

Differences in the Issue of “Atheism” Among the People of the World

Authors: Suzan Fahs (England)¹, Hassan al-Askari
Mohammad Hussein (Austria)²

Receiv: 10/03/2021

Accept: 12/06/2021

Abstract

The difference between how people view atheism varies in the world, in the west, Atheism is seen to be a normalised topic which is accepted by many people whereas in the East, heavily criticised. The openness in western societies with the spread of free secular materialistic thought occurred after the Enlightenment period, has pushed people towards the concept of atheism, especially in the younger generation. On the other hand, the East has much harsher rules when dealing with the influx of atheism where some countries believe death by execution is the solution. This pushed them to westernised way of thought where they began to fight Islamic beliefs, and of course under the support and protection of western regimes that they used as tools against Islam, many managed to flee their countries and go to the west as they consider that religion restricts and prevent them from achieving their goals, while atheism makes them free from all values

1. Student in Department of Dentistry, Faculty of Dentistry, The Open University, Walton Hall, England, malichehab@hotmail.com

2. MA in Department of Engineering Science in MedTech, Faculty of Radiotherapy, University of Applied Sciences Wiener Neustadt (FHWN), Wiener Neustadt, Austria, Hassan.el.askeri.hussein@hotmail.com

and allows the achievement of freedom, without any restrictions. From here we see that the spread of Atheism in the Muslim countries stems from western atheism. It is thought that the increase of East atheism is due to cultural, intellectual, educational, psychological, political, social, and religious reasons and it is our duty as Muslims to find out why this is and how to solve it from the concept of Islamic beliefs the same way Imam Sadiq would by adopting a logical concept to convince the atheists during their theological debates and arguments. Due to their lack of evidence, it was not long before their theories were being disproved with one example being from the famous British philosopher Anthony flew was a strong advocator for atheism wrote a book called “There is a God” in the later days of his life.

Key Words: Atheism, Secularism, Agnostic, Islamic Beliefs

Introduction

In this article, some points that will be mentioned range from:

- Definition of Atheism
- Agnosticism
- Reasons for the strong view on atheism in the west
- Different types of atheism in the west
- Role in exporting atheistic ideas to Islamic countries
- Atheism in the East
- Different types of atheism in the east
- Causes of its spread
- Impact of western ideology

- Solutions
- The fate of Atheism

Definitions of Atheism vary in the degree of consideration a person must put to the idea of Gods to be considered an atheist, “atheism in the broadest sense is an absence or belief in the existence of deities. Less broadly, atheism is a rejection of the belief that any deities exist. In an even narrower sense atheism is specifically the position that there are no deities”.

Atheism is also distinguished from agnosticism: “who does not know or believes that it is impossible to know if a god exists”. (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary, 2003)

Types of Atheism in the East and West

Allah said in his glorious book:

“So set thou thy face steadily and truly to the Faith: (establish) Allah's handiwork according to the pattern on which He has made mankind: no change (let there be) in the work (wrought) by Allah: that is the standard Religion: but most among mankind understand not”. (Quran, 30: 30)

Each human being is programmed to know Allah by “Fitrah”, which may be defined as our nature or the way we were created; but the two main problems of humanity is the constant state of distraction from things other than Allah and the immersion of itself in sin which corrupts the human Fitrah.

Distractions and sin are two sides of the same coin, and both play a role in ruining our Fitrah and therefore distancing our relationship with Allah.

A cause of why so many people disregard their religious beliefs is due to the corruption of their Fitrah and therefore causing many to become atheists.

Furthermore, since there are many methods and reasons to disbelieve, many types and sections of atheism appeared over time.

Applying Empson's methodology, John Gray examines 7 kinds of atheism:

- The so-called "new atheism" contains little that is novel or interesting.
- Secular humanism
- There is the kind of atheism that makes a religion from science.
- There are modern political religions from Jacobinism through communism and Nazism to contemporary evangelical liberalism.
- There is the atheism of God-haters such as the Marquis de Sade
- The atheisms of George Santayana and Joseph Conrad, which reject the idea of a creator-God without having any Piety towards humanity.
- There are the mystical atheism of Arthur Schopenhauer and the negative theologies of Benedict Spinoza and the early twentieth century Russian Jewish Leo Shestov, all of which in different ways point to a God that transcends any human conception. (Gray, 2018: 7-8)

However, the “Seven Types of Atheism” is not an exhaustive list of all kinds of atheism in the world. John Gray explains the different methods of disbelieving in God especially focusing on the New or modern atheism which is represented by the Four Horsemen authors:

Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennet and Sam Harris. They assume that religion was an obstacle to the development of science publishing several books on the same subject criticizing religion and promoting atheism.

