

New Atheists on the Paris Attacks: Reactionaries or Progressive Iconoclasts?

Written by Stuart McAnulla

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STUART MCANULLA, JAN 8 2016

As efforts to absorb the shock of the terrorist attacks in Paris on November 13th, 2015 continue, the role of religious fundamentalism has again been subject to commentary. The responses of new atheist authors to the shootings in France have provoked controversy, particularly with their contention that Western societies have failed to take the dangers posed by forms of Islam seriously enough. Some critics have cited such views as further evidence that new atheism is vitiated by politically reactionary attitudes (Norton, 2015). However others believe new atheism should be credited for encouraging progressive opinion to be more consistent in the way it opposes religious bigotry (Cohen, 2013). This article examines new atheist interpretations of the Paris attacks, with a view to reflecting upon the politics underpinning their approaches.

Who Are the New Atheists?

Over the last decade, public debates concerning the role religion have been influenced by a loose group of philosophers, scientists, ex-clergy, authors and others who have argued strongly against monotheistic religion and in favour of an atheistic worldview. Initially, the 'new atheism' was a phrase used by media commentators as a shorthand reference to an emerging trend of outspoken atheist opinion in public life (Wolf, 2006). Yet subsequently the term has been accepted and used by most of the associated writers themselves. Prominent figures have included Richard Dawkins (2006), Sam Harris (2004, 2008), Ayaan Hirsi Ali (2007), and the late Christopher Hitchens (2007). Although new atheism is primarily an Anglo-American phenomenon, the French philosopher Michel Onfray has also been associated with the emergence of radical Godlessness, following publication of his *In Defence of Atheism* (2007). Novellists such as Phillip Pullman, Ian McEwan and Martin Amis have been linked with new atheism, as have journalists such as Polly Toynbee. The new atheists have diverse outlooks, but all argue that a set of social taboos concerning openly criticising religion have meant that the regressive political views of certain religious groups too often go unchallenged. As the world's two biggest religions, new atheists particularly focus on questioning Christianity and Islam. In the post-9/11 context, it is suggested that failure to sufficiently confront the threat posed by radical Islamism has heightened its threat to liberal values and national security.

However, the new atheists have at times been accused of promoting anti-Muslim animus, and some have linked their ideas to political neo-conservatism (Savage, 2014). More generally, they are criticised for exaggerating the role of religion as a factor in political violence, and neglecting to sufficiently recognise the influence of economic and cultural contexts. Religious scholars such as Karen Armstrong have scolded the new atheists for promoting division and misunderstanding between the secular and religious communities at a point where yet further social polarisations are unhelpful (2009). Debates concerning the recent Paris attacks have further fuelled clashes between new atheists and their critics.

Responses to the Paris Shootings

Ian McEwan was dining out in Paris on the night of the attacks, only a mile away from the shootings. He acknowledged the symbolism of inflicting such deadly violence on the 'secular capital of the world, as hospitable, diverse and charming a metropolis as was ever devised' (McEwan, 2015). McEwan also emphasised the difficulties

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of dealing with an enemy whose 'savage nihilism' meant they had no conventional human instinct for self-preservation – '(t)heir protective armour was the suicide belt, their idea of the ultimate hiding place was the virtuous after-life, where the police cannot go' (McEwan, 2015). In a similar vein, Sam Harris argues that ISIS are 'scarcely human in their aspirations' (Harris, 2015). He suggests that despite the fact that the various terrorist attacks in Western countries are frequently described as 'wake-up' calls, too many people are unable to accept the nature of the ongoing threat. Harris comments 'the idea that our enemies are sufficiently like ourselves, that they won't set this world on fire, is pure delusion' (Harris, 2015). A principal fear for Harris is that if left-liberals don't face-up to this hard truth, then right-wing politicians, such as Republican presidential candidates Donald Trump and Ben Carson, will dominate political responses. He argues that within the United States the consequence could be to hand victory to ideological forces which actually rival Islamists in their backward outlook i.e. hard-line conservative evangelicals. More generally, Harris proposes that liberal progressives must distance themselves from what he terms the 'regressive left' whom he believes are too ready to excuse away the brutality and nihilism of violent jihadists. Yet not all commentators are impressed by this polemical move, and Harris has been accused of effectively giving camouflage for views which are unacceptably anti-Islamic. For example, Marek Sullivan argues Harris deploys a 'vaccinated polemicism' which enable him to 'say one thing while meaning another, to give the impression of reasonableness while endorsing the most noxious ideas of the right' (Sullivan, 2015).

