against religion,<sup>131</sup> it is scientism that actually shapes their entire perspective. Scientism, broadly construed, is the belief that all intellectual disciplines must be subject to the natural sciences to be able to achieve the license to properly interpret reality. In this vein, Stenmark provides some useful distinctions on the various forms of scientism. For our specific purposes, these include epistemic scientism, ontological scientism, and existential scientism.<sup>132</sup> Epistemic scientism refers to the position that the only reliable and valid method by which we can make claims about reality is through the scientific method; all else needs to be marginalised or excluded. Ontological scientism refers to the idea that reality consists only of those things that are knowable through the scientific method. In its extreme form, it invokes a naturalistic philosophy, which is the belief that all of reality can be reduced to and can only be explained by physical elements, including free will, thoughts, and morality. Thus, science does not merely answer the questions that religion seems to have answers for, it also replaces religion *in toto*; this is existential scientism. It is this specific and radical position within scientism that is predominant among atheists.

Under this narrative, Lawrence Krauss, whom I introduced earlier as falling into the second wave of atheism, argues that since the universe has a net sum of zero energy, this implies that the universe literally came from ‘nothing’. Consider Harris’ views on the matter: he claims, using the famous experiment of Benjamin Libet—a pioneer in human consciousness—among others, that our brains have made decisions about a presented matter prior to our ‘conscious’ decisions. He concludes from this that we do not really have free will: “What I will do next, and why, remains, at bottom, a mystery—one that is fully determined by the prior state of the universe and the laws of nature”.<sup>133</sup> A more extreme case of existential scientism, and one that is strongly emphasised by Dawkins, is when

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<sup>129</sup> Khalid Blankinship, “The Early Creed”, in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed. Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 33–54; Tim Winters, “Islam and the Problem of Evil”, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil*, ed. Chad Meister and Paul K. Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 230–248.

<sup>130</sup> In the context on the theory of evolution, Guessoum seems to highlight or suggest that evolution raises problems for Islamic theology because of the large amount of suffering connected to the killing of the vast number of animals that die in the process. See Nidhal Guessoum, “Islamic Theological Views on Darwinian Evolution”, in *Religion: Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, (n.p., 2016), 1–25.

<sup>131</sup> “The problem with the science in the books and lectures of the New Atheists is that it is not pure science—the objective pursuit of knowledge about the universe. Rather, it is ‘science with a purpose’: the purpose of disproving the existence of God.” See: Amir D. Aczel, *Why Science Does Not Disprove God* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), 18.

<sup>132</sup> Mikael Stenmark, *Scientism: Science, Ethics and Religion* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 1–17.

<sup>133</sup> Harris, *Free Will*, 40. The weakness in this perspective becomes exposed once we refer to quantum physics as the ontological grounding of the universe. If the universe is objectively indeterminate, this contradicts Harris’ deterministic picture.



atheists explain away God by resorting to the multiverse theory:<sup>134</sup> since our universe is one of a vast number of universes, each with their own laws and fundamental constants, our universe was bound to come into existence. *Some* of these views are in obvious contradiction with Islamic theology, but it should be emphasized that they are not scientific claims. These are interpretations of specific scientific data that are metaphysically loaded with a naturalistic worldview, all of which is improperly labelled as scientific.<sup>135</sup> It could even be argued that some of these claims are pseudo-science. The multiverse theory, for instance, has no shred of significant empirical evidence: it is largely based on the technical mathematics of string theory, which seems to unify general relativity and quantum physics. The by-product of this theory requires eleven unobservable dimensions.<sup>136</sup> It is for this reason that some have questioned whether theoretical physics actually falls under science or whether it requires an idiosyncratic standard of its own as a discipline.<sup>137</sup> The central point here is that scientism is sometimes put forward as science, and secretly carries metaphysical underpinnings that are anti-theological (atheological?) and may not be easily discernible to the layman. For these reasons, having an alternative metaphysical framework that can rest within an Islamic worldview is something that requires constant and consistent attention as well as serious investigation of the permeating interfaces of science, philosophy, and theology, as we shall see in the next section.

### 2.2.3 *Quantum Mechanics and Occasionalism*

Under a naturalistic worldview, God is deemed redundant—an unnecessary add-on that does not explain anything. This is related to the modern contentions about how God actually ‘fits’ into our universe. In response to these specific questions, though not to the broader category of atheistic arguments against religion, there have been recent publications calling for the revival of *kalam* or its revision in order to help Muslims engage with these contemporary issues, and, I think, rightfully so. Basil Altaie makes a noteworthy remark:

Living in a world where the value of science is becoming more and more relevant for societal as well as individual progress, it becomes a rather important task to revive a rational approach and to try to realize a scientifically viable system of thought in the organization of modern Islamic thinking. Thus, we now need to discuss the possibility for such a venture to be realized in a practical program that may

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<sup>134</sup> “If we are going to permit the extravagance of a multiverse, so the argument runs, we might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb and allow a God. Aren’t they both equally unparsimonious ad hoc hypotheses, and equally unsatisfactory?...The key difference between the genuinely extravagant God hypothesis and the apparently extravagant multiverse hypothesis is one of statistical improbability. The multiverse, for all that is extravagant, is simple. God, or any intelligent, decision-taking, calculating agent, would have to be highly improbable in the very same statistical sense as the entities he is supposed to explain. The multiverse may seem extravagant in sheer number of universes. But if each one of those universes is simple in its fundamental laws, we are still not postulating anything highly improbable. The very opposite has to be said of any kind of intelligence.” Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 175–176.

<sup>135</sup> On rightly demarcating between science’s epistemology and its hidden metaphysical commitments, Golshani observes “...it is not the methodology of science that marks it as sacred or secular; rather, it is the underlying metaphysical basis that bring in such categorization.” Mehdi Golshani, “Sacred Science vs Secular Science”, in *Science and Religion in a Postcolonial World: Interfaith Perspectives*, ed. Zainal Abidin Bagir (Adelaide: ATF Press, 2005), 77–102.

<sup>136</sup> Aczel recalls trying to get Brian Greene, a well-known string theorist, to answer on the nature of these the alternative universes. His response was along the lines of: “The maths tells us so, and I believe in the math”. Aczel, *Why Science Does Not Disprove God*, 139.