On the contrary, Professor Ward, who is a champion of the compatibility of science and religion, argues that the views of many new atheists such as the Four Horsemen are flawed and fail to meet their own criteria of rationality.

“New atheists condemn religious beliefs and contend that such beliefs are destructive to human life and lacking any basis in reality”.

He also said that their “comprehension of the scope and limitations of science is poor, as is their understanding of religion and its greatest thinkers”. (Ward, 2009)

As well as critiques the theory of new atheists stating that it is nothing more than a repackaging of all the old anti-religious philosophical arguments.

Another type of western atheism which John Gray disregards is: Agnostic atheism.

Weak atheists emphasize one’s lack of belief in gods unlike agnostic atheists which highlight that one does not make any knowledge claims and how usually the lack of knowledge is an important factor in causing lack of belief.

Furthermore, Agnostic atheist is arguably a label which applies to most atheists in the West today.

Where atheists and agnostics are pushed to expand and diversify their ranks as secularism grows.

We must also take into consideration of atheism that exists in our Arab and Islamic countries stemming from the west which is caused by the intellectual ideology that entered our Islamic countries by western colonization furthermore the cultural invasion succeeded in attracting a good number of Muslim youth and affected their thoughts due to their lack of base knowledge and understanding causing them to imitate the western way of thinking and they follow their ideals.

This can be the case with most types of atheism where they always originate in the west and spread around the world.

The Reasons for the Spread of Atheism in the East and West

Before we mention the reasons for both, it is necessary to refer to what Abd al-Rahman Badawi mentioned in his book “from the history of atheism in Islam”, he said:

This explain to us the secret that atheists in the Arab spirit all rejected the idea of prophecy and prophets, and left divinity, while atheism in other civilizations were about the denial of Gods existence. (Badawi, 1993: 5)

He states the origins of atheism which is an extension of the new atheism that has become a global complex phenomenon containing several reasons which are not necessarily religious.

In addition, they can be intellectual, political, cultural, educational, social, and psychological as well.

The first and most important reason is the introduction of superstitions by the European church and considered as religious beliefs, Richard Dawkins referred to this as he said in his book *Outgrowing God*:

How much of what we read in the Bible is true?
How do we know anything in history really happened? (Dawkins, 2019: 16)

John Gray also mentioned this in his book *Seven Types of Atheism* and said:

The real conflict is not between religion and science but between Christianity and history. (Gray, 2018: 14)

He also said:

Atheists attack Christian values because they are changeable and often contradictory. (Gray, 2018: 20)

If we go back to the first century world when the distortion of the Bible and the introduction of lies by Paul the Apostle happened, in which the power of the clergies in the church helped establish many superstitions, where they were considered as religious beliefs to pursue further power.

These factors therefore helped push scholars and thinkers in the 17th century which was known as the “Age of Enlightenment” or “The Reformation”.

This followed the scientific revolution when Copernicus published his book about the rotation of the earth and faced a violent reaction from the clergy in the church.

Towards the end of the 18th century, we saw a violent explosion of secularism and atheism in the French revolution as well as materialism developing into a philosophy which gained a following that has continued into the present day.

In this century atheism has appeared in Europe as an integrated idea which David Berman has called “Avowed Atheism”. (Berman, 2013)

This serious intellectual campaign against religion by the secularist movement extended into the nineteenth century which was considered as a “Century of movements of Rationalism, Freethought and Liberalism” and which was also a time of great transformation in all spheres of life.

These factors had a negative profound effect on religion that led to the belief that religion stands as a barrier to all forms of scientific and civilized progress.

Also, that turning to atheism and abolishing religion is the best and correct way to develop and liberate human beings from restrictions.

Another reason John Gray mentioned at the end of the first chapter of his new book “Seven types of Atheism” in which he concludes that:

“The organized atheism of the present century is mostly a media phenomenon and best appreciated as a type of entertainment”. (Gray, 2018: 23)

The widespread use of social media has further contributed to the awareness of atheism and has affected many of the youth’s religious beliefs through its constant promotion and praise towards them.

This caused many to start to compare and question their ideas and views leading to sceptising their thoughts, which meant that most are left with unanswered questions due to their lack of knowledge and insufficiency of resources around them resulting in them resorting to atheism.

Reasons of Atheism in the East

Atheism is not a modern concept rather it has ancient roots starting from Ibn al-Rawendi who questioned prophethood, rejected Abrahamic religions and heavily criticized the Quran.

Other people such as Ibn al-Mukaffa or Abu Bakr al-Razi were also in the same boat. This however was a small fraction compared to the number of atheists nowadays.