Much of the controversy surrounding Harris' worldview has been his long-standing insistence that the doctrines of Islam easily lend themselves to the kinds of radicalisation needed to created Islamists and terrorists. Against those who argue that material factors are more important to accounting for groups like ISIS in the middle-east, he asks:

There are (or were) Christians living in all these beleaguered countries. How many Christian suicide bombers have there been? ...the Muslim supply of such people is apparently inexhaustible. In every case, we're talking about the same people, speaking same language, living in the same places, enduring same material deprivation. In fact, the Christians of the Middle East have it worse. They've not only suffered the legacy of colonialism, they've been hounded out of their countries and often killed outright by their Muslim neighbors—and they still haven't organized themselves into a death cult. What's the difference that makes the difference? Religion. (interview, Illing 2015)

Harris is careful to argue that most Muslims are not supporters of groups such as ISIS and points out the tremendous suffering of women, children and minorities under Islamist rule. Yet he argues that justifications for violent jihad are replete in holy texts, presenting a difficulty for Islam that must be faced. Thus Harris is sceptical that ISIS can simply be understood as a 'blowback' effect against the West for military interventions in the middle-east, or as a response to poverty and social degradation. Other new atheists have also pointed out what they see as ongoing denial of many of the full role of faith in terrorism. After the Paris shootings, Richard Dawkins tweeted 'Why are people so desperate, desperate, DESPERATE to find something, anything, ANYTHING to blame in order to avoid blaming religion?' (Dawkins, 2015)

New Atheism and Islam

What are the geo-political implications of such views? Ayaan Hirsi Ali has argued that the approaches of US and European elites to Islamist terrorism have proven to be inadequate over the last fifteen years. She criticises the stances of George W. Bush and Barack Obama which she contends have sought to dissociate the terror from the religion of Islam, due to fear that linking the two would risk intensifying social division. Against this, Ali argues that the issue can only be confronted by 'naming' the problem and recognising its roots in interpretations of Islamic theology (Hanchett, 2015).

However, critics of authors such as Ali, Harris and Dawkins argue that they are too ready to accept a literalist understanding of Islam, as if fundamentalist groups offer a true account of a 'core' essence of the religion (Dickson, 2010: 46). More moderate versions of Islam are taken to be so in virtue of their willingness to overlook, ignore or qualify elements of the holy texts. However, critics contend that most versions of Islam offer very different interpretations of the Koran, leaving little justification for new atheists to conflate them with the nihilism of groups like ISIS. Reza Aslan argues:

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in the case of someone like Harris, they will scour a scripture for bits of savagery as though that is considered “research,” and then make these grand pronouncements about the lived experience of billions of people of faith. And then, when confronted with the fact that these scriptures can be interpreted in a multiplicity of ways, they will often make an argument somewhat akin to, Yes, but those who read these scriptures in a “figurative” or “metaphorical” way, they’re not the real Christians, they’re not the real Jews or the real Muslims. The great irony is that a lot of these New Atheists, memes when it comes to religion, they tend to read the scripture more literally than most religious literalists do. (interview, Singal, 2015)

Moreover, it is suggested that this confusion can contribute to climate of anti-Muslim prejudice and scapegoating, with some critics suggesting new atheism has a tone of cultural supremacism (Eagleton, 2009). Tina Beattie argues that Harris treats US political actors as ‘essentially benign individuals who are sadly sometimes compelled into violence by the religion of their enemies’ (2007: 91). Left-wing critics of new atheists contend that their emphasis on religion serves to provide intellectual cover for Western military interventions in areas such as Iraq (Savage, 2014), which in turn have played a role in creating conditions for ISIS to prosper.