<sup>137</sup> Helge Kragh, *Higher Speculations: Grand Theories and Failed Revolutions in Physics and Cosmology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 355–367.

substantially contribute to transforming Islamic thought and successfully accomplishing a realm of new ideas and directions.<sup>138</sup>

Keeping this in mind, interpreting the ‘fuzzy’ ontology of quantum physics has created some very interesting problems for Islamic theology. To appreciate some of these issues, it is worth mentioning Abner Shimony’s concise summary of what quantum mechanics entails:<sup>139</sup>

- (1) Objective chance—the chance character of outcomes is a property of the physical situation itself, not a consequence of the observer’s ignorance. It presupposes objective indefiniteness;
- (2) Objective indefiniteness—there are eventualities that do not have a definite truth or falsity, independent of the observer;
- (3) Objective probability—there is a definite probability of finding an eventuality to be true, and definite probability of finding it to be false, depending only on the state of the system and on the eventuality itself, not on the knowledge or beliefs of the observer. This objective probability is embodied in the wave function, and connected with a notion of potentiality;
- (4) Potentiality—eventualities are potential. There are procedures by which a given potentiality, initially indefinite, is actualized. A quantum state is a network of potentialities;<sup>140</sup>
- (5) Entanglement—there can exist situations involving two (or more) states, say *a* and *b*, in which neither state *a* nor state *b* are actualized, but state *a* + *b* is;
- (6) Quantum nonlocality—we observe the correlated actualization of potentialities over spacelike intervals (intervals which cannot be connected by light signals), which implies that the important entities (‘wholes’) may be nonlocal (that is, their various components may be widely separated in space and time).

This is a significant departure from the classical Newtonian paradigm that reigned for nearly two centuries before quantum mechanics came to the fore. The biggest change and the one relevant for our purposes is the loss of determinate causality, which is replaced by indeterminate causality. Does God actually play dice?

Altaie seems to have provided a reasonable metaphysical framework by which God’s divine intervention can neatly fall in line with the new metaphysics of quantum mechanics.<sup>141</sup> Note that in traditional *kalam*—specifically, the Ash‘ari perspective—nature is composed of a fundamental unit. This unit is a combination of the *jawhar*, which is the abstract entity—the invisible scaffold that manifests into concretion only when it is combined by either a single or multiple properties, that is, an accident. Time is also discrete in the Ash‘ari worldview, and since no property can occupy two instantaneous moments consecutively, the universe is in a continuous process of recreation (of existence and then non-existence and back again repetitively, but at a rate impossible to notice, thus giving

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<sup>138</sup> Altaie, *God, Nature, and the Cause*, 163–164.

<sup>139</sup> Abner Shimony, “Conceptual Foundations of Quantum Mechanics”, in *The New Physics*, ed. Paul Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 373–395.

<sup>140</sup> Bear in mind that these potentialities have prior probabilities attached to them. Some are more likely to occur than others.

<sup>141</sup> Altaie, *God, Nature, and the Cause*, 85–117.

the illusion of continuity), otherwise known as occasionalism. Under this worldview, the potential states are an ensemble of momentary states in suspension until God's will is enforced and a particular reality is eventualized. This also conveniently accommodates the Ash'ari's concept of acquisition (*kasb*), in which free will coexists with the potential states: when a person makes a decision, God can choose to actualize what that person intended, in which case they 'acquire' that act.<sup>142</sup> Miracles are also possible in this picture: they are simply very low probability events, but probable nonetheless, which can be actualized by God. By extension, this also nullifies the idea of chance and blind forces of nature, which atheists seem to impose on the scientific discourse.<sup>143</sup>

In his exciting upcoming book, *Kalam Atomism and Modern Cosmology*,<sup>144</sup> Mehmet Bulgen furnishes us with another example of how the historical inventory of *kalam* can be reinvigorated to engage with modern developments. In it, he discusses the fissure that has ruptured modern physics: general relativity seems to be the predominant expression for large-scale bodies, but fails to represent the microscopic world, while quantum physics successfully captures the microscopic, realm but not the macroscopic world. In light of this split, physicists are searching for the theory of everything: something to satisfactorily describe both realms. The current contenders that seem to bridge these two worlds are M-world theory and Loop Quantum Gravity theory, but these are currently on a placeholder status until further empirical investigations can (if ever) clearly confirm which one is more representative of reality. Nonetheless, if assumed to be tentatively true, what is surprising is that both of these theories suggest that the architecture of the universe is discrete. This would confirm the discretized view of nature as held by the *mutakallimun* (practitioners of *kalam*). However, Bulgen also notes that there are some major differences between the fundamental unit as proposed by *kalam* and that of modern physics. For example, the *mutakallimun* believed that the fundamental unit (*jawhar*) is entirely the same everywhere, which is in stark contradiction with the current Standard Model, which accommodates different-sized fundamental particles. There are other differences, but this is sufficient to prove my point: modern physics is opening new avenues and, in order to engage with them, *kalam* is in need not only of revival but of reconstruction in light of contemporary developments.

Though these are refreshing perspectives that need to be followed by more research, these are still early days and Muslim scholars are still debating and discussing the validity of such approaches<sup>145</sup> as well as of competing interpretations of modern quantum mechanics.<sup>146</sup> Nonetheless, the point of showcasing these two different works is to demonstrate that Muslims have an intellectual repository, already existent within their tradition,

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<sup>142</sup> This obviously solves the 'mechanics' of how free will works through God's intervention, but the larger question of how free will makes sense given God's absolute power on one hand and God's absolute foreknowledge on the other still remains a difficult issue.

<sup>143</sup> One of the problems with evolution is the inclusion of chance in the selection process. In mainstream Islamic theology, there is nothing that God does not know and nothing can escape His knowledge. Under the framework developed by Altaie, if God's foreknowledge seems to be preserved, while evolution is maintained as a possible mechanism for the material development of the human race. Furthermore, this also showcases the reason why theologians were more interested in physics/metaphysics rather than biology, because it undergirds all the other sciences.

<sup>144</sup> Mehmet Bulgen, *Kalam Atomism and Modern Cosmology* (Abu Dhabi: Kalam Research and Media, Upcoming).

<sup>145</sup> In a discussion on the relevance of *kalam* at a conference we both attended, Dr. Nidhal Guessoum mentioned his scepticism about whether concepts of *kalam* from antiquity can be used at all given the developments of modern physics.

<sup>146</sup> In my personal communications with Mehdi Golshani, he mentioned that the indeterminate interpretation of quantum physics is axiomatically incorrect and thus he is fundamentally at odds with Altaie. Rather, he believes that a deterministic approach of Bohmian mechanics is the way forward. See Altaie, *God, Nature, and the Cause*, 80.

which needs to be revisited and reformulated to provide an alternative theistic framework to the atheistic and naturalistic worldviews predominant today. Through these, modern science and Islamic metaphysics can be potentially brought into harmony.

