



In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious Ever Merciful

2013 West Coast Jalsa Salana  
December 28, 2013

## Atheism – Biggest Challenge of Our Times & Its Remedies

By Harris Rahman Zafar

126. Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom<sup>1588</sup> and goodly exhortation and argue with them in a way that is best.

أذْءُرْ إِلَى سَبِيلِ رَبِّكَ بِالْحِكْمَةِ وَالْمَوْعِظَةِ الْحَسَنَةِ وَجَادِلْهُمْ بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ

Over the past several years, many have discussed what has been called a growing trend worldwide and here in the United States – and that is the number of people self-identifying as atheists. Of course we need to distinguish atheists from those who describe themselves as irreligious or followers of no particular religion. A study by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life just last year found that nearly 6% (approximately 13 million) American adults self-described as either atheist or agnostic. Dissecting this, one sees that less than half of these people self-describe as atheist (2.4% of American adult population). So a small number, but this study shows a year-over-year small but consistent growth in the percentage of Americans identifying themselves as atheist over the past 5 years.

So, more people describe themselves as atheist now than ever before, with greater number of popular icons being more vocal about their disbelief in God and religion. This is part of an ongoing battle of words and ideas between theists and atheists. For believers in God, a growing trend of Americans turning to disbelief identifies a problem. And the promulgation of an ideology to abandon belief in God becomes even more problematic. Conversely, for atheists, the promulgation of an ideology they have consciously rejected poses a great problem as well.



Recently, the advent of what I would call evangelical atheists – such as Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, Dan Barker, Richard Dawkins, etc. – and the growing number of popular celebrities using their influence to openly challenge religions – starting from George Carlin, Bill Maher, Ricky Gervais, and a host of very funny comedians who have made it okay to ridicule religion – has given the atheist movement more prominence, acceptance and attractiveness.

And one of the biggest mistakes religious people and institutions have made is the manner in which they deal with skeptics and disbelievers. Not only have some efforts been made to silence the words of atheists but they have also been recipients of open contempt and ridicule.

Famous televangelist Pat Robertson vilified atheists as a response to the shooting at the Sikh temple last year when he said “...people who are atheists, they hate God, they hate the expression of God, and they are angry at the world, angry with themselves, angry with society and they take it out on innocent people who are worshipping God...”<sup>i</sup>

Rick Warren is arguably one of the most prominent and influential religious leaders in the country, and here is what he said about the belief of no God and, thus, no life after death: *“If your time on earth were all there is to your life, I would suggest you start living it up immediately. You could forget about being good and ethical, and you wouldn't have to worry about any consequences of your actions. You could indulge yourself in total self-centeredness because your actions would have no long-term repercussions.”*<sup>ii</sup>

He alleges that a nonreligious person has no reason to be a decent human being. This is the most common clichéd view of atheists – as being selfish, self-absorbed people who indulge in vanity and unethical behavior. But this is an intellectually weak view of atheists, as it seeks to demonize those who lost faith in God or religion. Instead of understanding the reason for their diminished faith, people push them further away by painting them to be rather evil individuals.

As Ahmadi Muslims, we have accepted not only the beautiful teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (sa) but also recognized the Promised Messiah and Mahdi (as) who was to come in order to reform mankind. It is his stated mission to bring all people back to the path of God –



including both atheists and those already professing belief in God. So we need to protect ourselves from making the same mistake that other religious people make in dealing with atheists. Whether or not a society entirely consisting of atheists can persist to live in peace and morality is something that can certainly be debated, but to allege that an atheist as an individual cannot be good is simply not true. Surely we would believe they are misguided and missing the understanding of the true nature of God and His creation, but it is not only unfair but inaccurate to necessarily equate atheists with selfishness, greed, indecency or arrogance and to allege that no atheist can live a good life. Those vices do exist among some atheists, but then again, they also exist among some religious people. I myself have seen atheists who appear to live good lives, and even some who actively engage in interfaith dialogue and do a lot for community service and humanitarian purposes.

So, do not strip them of their humanity by adjudging them as necessarily immoral, selfish and arrogant. Rather than point the finger outward towards those who lost their faith in God, why not point the finger inward towards those who still claim to have faith in God? This is a time for introspection. What have believers of God done to turn away others from having faith in the Almighty? Consider for a moment if we – and I mean the very general “we” as in all religious people around the world – have said or done anything that would repel people from wanting to be believers.