In this respect, Michel Onfray’s response to the Paris attacks has been very different. Having previously described his own views as ‘left of the left’, he was quick to identify what he believes is the French political elites’ own culpability for the shootings. He argued ‘Right and Left sowed war against political Islam, and now they are reaping it back’. Indeed Onfray suggests that the Paris attacks were inevitable following France’s decision to involve itself in the wider West’s war in the middle east (Schofield, 2015). He argues that France can hardly be surprised that such a response has been given to the bombing of thousands of Muslims in the affected parts of world. Such bombing, he suggests, is the real manifestation of ‘Islamophobia’. Yet Onfray himself has faced a backlash from those who say he has not only given justification to ISIS for the attacks (indeed clips of his response have reportedly since been used in ISIS propaganda), but for also that he has unhelpfully linked ISIS to Muslims and Islam more generally. Thus Onfray is accused of understanding ISIS to in some way some way be legitimate representatives for Islam more generally, despite Muslim people being the biggest victims of their violence (Woods, 2015).

However, if Onfray’s views on French foreign policy can be understood as part of a left anti-imperialist tradition, his wider views on monotheism, Islam and secularism in France are rather different. Indeed Onfray believes the Abrahamic religions are inherently deadly:

The three monotheism share a series of identical forms of aversion: hatred of reason and intelligence; hatred of freedom; hatred of all books in the name of one book alone....Instead Judaism, Christianity, and Islam extol faith and belief, obedience and submission, taste for death and longing for the beyond, the asexual angel and chastity, virginity and monogamous love, wife and mother, soul and spirit. In other words, life crucified and nothingness exalted. (2007)

Although Onfray’s atheistic views have been widely discussed in French society, in the wake of the Paris attacks he has cancelled publication of a new critical essay titled ‘Thinking Islam’ (Mezzafiore, 2015). In so doing he lamented that ‘no debate is possible’, appearing to reference how some of his recent political comments have been interpreted by many as lending legitimacy to the Right. Onfray has chastised political leaders in France for allegedly prioritising protecting global financial elites and catering for minority groups, whilst neglecting the interests of the broader French working class. He has questioned approaches to multiculturalism and immigration, and spoken of the need for more robust secularist approaches. Some have argued that in this respect Onfray has become part of a broader ‘new reactionary’ trend in French intellectual life (Briancon, 2015). However, for others Onfray is staying true to the idea of speaking directly to the interests and concerns of the mass of ordinary people, rather than ceding either to mainstream political orthodoxy or the elitist postures of detached academics (West, 2015).

Conclusion

The current controversies surrounding the politics of new atheism can be understood as part of wider political dilemmas and sensitivities in Western societies following the Paris attacks. In particular, how can the terrorist threat be properly understood and confronted, whilst avoiding scapegoating the innocent and further marginalising groups who are already the victims of discrimination? How can the right to practice religion and receive equal treatment be

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balanced against upholding freedom of speech to criticise religion? The critics of new atheism may be correct to question their rhetoric concerning Islam, and to highlight dangerous elisions and omissions within their analysis. At the same time, it is clear that there are contrasting political currents within new atheism. Whilst some echo the conservative theme of an alleged 'clash of civilisations' between dominant Western ideals and Islam, the majority identify themselves as left-liberals or progressives of varying kinds. In this respect, a key goal is to persuade the left that violent Islamism should more be understood more as a strain of far right or fascistic politics, rather than as a straight-forward reaction to Western foreign policy. New atheists are very much divided on the question of whether recent military interventions in the middle-east have had merits, or in fact made the problems of the region yet worse. Thus whilst the new atheism continues to be politically provocative, the temptation to box the phenomenon into established ideological categories should perhaps be resisted.

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