### 2.3 Theological Contentions

In this section I will briefly highlight two important points: the first is the relationship between hermeneutics and jurisprudence, and how it can easily be exposed to the atheists' rebukes of Islam if not carefully sifted through. The second is a simple reminder of the neglect of the spiritual dimension, which should not be forgotten in the context of Muslim engagement with this discourse.

#### 2.3.1 *Hermeneutics and Jurisprudence*

The theological concerns that atheists have are problems of major proportions. As I have highlighted earlier, the central issue within the theological realm is a lack of familiarity with the principles of jurisprudence and hermeneutics. As noted by Abdullah Saeed, we are facing the problem of atomization wherein single verses are picked out of their collective thematic, linguistic, and historical background.<sup>147</sup> If a physics textbook was interpreted similarly, then physics would become a distorted enterprise. More so than the Qur'an, the hadith literature poses a great challenge. The Qur'an has been determined, through the unanimous consensus of Islamic scholarly authority, to have the highest level of transmission (*mutawatir*), but only one to four hundred hadiths are agreed upon by consensus to be on the same level.<sup>148</sup> The rest are divided between well-known hadiths (*mashhur*) and single narrations (*ahad*) which are discerned, filtered, and scrutinised through various and extensive methodologies of hadith verification. These methodologies are largely unknown to atheists and the general Muslim community. Atabek Shukurov, an expert Hanafi scholar, provides an interesting example in his book on the principles of hadith classification of how the failure to apply this methodology can lead to flawed interpretations:

Take the famous hadith of Ibn Umar which is narrated in Sahih al-Bukhari: "There is bad luck in three things: women, houses and transport". The way this hadith has been narrated is very demeaning to women, as they are considered bad luck. It also encourages superstition which is an anathema to Islam. The Sahaba presented this hadith to Aisha who said "may God forgive Ibn Umar, he did not lie, but the Prophet [peace be upon him] was talking about the time of ignorance [before Islam] and the things people used to believe". Therefore, the hadith expressed views that were diametrically opposed to the true Islamic position.<sup>149</sup>

This is one of the simpler examples in which confusion can arise from within hadith literature; it also highlights how even one of the most authoritative texts after the Qur'an—Bukhari's collection of hadith—is not immune to misunderstandings, and thus must be studied in extensive detail before what it contains can be properly interpreted.<sup>150</sup> It is no

<sup>147</sup> See: Abdullah Saeed, *Interpreting the Quran: Towards a Contemporary Approach* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>148</sup> Atabek Shukurov An Nasafi, *Hanafi Principles of Testing Hadith* (UK: Avicenna Academy, 2015), 27.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>150</sup> See: Jonathon A. C. Brown, *Misquoting Muhammad: The Challenges and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy* (London: Oneworld, 2014); Jonathon A. C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (London: One World, 2009); Jonathon A. C. Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhari and Muslim: The Formation and Function of the Sunni Hadith Canon* (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

surprise, then, that Muslims and non-Muslims alike—the laity at large—are facing difficulty in recognizing how to disentangle the various aspects of ‘difficult scripture’.

The issue is compounded by the widespread problem of literalism, which is reducing or forcing scripture into a black and white picture and causing significant levels of regression in modern scholarship. Central to this movement is Saudi Arabia’s rigid doctrine of Salafism or Wahhabism, which zealously follows and stresses externally imposed ritual enactments, sometimes going to extreme lengths to secure only this at the expense of life itself. For example, there was a globally recognized tragedy in which a few school girls were not allowed to leave their burning school’s premises because they did not have the proper clothing on. Unfortunately, none of the girls made it out alive.<sup>151</sup> In fear of such rigidity, there are constant eruptions and outcries having to do with capital punishment (*hadd*), women’s rights, freedom of speech, and the generally regressive portrayal of the Muslim worldview in the media and by atheists and secularists. As has been very strongly argued by Khaled Abou El Fadl, the current state of Islamic jurisprudence is that it remains strung between a colonized past and a heightened sensitivity to modern secular pressures, thus the contextual approaches or ‘Islamic reforms’ are largely seen as a means of bending the Muslim will to foreign powers. This state, when paired with a global nostalgia for Islam’s Golden Age, paves the way for the rise of reactionary literalism and fundamentalism.<sup>152</sup> Unfortunately, this religio-political dementia, compounded by the inability of most Muslims to apply the critical filters necessary to properly interpret the Qur’an and hadith literature, has made it all too easy for atheists to demean, rebuke, and condemn Islam’s sacred scriptures.<sup>153</sup>

### 2.3.2 *Spirituality*

Muslims have a long and dynamic tradition that stresses the spiritual component of human existence as a valid epistemological gateway to God in addition to the empirical and logical means of attaining knowledge of Him. An important component of the atheist movement is to either reject the spiritual aspect of the human being or to reduce it to mere brain signals. Thus, spirituality is not considered to be a valid epistemic criterion on their account. Muslims should acknowledge this point of departure as a feature of the dialogue between atheists and theists, but they should not forget that the spirit is the fundamental core of human existence within the Islamic framework. Furthermore, they should bear in mind that the nourishment of the spirit, mind, and body occurs within the inseparable and triangular balance between jurisprudence, Sufism, and *kalam*: one cannot be raised above the other, nor can one dispose of any of the three:

If it is the case that an implicit tension between body, mind, and spirit provided a *point d’appui* for secularist tendencies that ultimately allowed the collapse of Christian commitment in Europe and the fragmentation of the Western self, then it is necessary to acknowledge that through modern influences, the same fissiparous tendency is shaping some of the most significant contemporary Islamic societies... The modern turn away from Kalam, and Sufism and from the texts of the great synthetic renewals that reintegrated Islam’s various disciplines, has produced a fragmented and impoverished Muslim intel-

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<sup>151</sup> BBC News, “Saudi Police ‘Stopped’ Fire Rescue,” accessed on 11<sup>th</sup> August 2017, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle\\_east/1874471.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/1874471.stm).