Have you paused to listen to some of the reasons why people turn to atheism? It is unwise to simply cast atheists aside as ignorant without understanding and addressing the matters that turned them away to begin with. Of course, there are those who simply do not care about religion and choose to disbelieve in order to avoid anything spiritual or avoid being held answerable to anyone. They have a hard time believing in a God they cannot see, nor do they understand the value in doing so. This certainly is not a very thoughtful reason, as it has more to do with apathy than disbelief. And yes, there are also others who stopped believing in God after experiencing a difficulty in life and not understanding how God could allow that to happen to them. This is not a terribly thoughtful disbelief – rather, it is based on raw emotion, which we need to understand, as it has the potential of clouding one’s rational judgment.



But not all atheists disbelieve for such simple reasons. For example, there are some who cannot reconcile science with religion and end up choosing science over religion. This often happens because many (not all, of course, but many) of our Christian friends have denied science and, thus, forced people to make a decision – choose faith in God or belief in scientific theories and evidences. As an example, Richard Dawkins – one of the most well-known atheists in the world – once stated that perhaps the most important reason for his disbelief in God was evolution. From his view, evolution simply cannot be reconciled with Christian doctrine, and he maintained that any Christian attempting to do so is delusional. He argued there is a deep incompatibility between evolution and Christianity, as many Christians have put forth the argument that evolution is simply wrong, and they do not address matters like fossil records that are used to argue in favor of evolution.

Dogmatic rigidity and the inability to reconcile scientific advancement with the teachings of religion lead many to opt for belief that satisfies their intellectual search for rationality and which doesn't feel so rigid and close minded. As humans, we are all generally searching for truth, and once someone perceives that anything (including their religious teaching) is impeding their acquisition of truth, they face a challenge reconciling the two.

In this scenario, does blame only lie on the people who felt the conflict between religion and science? Or is there also blame on those adherents of religion who refused to acknowledge and address the supposed clash between the two sides? Who really had weakness of faith? Those who asked how to reconcile science with religion? Or those who could not give a cogent answer? This goes beyond science as well. There are those who simply do not want to have blind faith. They have questions and genuinely do not understand some areas of their theology. They argue that their heart cannot accept what their mind rejects. Are they to be branded as heretics or ones weak in their faith? Or are the truly weak ones those who cannot present a logical case for their religion and, instead avoid dealing with these areas of uncertainty by saying you cannot question your religion?



The late fourth Khalifa of the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, Hazrat Khalifatul Masih IV (rm), once explained that because man is moving into the light of scientific achievements and understanding of the world, when they begin to notice some contradictions between biblical statements and the nature around us, then they begin to entertain doubts. They ask how God could have said something that is against the very nature of the world He created.

Is it really fair (or accurate) to describe such people who turn to disbelief as arrogant or ignorant? Doing so validates their contention – that religion provides no cogent, logical answer to these difficult questions and, instead, reverts to judging people as lost or ignorant who ask these questions.

There are also atheists who turned away from religion because of how they have seen religion used by people. They often speak about how religious Christians have for centuries behind us promoted and bred anti-Semitism by insisting to blame Jews for the death of Jesus; how they forced people to convert to Christianity (including Native Americans and African slaves in this country); how they committed unthinkable atrocities and brutalities against Muslims and others during the Crusades; how they butchered their own fellow Christians in the name of their own faith. This is not specific to Christians alone. Look at the militant Muslims in the world. Suicide bombers, hijackers and decapitators claim religious justification. Those destroying churches and scaling embassies claim to be religious Muslims. Or in the case of Jewish settlers, how they kept taking more and more land away from others no matter what happens to those families and children who already live there because they believed it was divinely commissioned for them to do so – and that God has said this is their land. So this is across the religious spectrum. Even Adolf Hitler claimed a divine purpose in his book Mein Kampf. In carrying out the Holocaust, he wrote, *"I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord."* The Nazi army's belts were even inscribed *"Gott mit uns!"* (God is with us).<sup>iii</sup> Of course, they simply stole that from the German empire's army, which used this phrase on their armor, but to the onlookers, the Nazis were invoking God. Thus, some atheists argue as Christopher Hitchens did that people who have



committed the cruelest, most callous and most brutal atrocities in the world have done so because they believe they explicitly have Divine permission.