The reason of the growth in the popularity of the new atheism in the East during the first decade of the twenty first century was due to:

- The west in their war against Islam started exporting atheism to our Arabic and Islamic countries in order to attract the largest possible number of youths to their side and influence their way of thinking to a more westernised ideology which were then used as tools against Islam.
- The openness of our countries to Western cultures and the replacement of religion by secularism that emerged after the French Revolution and infiltrated most of our Islamic countries. This increased the number of atheists especially in the younger generation where they would copy the west in their ideals, referred to

by the write Mohammad Nasser in his book “Atheism” as he said the intense fascination with the social and political success produced by experimental sciences and societies liberated from the dominance of religions.

However, in the third world countries, they suffer from poor living conditions and societies cause them to question the validity of God and wonder why he is not helping them.

This questioning of God's existence was normalised due to the infiltration of western thoughts into our culture. (Naser, 2019: 229)

- The exportation of atheist books to the East, especially Richard Dawkins’ book “The God Delusion” which was published in 2006 and is considered as the Bible of atheists. It has been translated into more than thirty languages in the world therefore having a huge impact on the minds of young people.
- Translating atheism books into Arabic and disseminating them among Muslim youth and with the western countries embrace and encouragement towards these translators and supporting them through various ways. Helped to spread and normalize the idea of atheism which was not accepted before in the Eastern countries and further making more youths disagree with their former beliefs.
- After the attacks on September 11th, European countries attempted to delude Islam as a religion of violence depriving people of enjoyment,

therefore making more people have a negative impression of Islam and therefore resorting to Atheism which is labelled as more open and entertaining.

- Suffering, recent wars and famines in the middle east has also helped to contribute to a larger number of atheists due to the belief that if God were real then there would be no suffering and inequality in the world.
- Another reason for this is due to facing questions of atheists with repression, intimidation and violence which has led to some reaction and aversion from.
- religion which can be seen through some Arab countries in where atheists are treated more fatally than others where they can face long prison sentences, exilation and others threatened with execution.
- Furthermore, another cause of this is through the wrong upbringing of children and the absence of a religious environment which helps to lead to a loss of religious knowledge and pushes these youth to resorting to atheism.
- Another key factor behind the emergence of new atheism is the revolution in global media, especially the dramatic use of the internet and the press, in which atheism is seen as having a large, significant positive effect on one's life where it helps to lead to a larger freedom of speech and actions. Therefore, attracting more people towards this belief. (Masterson, 1971)

Solutions

Allah says in his Glorious Book:

“Those who listen to the Word, and follow the best (meaning) in it: Those are the ones whom Allah has guided, and those are the ones endued with understanding”. (Quran, 39: 18)

The first way in which atheism can be “solved” is evident through the actions of Imam Sadiq where he would listen carefully and show respect to the opposing side and take into consideration the reason behind their thoughts.

Such as how he was very careful with his words and to not label them as infidels.

Therefore, scholars and educators should have open discussions and debates with atheists where they can have any doubts or concerns cleared up. (<http://www.imamreza.net/old/eng/imamreza.php?id=8621>)

It is vital that even if we have disagreements, we should always have a degree of respect towards them while also keeping a close eye on their actions.

Also, parents and guardians should be able to raise their kids on the right beliefs and educate them in a moral way by answering any questions that might be thrown at them.

As well as ensuring that their kids are surrounded by a good group of friends in a safe environment so they could thrive and make better decisions.

Islamic scholars and educators hold a role in also forming communities for youth awareness and educating them with all the Islamic religious ethics to keep them interested and up to date which will strengthen their religious beliefs in the long run.

Scholars should write books that refute the suspicions of atheists. Such as people like Alister McGrath who wrote books to reply to heavy atheist believers.

The main book off his was called: “The Dawkins Delusion” where in response to Dawkins he said:

“It is clear that a response of some sort is needed to the God Delusion, if only because the absence of one might persuade some that no answer could be given”. (McGrath and McGrath, 2007: 11)

The Fate of Atheism

Atheist philosophers and scientists believed that science clashed with their faith in God and as they went further down the line, they realized that religion and science go hand in hand causing their atheistic beliefs to fade away.

One example is the English philosopher Antony Garrard Newton Flew who changed his mind after spending more than fifty years establishing atheism.

In the end he had to admit that indeed the universe has an almighty God and atheism was an empty theory. He claimed that he was following the trails leading him to believing in the existence of a God as he says:

“Since this is a book about why I changed my mind about the existence of God”. (Flew, 2007: 27)

He said that when he found out about the existence of God, it shook his foundations at its core stating that “it was a journey of the mind and not a journey of faith”.