<sup>152</sup> Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

<sup>153</sup> Relevant to this is my upcoming article. See: Shoaib Ahmed Malik, Hermeneutics of New Atheism: Quran and Hadiths on Trial, *Journal of Quranic Sciences*. In Press (expected in 2020).

lectuality and spiritual habitus, which, one may foretell, will not long resist the same disenchanting tendencies that caused the atrophy of European Christianity<sup>154</sup>

Furthermore, lest some Muslims get carried away by the modern trajectory of scientism or by New Age spiritualities, Eagleton's advice about the effects of atheism on spirituality remains pertinent:

There are also traces of the transcendent in the bogus spirituality of some postmodern cultures...It comes as no surprise that Scientology, packaged Sufism, off-the-peg occultism and ready-to-serve transcendental meditation should figure as fashionable pastimes among the super-rich, or that Hollywood should turn its eyes to Hinduism...The point of spirituality is to cater for needs that one's stylist or stockbroker cannot fulfil. Yet all this reach-me-down otherworldliness is really a form of atheism. It is a way of feeling uplifted without the gross inconvenience of God.<sup>155</sup>

## 2.4 Sociological Concerns

Though I have already examined some of the explanations provided by Muslim atheists to justify leaving Islam, here I will briefly look at some of the sociological elements that may be involved in their doing so. There are two central references that I will use to examine some of these points: *The Apostates*<sup>156</sup> by Simon Cottee and *Arabs without God*<sup>157</sup> by Brian Whitaker. The former is an expose of a handful of organized viewpoints of ex-Muslim respondents' reasons for leaving Islam in the Western context, while the latter focuses on the Middle Eastern context, thus together they provide a somewhat holistic overview. Both authors point out a multitude of common denominators between the two contexts. These include bad personal experiences such as losing a loved one, and thus reduced faith in God's omnipotence and eventually His existence; spiritual alienation—feeling distanced from God because God did not answer their prayers and subsequently losing faith; reactions to repulsive political events such as 9/11 and the London bombings; exposure to alternative ideologies, including other religions, philosophies, and scientific theories that seem to conflict with Islam, like evolution; and scriptural inerrancy, which encompass controversial hadiths and verses in the Qur'an. A key difference, however, seems to be in the lack of validation of the atheistic identity in the Middle East: while Western countries are much more tolerant to several positions of identity, including intellectual and religious orientations, the Middle East seems to be much more restrictive of atheists and disbelief amongst its religious, particularly its Muslim, adherents. Whitaker makes this issue abundantly clear:

Arab non-believers face two separate but related struggles. One is their dispute with religion itself; the other is with societies and governments that refuse to recognise their disbelief. This broader struggle for personal rights—freedom of thought, freedom of expression, freedom of conscience, and so on—is one that they share with millions of religious Arabs too, especially religious minorities. Anyone who does not confirm to whatever happens to the local religious orthodoxy is liable to fall victim to blasphemy and apostasy laws or sectarian prejudices. The irony of this is that while believers and non-believers are

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<sup>154</sup> Tim Winters, "Education as 'Drawing Out': The Forms of Islamic Reason", in ed. Nadeem A. Memon and Mujaddad Zaman *Philosophies of Islamic Education: Historical Perspectives and Emerging Discourses* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 26–42.

<sup>155</sup> Eagleton, *Culture and the Death of God*, 191–192.

<sup>156</sup> Simon Cottee, *The Apostates: When Muslims Leave Islam* (London: Hurt and Company, 2015).

<sup>157</sup> Brian Whitaker, *Arabs Without God: Atheism and Freedom of Belief in the Middle East* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2017).

on the opposite sides where religious ideas are concerned they may also find themselves on the same side in the struggle for freedom of belief.<sup>158</sup>

A factor common to both contexts, which inevitably makes the situation worse, is the lack of support and the guilt that some respondents bore when they decided to tell or had already told their parents and friends about their leaving the faith. In the case of one respondent, her mother did not actually care about her daughter's reasons for leaving Islam, but rather was worried about how this would reflect badly on her.<sup>159</sup> This example shows how, in various contexts, Islam can become not just a personal choice but a badge of cultural and familial honour. In another situation, the respondent decided never to mention his atheism to his family because he was certain his mother would respond really badly.<sup>160</sup> For such reasons, the majority of the respondents would not discuss their theological issues with Islam with their family and friends; instead, they would seek information anonymously in cyberspace, which acted as a means not just to inquire when in doubt, but also to reaffirm them in their disbelief.

Whitaker further highlights how some theologians have also contributed towards the growing levels of atheism by issuing comical religious edicts (*fatwas*) that are devoid of reason. Examples include the nullification of marriage (not just as an isolated, prohibitive ruling, but a general one) when a couple has sex naked, imposing gender segregation on vegetables by claiming that tomatoes are feminine and cucumbers are masculine and thus should be separated in grocery stores,<sup>161</sup> and always meeting new technologies with restriction due to extreme caution in the face of new developments, banning cameras and cellphones, for example, only to become more accepting later on.<sup>162</sup>

It should be obvious by now that there are a variety of factors that shape the individual's path to becoming an atheist. Though a Muslim can be set on the road to disbelief by the intellectual arguments against Islam or by their own personal experiences, it is the ultimately the intellectual material—the work of Dawkins and Hitchens are most commonly referred to, but the others are also mentioned—that eventually consolidates the respondent's identity as an atheist:

Reading the work of atheists and agnostics was...a fundamentally validating experience for respondents. Their own intuitions were correct. They were sound. Their doubts had substance...And this recognition empowered them to move forward and to finally renounce Islam. It gave them the self-confidence to disavow: because it legitimized their doubts. And with that legitimization, and newly found self-confidence, their sense of guilt and anxiety began to fade. They were surely right in doubting Islam, so there was no reason to feel guilty or anxious anymore: this is what they thought, although their feelings were not always in tune with this.<sup>163</sup>

In keeping the aforementioned points in mind, one cannot fail to notice how ignorance, literalism, and the cultural enshrinements of Islam (informed and/or acted upon by people

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 6. Accordingly, religious education is a hot topic in Middle Eastern countries. Unfortunately, religious instruction of Islam is very strongly impressed upon students while religious education as a broad discipline is not as welcome. I say unfortunately because if students are to have a solid grounding in Islam, they need to be able to understand and discuss alternative worldviews. Unfortunately, the former is usually chosen and the latter neglected, thus students remain insulated from interreligious and inter-philosophical discourse. See Whitaker, *Arabs Without God*, 149–151.