This charge against religion cannot be cast aside. Can we blame atheists for having this view of religion? Or does the blame lie on the followers of religions (the followers of God)? How are we as religious people living our lives? How are we living our faith? How well are we understanding and explaining our faith to others?

Of course, many atheists in the West cite Christian doctrine as reasons for their disbelief in religion and God. For example, they cannot find it within themselves to believe that there could be a God who would cast His own creation into a burning, painful and tortuous hell for eternity simply for possessing the wrong belief. They have contempt for those religious figures – again, based on what they have seen within the different Christian churches – who have made it their living to instill fear into their congregants (especially children) that if they are not baptized and if they do not believe in certain principles (such as the human sacrifice of a prophet of God), they will be in hell forever. The very idea of an eternal hell connotes injustice, which is why we as Ahmadi Muslims reject such an idea. Our belief in God is of a truly Just and Merciful being – Just in that He does hold people accountable for their actions, and Merciful in that He then forgives them and eventually grants them eternal peace.

The point I am getting at is that studying and understanding the reasons for one's disbelief in God makes us realize that a lot of this has to do with the behavior and ideology of religious people and institutions. So we as believers in God have a part to play in someone's disbelief.

And this isn't specific just to Christians in the West inadvertently contributing to the growth of atheism. Even Muslims in the Middle East have a role to play in the growth of the population of people who disbelieve in God. A 2012 poll by Gallup International looked at the population of atheists around the world and found surprising data in Saudi Arabia, where they estimate that 5% of the population is atheist – double the percent as is found in the United States. This is despite the attempts of the government of Saudi Arabia to stop atheism, which it considers a



crime. So what accounts for the growth of atheism in one of the most conservative and rigidly “Islamic” countries?

The question contains the answer. The rigidity in religion as taught in Saudi Arabia is causing a growing group of youth in that country to turn away from religion all together. I have spent a lot of time with a young man from Saudi Arabia who is studying in America and loves to research and speak about this very phenomenon that he has witnessed in his home land. His conclusion is that the growth of disbelief in Saudi Arabia is due to the way that religion is practiced and taught in that country.

Being born and raised there, he recounts that from childhood they are told that everything different than what they are taught is entirely wrong, be it Marxism, Nationalism, Christianity, Shia Islam or other types of Sunni Islam. They are explicitly taught that the Ahmadiyya interpretation is wrong. From the beginning they are taught strict Wahhabi doctrines, which they are told are unquestionable and cannot be re-interpreted. So Muslims are raised to think that this is not just a way but the only way to understand not only Islam but God. Thus they understand that to reject such irrationality means to reject the very existence of God.

He further revealed that they are indeed taught the type of things you will find in Robert Spencer’s books about hating non-believers. When Muslims are told that hating the unbelievers would bring them closer to God, this eventually causes a crisis of faith for those Saudis exposed to rational thinkers outside of Saudi Arabia. And since they are taught that this is Islam and that no other possible explanation exists, they equate this government sponsored irrational, illogical, hate-filled belief-system with Islam – but which is really Wahhabism and because it is far behind humanity not only on issues of science but on morality itself, it causes people to lose faith.

The point is that we must look at the things religious people have done that have contributed to others becoming atheists. As a firm believer in God, I do find the growth in the number of atheists troubling – not because of any desire for everyone to believe as I do, nor because I fear what impact it will have on me, my family or our community. Rather, it is troubling because I see it as indicative of the failure of believers of God to inspire this belief in others through their



words and actions. I see it as indicative of some believers in God continuing to preach a word and live a life that turns people away from faith in God. I see it as indicative of some believers in God continuing to forsake one of the greatest gifts God gave to the human species: the gift of reason and rationality.

Of course I believe that true and long-lasting internal peace can only be established by re-connecting with our Creator. And of course having a love for others naturally inclines me to wish everyone can experience this internal peace. There is nothing wrong with caring for others enough to desire good for them. And if you believe you have a morsel of truth that can help others, it should be our desire to share that truth with others. But it must be done with genuine care for them.