Three years before his deaths he issued his book “There is God” which meant his past work consisting of around 30 books about philosophical research all went to waste as he said:

“I now believe there is a God”. (Flew, 2007: 25)

Another example was from the great philosopher in the west, a French physician and historian called: Gustave Le Bon. In his book: “The Civilization of the Muslim Arabs”, he stated:

“The civilization of the Muslim Arabs has introduced the brutal European nations into the world of humanity, and that the university of the west did not know any scientific resource for them except the works of the Arabs, they are the ones who civilized Europe is material, intellect and moral, and history does not know a nation that produced what they produced is reasonable”. (Le Bon, 1974: 276)

Richard Dawkins who is usually labelled as an “outspoken atheist” also in his book: “Outgrowing God” said: Now a few more names for people who don’t believe.

There are many who prefer to avoid the word “atheist”, some simply say: “I don’t know, we can’t know”.

These people often call themselves “agnostics” and some of them think it’s equally likely that God does or does not exist. (Dawkins, 2019: 11)

Richard Dawkins in his book: “Outgrowing God” Also said:

“when people say there are atheists, they don’t mean they can prove that there are no gods. Strictly speaking, it is impossible to prove that something does not exist. We don’t positively know there are no gods”. (Dawkins, 2019: 13)

During one of his interviews with the Archbishop of Canterbury he told us he prefers to be seen as agnostic rather than an atheist despite being one of the strongest advocates for atheism stating, “I can’t be sure God doesn’t exist”, due to the fact that he couldn’t logically prove whether a god exists, so he took the agnostic position.

From here we see that atheism is not based on reasonable or logical theories rather, atheism is nothing but a set of psychological complexes, due to insufficient evidence.

This therefore explains the decrease in the atheists among the years in where the Pew Center estimates that the percentage of atheists will decline from 16 percent of the total population of the globe today to 13 percent, despite the increase in their total number from 1.17 billion in 2015 to 1.2 billion in 2060, and in contrast, the number of believers in general is expected to reach 8.1 billion people by 2050.

Conclusion

Allah has bestowed countless blessings upon us with the most important blessing of all being Islam, the religion of Fitrah. This human nature has two separate paths: Good and Evil.

Pure Fitrah leads human beings to recognize that there is a creator for our universe, while one whose fitrah is polluted (Atheists) deny the existence of God which raises a certain question-why do our youths always end up with an atheistic point of view.

We have a great treasure such as the Holy Quran and teachings from our Prophet Mohammad and his Ahl al-Bayt which protect our Fitrah from being corrupted and guide us to the straight path (siraat al-Mustaqim) but even then, many of our Muslims turn into Atheists.

The main reason is due to the west with their cunning tricks that infiltrate our Islamic societies to control the minds of young people and make them under their power and eliminate Islamic belief by influencing turning them away from Islam.

From here, we as Muslims should stand up to this ideology that is corrupting the mind of our youth through manipulation while also addressing any problems or questions that might come our way.

We should also be very open minded when engaging in a discussion against atheists and try to see how they approach things so we can effectively change their point of view and bring them over and help them achieve a purer Fitrah.

Through this we can help to ensure a lower amount of our youth resorting to atheism where we can tackle all their misconceptions peacefully and strategically.

As well as attracting more people to Islam when they see how we calmly address ideologies and questions that contradict our beliefs unlike in other Arab countries in where people with such thoughts are shut down.

Resources

1. **The Holy Quran.**
2. Badawi, Abd al-Rahman (1993). **From the History of Atheism in Islam.** Cairo: Egyptian Renaissance Library.
3. Berman, David (2013). **A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell.** Routledge Library Editions: Philosophy of Religion.
4. **Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary** (2003). Cambridge: University of Cambridge: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org>
5. Dawkins, Richard (2019). **Outgrowing God.** London: Bantam Press.
6. Flew, Anthony (2007). **There Is a God: How the World's Most Notorious Atheist Changed His Mind.** New York: HarperOne.
7. Gray, John (2018). **Seven Types of Atheism.** New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
8. Intellectual Accomplishments of Imam Ja'far Sadiq: <http://www.imamreza.net/old/eng/imamreza.php?id=8621>
9. Le Bon, Gustave (1974). **The World of Islamic Civilization.** London: Tudor Pub. Co.
10. Masterson, Patrick (1971). **A Study of the Philosophical Sources of Contemporary Atheism.** Indiana: University of Notre Dame Publications.
11. McGrath, Alister. And Joanna Collicutt McGrath (2007). **The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine.** Chicago: InterVarsity Press.

30) / Journal of PURE LIFE, Vol. 8, No. 26 (June 2021)

12. Naser, Mohammed (2019). **The Atheists' criticism of the law of causality (David Hume as an example)**. Al-Daleel. Vol. 6: 204-247.
13. Ward, Keith (2009). **God, Science and the New Atheism**. Queen's Lecture Theatre. Cambridge: Emmanuel College.