<sup>159</sup> Cottee, *The Apostates*, 48.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>161</sup> Whitaker, *Arabs Without God*, 38.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>163</sup> Cottee, *The Apostates*, 61.

around them) played some part in the lives of the ex-Muslims we looked at earlier. For example, Navabi attempted to commit suicide when he was a young boy because he was informed that all children who died below the age of fifteen would be guaranteed heaven;<sup>164</sup> Hirsi was always prevented from asking too many questions because it was perceived as being “feeble in faith”<sup>165</sup> and had her genitals mutilated at the age of five in order to become a “pure Muslim woman” as understood in her culture.<sup>166</sup> In *Leaving Islam*, Warraq collects testimonials from individuals who left Islam; among them was one Bangladeshi ex-Muslim who recalled how Muslims around him were happy because a Hindu student had been killed, justifying it as retaliation for the Muslims in India who were being killed; the act was further legitimized as being a form of *jihad* by some Muslim clerics.<sup>167</sup> Although I personally may not agree with atheism as a worldview, these experiences do strike an empathetic cord and also reveal the collective socio-pedagogical issues exacerbating the rising disbelief within Muslim communities.

### 3 Muslim Engagement

Muslims have been, in large part, reluctant to engage many of the arguments raised by atheists. A few exceptions can be noted, but there is one important caveat that should be mentioned first: as one author commented, “The atheism-theism debate is no longer confined to the alleged ivory towers of the academy, but occurring on Twitter or YouTube. This is a marked shift in context which has emerged in line with the public appeal of New Atheism”.<sup>168</sup> Given the new climate of religious discourse, it should be of no surprise to hear that the little Muslim representation that does exist in countering atheism is not necessarily comprised of academics. The most popular Muslim frontman for engaging with atheists, at least in the English-speaking world, is Hamza Andreas Tzortzis, a Greek-British revert known for being philosophically articulate and providing rational and coherent arguments for Islam.<sup>169</sup> He has debated with many atheists around the world, including reputable scholars such as philosopher of ethics Simon Blackburn, philosopher of religion Dr. Stephen Law, and theoretical physicist Lawrence Krauss. He has very recently published a book entitled *The Divine Reality: God, Islam and the Mirage of Atheism*, which is a culmination of a variety of arguments for the existence of God<sup>170</sup> and he is also a central spokesman for the Islamic Education and Research Association (iERA) in the UK.<sup>171</sup> Another established speaker is Abdullah Andalusi, also a revert from Christianity with Portuguese origins, based in the United Kingdom. His niche is conveying and defending Islam from a social, legal, and political perspective and thus he debates not only with atheists but secularists, humanists, and Muslim reformists as well. He is the

<sup>164</sup> Navabi, *Why There is No God*, 122.

<sup>165</sup> Hirsi, *Heretic*, 41.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 31–34.

<sup>167</sup> Warraq, *Leaving Islam*, 182–183.

<sup>168</sup> Gary Keogh, “Theology After New Atheism”, *New Blackfriars* 96, no. 1066 (2015): 743. For an excellent review on the problem of the mediation of knowledge between laity and Islamic scholars, see Jonathon A. C. Brown, “Is Islam Easy to Understand or Not? Salafis, The Democratization of Interpretation and the Need for the Ulema”, *Journal of Islamic Studies* 26, no. 2 (2015): 117–44.

<sup>169</sup> “Hamza Andreas Tzortzis”, accessed July 29, 2017, <http://www.hamzatzortzis.com/>.

<sup>170</sup> Hamza Andreas Tzortzis, *The Divine Reality: God, Islam and the Mirage of Atheism* (San Clemente: FB Publishing, 2016).

<sup>171</sup> “iERA: Conveying the Call”, accessed July 29, 2017, <https://www.iera.org/>.



co-founder of the Muslim Debate Initiative (MDI) and all of his talks and lectures can be found on the institution's online website.<sup>172</sup>

Both of these individuals have reached an international level of fame and have appeared on various TV networks and programs, and both are self-trained speakers who are trying to embody some sort of intellectual representation of Islam that is engaging with the criticisms directed towards it by atheists. This is not an attempt to discredit the work they have done, which is valuable, but the role they have taken up is a reflection of the intellectual state of the Muslim world: instead of having well-trained philosophers, scientists, and theologians at the forefront, we are resorting to the use of what I like to call 'middlemen'. This is a category of individuals in between the laity and fully established and recognised scholars; they have taken it upon themselves to fill a void that they think needs addressing. Indeed, confronting atheism is a collective obligation (*fard kifaya*) and these individuals, with the right intention, feel the impulse to address that concern. However, this has not always produced the most fruitful results: at times it has led to the articulation of certain opinions that were not thought out well enough due to some gaps in knowledge. For example, Tzortzis, alongside the iERA, was a leading proponent of the idea that there are scientific miracles in the Qur'an<sup>173</sup> (something also acknowledged by Andalusi in his lectures) only to then change his opinion apologetically in light of the heavy criticism received from the wider public. This then led the iERA to create their new workshop "The Failed Hypothesis".<sup>174,175</sup> As admitted by Tzortzis himself, this was a mistake that could have inadvertently led to people losing their faith if premised entirely on scientific miracles in the Qur'an, thus jeopardizing the integrity of the faith. A public declaration of the mistake and a retraction of the corresponding position is, of course, a highly commendable way to deal with this, and Tzortzis has since then reconceived his approach to the scientific miracles in the Qur'an, his position now being that there aren't any.<sup>176</sup> More fundamentally, scenarios like these beg the question of why experts in the wider academic Muslim community, who are respected in their diverse fields, are not stepping forward and contributing to the dialogue.

In addition to the media available online and through audio-visual content, there are only three books that provide an Islamic perspective in response to atheism. Alongside *The Divine Reality* (which stands out as the best book refuting atheism from the Islamic perspective currently), these include *God, Islam, and the Sceptic Mind: A Study on Faith, Religious Diversity, Ethics, and The Problem of Evil*,<sup>177</sup> which, to my knowledge, was the first book that dealt with the subject in the English-speaking world, albeit on an introductory level; and *Sam Harris and the End of Faith: A Muslim's Critical Response*,<sup>178</sup> which,

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<sup>172</sup> "The Muslim Debate Initiative", accessed July 29 2017, <https://thedebateinitiative.com/>.

<sup>173</sup> Hamza Andreas Tzortzis, "Embryology in the Quran: A Scientific-linguistic Analysis of Chapter 23", accessed July 28, 2017, [https://www.missionislam.com/science/Embryology\\_in\\_the\\_Quran\\_v2.pdf](https://www.missionislam.com/science/Embryology_in_the_Quran_v2.pdf)

<sup>174</sup> iERA, "Tackling the 'Failed Hypothesis' in Manchester", accessed July 29, 2017, <https://www.iera.org/tackling-failed-hypothesis-manchester/>.