We cannot do that by vilifying those who do not believe. The Prophet Muhammad (sa) has told us that differences of opinion are a blessing. Why would he say that? I submit that it is because we stand to learn – about others’ beliefs and even our own beliefs – when confronted by those who hold a different view. Sometimes we don’t truly understand why we hold a certain belief until challenged by an opposing view. There is much for us to gain by these people who draw a spotlight on the hypocrisy, harm, violence and intolerance of some religious people. So let us not disregard those differences of opinion.

I think you may by now have begun to understand what we could call the remedy to this issue. The solution rests in our hands – to become more educated, to understand our faith, to ensure belief in faith is backed by moral and ethical behavior, to avoid all hypocrisy in our form of faith, and to explain religious and secular topics in a rational manner. This is the way all religious people should behave, but we begin by first exhibiting that within ourselves.

Ask yourself what changes you can make in your own life and behavior in order to properly express the beauty of Allah and the love between the Creator and His creation. Mahatma Gandhi said it best when he said *“You must be the change you wish to see in the world.”* So, if you want to see more people in the world believe in God, fall in love with God yourself. If you want more people to see the beauty and wisdom of believing in God, then understand that



beauty and wisdom for yourself. If you want people to be attracted to Islam and the Mosque, foster that within your heart first. That's the part you can play. Increase not only your belief, but more importantly your understanding, your insight into the very nature of God and purpose of our creation.

We must understand that people of faith have corrupted the teachings of their faith. Thus has religion become irrational in the eyes of onlookers. We are fortunate to be believers of that Messiah and rightly guided Imam and reformer who taught us the value and mechanism of believing in God and Islam through rational thought. It is the scientific age which sparked doubt among people who did not see the logic in religion. And it is through this scientific age that we can rest those doubts. There is immense benefit that can be derived from continuing a life-long journey of studying the treasure of wisdom and knowledge that the Promised Messiah (as) left behind for us. This is wisdom that the Khalifa of Islam, His Holiness Mirza Masroor Ahmad, continues to impart to all. Thus do we obtain faith that is backed by reason instead of faith in spite of reason.

Remember that atheists are like us; they are not people without faith. Every human being on earth has faith; they just have faith in different beliefs. An atheist may argue that they have no faith in matters like the existence of God or heaven and hell because nobody can prove it to them. But they deny the reality that this is their faith. They, too, cannot prove that God does not exist, nor can they prove that heaven and hell do not exist and that there is no afterlife. After beginning with logic, they then have to go on faith. This is how humans are built – reason and logic can get us to a point and then the rest is put on faith. As Christian author and debater, Dinesh D'Souza, argued, the atheist who says there is no life after death and the believer who says there is are both making a leap of faith – because neither can be proven. "Faith," he argues, "is not a substitute for reason. Faith only kicks in when reason comes to an end" – when explanations eventually stop.

Let us respect and care for people irrespective of their beliefs, not only to cultivate higher levels of love and peace within ourselves, but also to connect with others. Then do as the Quran



instructs. First, the Quran says to call people towards God with wisdom and in the manner that is best. The Arabic word for “best” (*husn*) means a manner that is good, beautiful, appealing or pleasing. It is used elsewhere in the Quran when it says to speak to others kindly. The Quran guides us to speak with wisdom (rationality) and in the best, kindest possible manner.

It then says that our duty is only to convey the message and to leave matters in Allah’s Hands. Without this trust in Allah, how can we claim to be Godly people with genuine concern for others? This is why in the end, our care, wisdom and outreach must be joined by prayer to bring about the greatest results. I pray that God touches the hearts of believers and non-believers, guides us all and grants everyone wisdom and greater levels of understanding. And just maybe, we can then collectively recognize each other as children of one loving God.

---

<sup>i</sup> Pat Robertson Blames Atheists And Those Who Hate God For Wisconsin Temple Shooting, Huffington Post (August 6, 2012), [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/08/06/pat-robertson-says-those-\\_n\\_1749532.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/08/06/pat-robertson-says-those-_n_1749532.html)

<sup>ii</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Zondervan, 2002), p. 38

<sup>iii</sup> Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, trans. R. Manheim (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1943), 1:65