<sup>175</sup> For an excellent critique on scientific miracles in the Quran, see: Nidhal Guessoum, *Islam's Quantum Question*, 141-76.

<sup>176</sup> Hamza Andreas Tzortzis, "Does the Quran Contain Scientific Miracles? A New Approach on how to Reconcile and Discuss Science in the Quran", accessed July 30, 2017, <http://www.hamzatzortzis.com/essays-articles/exploring-the-quran/does-the-quran-contain-scientific-miracles-a-new-approach/>.

<sup>177</sup> Saiyad Fareed Ahmad and Saiyad Salahuddin Ahmad, *God, Islam, and the Sceptic Mind: A Study on Faith, Religious Diversity, Ethics, and the Problem of Evil* (Kuala Lumpur: Blue Nile Publishing, 2004).

<sup>178</sup> Bill Whitehouse, *Sam Harris and the End of Faith: A Muslim's Critical Response* (Scotts Valley: CreateSpace, 2009).

it was pointed out, was the only response by a Muslim author of one of the article entries in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*. The same author observingly asks:

Given the fact that *The God Delusion* exists in unofficial electronic versions in Arabic (*wahm al-ilahi bi-qalam*) and in Farsi (*Pendar-e Khoda*) and as such distributed on the internet, what is the reception of Dawkins in countries where Islam is the predominant religion? How do non-Christian religious apologists fend off the ‘neo-atheistic’ criticism of their religion? In which regard—if any—does Christian apologetics differ from Muslim or Jewish apologetics?<sup>179</sup>

As this question intimates, almost every other book countering atheism from a theistic perspective is written by Christians, and these books easily number in the hundreds. In light of these points, it should be obvious that, although the Muslim response to atheism is not entirely non-existent, it is problematically insufficient in scope and substance and heavily marginalized.<sup>180</sup>

### 3.1 Ways Forward

The following are my suggestions for how the Muslim world needs to act going forward in order to have a more a serious presence in this particular discourse.

#### 3.1.1 *Interdisciplinary Platforms*

The first change that we need to focus on is creating platforms for interdisciplinary dialogue and education. The reason for this is that the intersection of science, philosophy, and Islamic studies is central to the atheism-theism discourse: if this nexus were removed, the discussion would be non-existent. Moreover, in the modern intellectual climate, it is no longer sufficient to be an isolated specialist. This is not a call to do away with specialized knowledge, but rather a reminder that specialization should not become a barrier to establishing a holistic and well-defined worldview. Indeed, there may be some overlap between the subjects, but the vastness of each field means that information learned at the periphery is no longer sufficient. When theologians speak unqualifyingly on matters of science, or vice versa, this not only causes frustrations on both sides, but also increases the potential for spreading erroneous views, which only diminishes the intellectual integrity of Muslims and muddies their interface with the wider public. For example, very recently there was a huge public backlash on social media against a Saudi cleric who was attempting to explain a static geocentric model of the solar system, but was backing this up solely using religious quotes from scholars in conjunction with some very weak logic instead of science.<sup>181</sup> The main moral of this episode (amongst others) is that Muslim scholars in all disciplines need to become more acquainted with each other in order to avoid making such absurd statements. There is a huge dissonance between the epistemological and the ontological ‘assertability’ of theology and science. In the absence of recognizing this fact, Muslims face the problem of epistemological precedence. Should Muslims take the Qur’an over the scientific enterprise as a source of knowledge? Or vice versa? Is there a third way? These are some of the many questions that need to be deliberated on and

<sup>179</sup> Zenk, “New Atheism”, 258.

<sup>180</sup> Similar observations have been made by Professor Nidhal Guessoum but more particularly in the context of the interface of science and religion. See his monograph, *Kalam’s Necessary Engagement with Modern Science*.

<sup>181</sup> John Hall, “Saudi Cleric Becomes Online Laughing Stock After Telling Student the Sun Rotates Around the Earth as Otherwise Planes Would Not be Able to Fly”, Mail Online, accessed 30 July, 2017, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2957414/Saudi-cleric-online-laughing-stock-telling-student-sun-rotates-Earth-planes-not-able-fly.html>.

discussed in depth, but in order to do this we need to create more penetrating interfaces such that science, philosophy, and Islamic studies are intertwined more than ever before.

Muslim scholars should also take cues from well-known Christian thinkers such as John Polkinghorne, Ian Barbour, Alister McGrath, Nancy Murphy, William Dembski, and Arthur Peacocke, who are contemporary figures, many of whom have multiple degrees, known widely for their work on science, religion, naturalism, and atheism. Christian communities also have a strong infrastructure in place for educational opportunities. One example is Biola University,<sup>182</sup> which, though primarily a missionary institute, can act as a model for Muslims. There, the three disciplines are endlessly connected and critically distilled for young graduates; nothing of this magnitude exists in the Muslim world. This is not to say that Muslims are starting from scratch. Cambridge Muslim College<sup>183</sup> and Zaytuna College<sup>184</sup> are two of a few great examples of Islamic institutions trying to reinvigorate Islamic studies by providing a much more holistic curriculum.<sup>185</sup> We also see institutions that are working on the level of academic research, such as *Kalam Research and Media* and the *Yaqeen Institute*,<sup>186</sup> run by Omar Suleiman.<sup>187</sup> This is hopefully the start to a renewal and revitalization of the Muslims' intellectual ethos, taking that process to a new magnitude and scope.

What I am suggesting here is not alien to the traditional practices of Islamic pedagogy. Hamza Karamali, a scholar who has had traditional seminary and modern institutional training, has written an extensive monograph detailing how traditional pedagogy involved a creative infusion of ancillary sciences, such as Arabic and logic; philosophical sciences such as the natural sciences and metaphysics; and scriptural sciences such as exegesis and *kalam*, such that scholars were well-versed, holistic in their knowledge and approach, and members of vibrant intellectual communities.<sup>188</sup> But he notes a growing historical division between the sciences:

This connection between the sciences of the next world and those of this world was broken with the onset of modernity and, for approximately the last three centuries, the religious sciences that were written in the context of the pre-modern world have continued to be taught with the same teaching texts and pedagogical techniques, whereas most of the pre-modern worldly sciences have been abandoned, all while the intellectual and social currents of the modern world have moved with constantly increasing speed further and further away from their pre-modern predecessors.<sup>189</sup>

Thus the need for a revival of the traditional *madrassa* is not straightforward:

The academic experience of the madrasa community was a sophisticated preservation of the “pure revelation” of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) in the philosophical and social vocabulary of the pre-modern world. That world no longer exists, the careers that madrasa graduates filled no longer exist, the society that they served no longer exists, the philosophy that they integrated with their

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<sup>182</sup> Biola University, accessed July 30, 2017, <https://www.biola.edu/>.

<sup>183</sup> Cambridge Muslim College, accessed March 6, 2018, <http://www.cambridgemuslimcollege.org/programmes/ba-islamicstudies/>.

<sup>184</sup> Zaytuna College, accessed March 6, 2018, <https://zaytuna.edu/>.

<sup>185</sup> For an excellent recent book that discusses elements of modern Islamic scholarship, see: Memon and Mujaddad Zaman, *Philosophies of Islamic Education*. One entry looks at Zaytuna College.

<sup>186</sup> Yaqeen, accessed July 30, 2017, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/en/homepage/>.

<sup>187</sup> This is not an exhaustive list.

<sup>188</sup> Hamza Karamali, “The Madrasa Curriculum in Context”, *Kalam Research and Media*, Monograph Series (12), 2017.

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

sciences no longer exists, and the academic community that collectively examined religious questions also no longer exists. But, the need for a religious education that would help Muslims keep their faith, practice it, and be spiritually changed by it does exist, more now than ever before, and how we use our scholarly heritage to meet this need is the urgent question of our time.<sup>190</sup>

Following from Karamali, Moad's points out another but relevant problem regarding the contemporary knowledge structures within the Muslim world:

For the most part, it seems, traditional circles of Islamic scholarship have tried to maintain the feudal exclusionary policy on discourse, expecting the general public to continue in a state of blissful *taqlid* ... The problem is that the modern public is not so provincial, even in the Muslim world. They demand an account of things, proofs, explanations, and the right to ask questions. Questions are forced on them, in fact. And in the vacuum left by traditional expectations on the general public to leave what supposedly does not concern them, fundamentalist movements have provided their own proofs and explanations. Between them and their secular modernist twins, they have persuaded large swaths of Muslim society that they have a monopoly on reason and evidence, and that the Islamic tradition is mere superstition, with no rational basis in either science or religion. The problem is that the fundamentalist logic is weak and impoverished. It eventually leads full circle to secularism in the metaphysical sense. But for the modern Muslim of the intellectual middle class, some reason is better than none, and the reason and logic of Islamic tradition has been locked away in Ibn Rushd's ivory tower. So what is happening? The tension of trying to maintain the feudal social and discursive structure in the political realm, under modern conditions of education and communication, has turned the old traditional monarchy system into a crushing military dictatorship locked in a death match against radical ideologues.

... In the case of the sciences, the public has been forced into a false dilemma between a 'scientific' or Islamic religious worldview, not only by an unchallenged 'scientism' that makes claims beyond its epistemological sphere, but by the absence of an Islamic intellectual approach to the problem that is both accessible to the general public and solid and sophisticated enough to meet the challenge holistically.

... The only antidote for this condition is to provide the resources for religious intellectual responsibility that will empower the Muslim intellectual middle class to make a reasoned account of its religious life. This is precisely the role of *kalam* for the modern Muslim world: to make these resources accessible, not only to the elite, but to the general public.<sup>191</sup>

Thus, providing interdisciplinary education hubs is just one half of the challenge. Since the modern world is an information-centric society, the general populous is now being forced to answer questions which they may not have any relevant training in. Such problems were generally handled by elite scholars in the past. Moad has thus rightly pointed out that such old expectations in a new environment like ours is indeed anachronistic and unrealistic. Contemporary Muslim scholars and institutions need to acknowledge this when trying to address the issues that confront the Muslim world today.

Finally, in addition to creating such intellectual hubs, the Muslim world needs to re-invigorate its longstanding practice of patronage<sup>192</sup> on a large scale, without which the development of such endeavours will never come into fruition.

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<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>191</sup> Omar Edward Moad. What is Islamic Analytical Theology? Accessed 17<sup>th</sup> July 2018, [https://1pjhft3ggnei4el4oqfi16ch-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/FINAL-What-is-Islamic-Analytic-Theology\\_-1.pdf](https://1pjhft3ggnei4el4oqfi16ch-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/FINAL-What-is-Islamic-Analytic-Theology_-1.pdf)

<sup>192</sup> George Makdisi, *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1981).

### 3.1.2 *The Qur'anic Prerequisite*

A shared thematic flaw amongst all the atheistic arguments against Islam is that none of them actually confronts the epistemological force of the Qur'an in legitimizing its own establishment as the word of God—that is, the literary miracle of the text. As is well-known, the Qur'an challenges its reader or interlocutor on three separate occasions to bring a verse like itself.<sup>193</sup> It is this specific challenge that needs to be met by atheists in order to undermine the textual legitimacy of the Qur'an and therefore Islam more broadly.<sup>194</sup> All the theological issues that are raised by atheists are secondary and derivative, mainly related to the epistemology of hermeneutics. Indeed, the Muslim world features a spectrum of opinions and attitudes on how best to approach the sacred texts. This variation in views does not entail the negation of the sacred texts as such, nor does it validate all opinions—it just means that we need to discuss, evaluate, and refine our understanding through constructive debate with each other to see where the evidence takes us. If the nuances are unresolvable, then so be it. If atheists claim that the existence of nuance makes the worldview unscientific, this would undermine science itself, because any notion of differences of opinion amongst scientists would then negate the scientific enterprise. Thus nuances are not a 'show-stopper'.

This is not to say that the atheists' theological arguments are unconvincing. Some of their points raise some very serious concerns that Muslim scholars need to collectively address. My point, however, is that these criticisms do not approach the heart of the matter: the Qur'an comes with its own falsification criterion. The atheist, if he truly wishes to negate the Islamic worldview, needs to prove that the Qur'an is not a literary miracle.<sup>195</sup> Thus, learning classical Arabic becomes a fundamental prerequisite in either establishing or negating the Qur'an's miraculousness. Unlike the Bible, which is premised on the miracle of a historical event, the Qur'an is not a time-bound miracle. This aspect is very fortuitous for Muslims, though less so for the wider community and those who lack the requisite linguistic skills. This raises a fundamental problem in the dialogue: comparatively, the prerequisites called for in verifying the historical claims of the Bible are much more accessible to a global audience than the study of classical Arabic required to verify the Qur'an's status as revealed text. Thus, the discussion is always forced into secondary contentions by both sides: atheists end up criticizing individual verses as being either scientifically inaccurate, politically incorrect, or barbaric; Muslims, very unfortunately, resort to 'proving' scientific miracles in the Qur'an—always retrospectively and never prospectively—to bypass the Arabic prerequisite necessary for *proselytistic* ends. Neither sides are, in my opinion, getting the point across. It is a sad fact that respect for and fluency in classical Arabic has clearly diminished in the Muslim world such that even modern

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<sup>193</sup> See: Qur'an 10:37–38; 11:13; 52:33–34.

<sup>194</sup> I subscribe to evidentialism, though not to the enlightenment type, nor necessarily to fideism. Rather, I take on a contextually evidentialist position in which sufficient evidence is provided relevant to the belief being asserted. See: Peter Forest, "The Epistemology of Religion", *Stanford Encyclopaedia*, 2016. I also concur with Corlett's employment of Keith Lehrer's *personal* and *complete* justification, as it still leaves room for religious experiences as an epistemological means for achieving belief in God (even if not considered sufficient or complete). See: J. Angelo Corlett, *The Errors of Atheism* (New York: Continuum, 2010), 29–50.

<sup>195</sup> Indeed, even here there are different opinions as to whether the Qur'an is intrinsically or extrinsically a miracle. However, neither position actually undermines the point I am making here. See: Qadhi, *An Introduction to the Sciences of the Quran*, 286–287.

Arab laymen have trouble understanding the Qur'an.<sup>196</sup> There is thus a pressing impetus to raise a new community of Muslims and non-Muslims with a deep comprehension of the Arabic language. It is for this reason that projects like Nouman Ali Khan's *Bayyinah Institute*<sup>197</sup> are a monumental support for English speaking Muslims around the world: he has single-handedly helped an entire generation around the world appreciate the nuances and eloquence of the Qur'an unlike any other contemporary speaker or scholar.<sup>198</sup> Such projects also provide the Muslim world with exciting opportunities to reengage with the Islamic corpus and thus deliver refreshing proposals and perspectives on contemporary issues.

#### 4 Concluding Remarks

In this monograph I have tried to show that atheism is a multifaceted confrontation, which Muslims need to collectively acknowledge and address. Though the New Atheists are widely known, I have additionally tried to provide a brief overview of the Muslim atheist community, who do not receive enough recognition as a serious participant in the discourse. Furthermore, though the arguments of atheists are nothing new, they have been armed with the modern advancements of science as a first order enterprise and then philosophically as a second order assault against all religions alike. When it comes to these issues, *kalam* can play a crucial role in how Muslim's engage—indeed, it is making a slow comeback—but how this will be carried out still remains to be seen. Additionally, the issue of hermeneutics is a major obstacle for the Muslim laity and atheists alike in understanding Islam. Literalism and uncritical filters of interpretation have led to negative manifestations and impressions of fundamentalist Islam; these circumstances only make Islam an easy scapegoat for atheists. Thus — and it cannot be ignored or stressed enough — the atheism-theism discourse, at least from an Islamic point of view, requires familiarity with a wide range of subjects. From a pragmatic perspective, this responsibility is too big to burden the entire Muslim populous with it. In light of these circumstances, it should be seen as an imperative by all Muslim experts that they bring forth wide-ranging and interdisciplinary ideas, books, and videos to create a broader academic representation in this particular discourse that can then aid the wider Muslim community in combating the various arguments that atheists and secularists have put forward against Islam. A Muslim response to atheism does exist, but it is significantly weaker and more marginal when compared to the work done by Christian communities and thinkers, who have written several hundred books and established several institutions to do this work. Lastly, and ultimately, the Qur'an is the focal point of the Islamic perspective in intellect, spirit, and action; in order to fully appreciate its divinity in attempting to create a comprehensive and coherent worldview, one must be familiar with the Arabic language. The absence of this prerequisite somewhat diminishes the epistemic bearings of the Muslim and limits his illumination (intellectual and spiritual) from and within the Divine scripture.

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<sup>196</sup> This does not imply that their faith in the Qur'an is weak or evidentially problematic. Most Muslims rely on the argument of the Qur'an's veracity based on the argument of authority even if they themselves haven't ever "witnessed" the miraculousness of the Qur'an. If this were to be criticized, then similarly all scientific textbooks would be questioned under the same assumption, since students of science have never actually conducted the experiments that they are taught in high school or in university as fact.

<sup>197</sup> "Bayyinah", accessed 12<sup>th</sup> August 2017, <http://bayyinah.com/>.

<sup>198</sup> See Nouman Ali Khan and Sharif Randhawa, *Divine Speech: Exploring the Quran as Literature* (Euleess: Bayyinah Institute, 2016).

Moreover, the countless works by luminary scholars within the Islamic tradition become missed opportunities as they are predominantly in Arabic. In the terminology of the Sufis, it (Arabic) is the key in unlocking these vast treasures that can authentically connect the lover (servant) with the beloved (God)

And God knows best.

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## SHOAIB AHMED MALIK

Dr Shoaib Ahmed Malik is a Pakistani scholar who was born and raised in Kuwait. He obtained his PhD in Chemical Engineering from the University of Nottingham. It was there he realized that he wanted to pursue a career in theology and philosophy. Upon graduating in 2015 he underwent several programs at various Islamic institutions and is now in the midst of finishing his MSc in Philosophy of Science and Religion at the University of Edinburgh, while maintaining a position as an Assistant Professor at Zayed University in Dubai. His research, however, is entirely in the realms of atheism, science and religion, and Islamic theology, and he is currently preparing for a PhD in the field of science and religion.

**ATHEISM AND ISLAM: A CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSE**

by Shoaib Ahmed Malik

This monograph skilfully surveys the expanding gap between Islam and the rhetoric of contemporary atheism. It offers a much-needed, comprehensive, and thematic overview of atheist-theist discourse from several scientific and philosophico-theological perspectives and identifies major scientific contentions and provides a critique of the ubiquitous over-reliance on natural theology, which has not resolved the “theological gap”, as opposed to the extra-evaluative potential of systematic (revealed) theology. From evolution to sociology, physics to metaphysics, philosophy to theology, this monograph provides a great overview of the current state of the discourse.

