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Why I Call Myself an 'Atheist Muslim'

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Last week, I had an essay up on HuffPost entitled "An Atheist Muslim's Perspective on the 'Root Causes' of Islamist Jihadism and the Politics of Islamophobia."

One of the goals of the piece was to emphasize the difference between the criticism of Islam and anti-Muslim bigotry: the first targets an ideology, and the second targets human beings. This is obviously a very significant difference, yet both are frequently lumped under the unfortunate umbrella term, "Islamophobia."

I highlighted this distinction by describing myself as an "atheist Muslim," which drew the single most commonly asked question about the piece by both atheist and Muslim readers: "How can you be an atheist and a Muslim at the same time? Isn't that contradictory?"

Let me explain.

One of the central themes of the essay was that all religious people are selective in their religiosity. This cherry-picking is almost universal, and even inevitable considering the frequency with which contradictions appear in religious texts.

If this selectivity allows people to disregard some of the teachings of their faith, such as the orders to publicly execute non-virginal brides and homosexuals, or behead and mutilate disbelievers, it may not be a bad thing, for obvious reasons -- even if it appears intellectually dishonest.

I once jokingly asked a writer friend how her identification as a "feminist Muslim" was any different from someone identifying as a black white supremacist or a meat-eating vegetarian. She replied that she didn't see this designation as inherently contradictory, because she identified with a range of feminist values as well as many Islamic values. She openly admitted that she doesn't understand or agree with many of the more patriarchal verses in the Quran despite being aware of their various exegeses -- that she was able to disregard them, confident in the belief that Allah sees her as equal to her male counterparts.

I asked her if she saw that as disingenuous. "Everyone cherry-picks," she replied, with a shrug.

This kind of reconciliation and compartmentalization is made possible by a selective reading and following of religion, and is also increasingly seen among groups such as believing gay Muslims. It has long been a phenomenon with other religious groups. A majority of the world's Catholics are cafeteria Catholics (most of them ignoring their Church's positions on birth control and abortion while retaining their Catholic identities), and many Jewish atheists expressly reject Judaism while retaining its cultural elements.

So who decides how far the cherry-picking can go? If everyone cherry-picks, is it possible to do it all the way to non-belief status?

My take is that these things are subjective and relative. Fundamentalist Muslims say that women who work outside the home without their husbands' permission are not true Muslims. Some moderate Muslims say that those who eat pork or drink alcohol are not true Muslims. Violent sectarian conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Pakistan have graphically demonstrated that many strict Sunnis reject the idea that Shias are true Muslims, and vice versa.

Even the wildly popular, seemingly moderate Pakistani candidate Imran Khan recently said, disappointingly, that he does not consider the Ahmadis, a community that has suffered decades of persecution in Pakistan, to be true Muslims because they do not believe in the "finality" of the Prophet. I actually found it interesting, in light of this, that a few readers who took issue with my identification as an atheist Muslim were Ahmadis themselves.

So my first point is simply this: *If the rest of you can cherry-pick, why can't I?*

The second aspect revolves around the question of whether Islam a culture or a religion.

For me, the answer is that Islam is a religion, but the experience of being Muslim, practicing or not, is much more nuanced and complex.

Just like Judaism is a religion that can exist independently from Jewish ethnicity or Jewish culture, Islam is a religion, and even though Muslims are ethnically and racially varied, there really is such a thing as a Muslim culture that can exist separately from Islam.

It's true that Muslims around the world are culturally heterogeneous. Pakistani Muslims, for instance, have more cultural similarities with Indian Hindus than with Arab Muslims. Arab Muslims, in turn, have more in common culturally with Arab Christians than with Indonesian Muslims.

However, some elements of Muslim culture are universal.

The festival of Eid is celebrated across all Muslim societies. The celebratory *iftar* (fast-breaking) feasts of Ramadan are common to all Muslims. These rituals are among several that I enjoy immensely as someone raised in a Muslim family and society.

As a songwriter, the rich musicality and poetry of the *nahas* recited and sung at Shia Muslim mourning rituals, with a light beating of the chest providing the rhythm, have had a strong influence on my own music. Like many singers attribute their musical education to singing in church growing up, I learned singing and music from my upbringing in a Shiite Muslim household.

Richard Dawkins has referred to himself as a "cultural Christian", with an admitted fondness for Christianity-inspired art, literature and Christmas carols. "I'm not one of those who wants to purge our society of our Christian history," he once told the BBC.

This is probably why he hit the nail on the head when he described me as a "cultural Muslim with no imaginary friend." He understood that this is precisely what I meant when I called myself an "atheist Muslim."

And I am not the only one who identifies this way. Another atheist Muslim blogger who writes under the name "Re-Enlightenment" also makes the case by drawing a comparison with Christians:

Would you only be prepared to grant someone a Christian identity if they successfully negotiated your questions on church attendance, the Old Testament, and attitudes to homosexuality? You probably wouldn't and you definitely shouldn't. Even if someone considered themselves Christian in a religious sense, again, would you interrogate them on their compliance with what you (religious "scholar" that you clearly are) considered to be the fundamental theological tenets of Christianity? Again, you shouldn't.

I know Christians who never go to church. I know Christians who don't believe in God. I know Christians who don't hate homosexuals. I know Christians who never wear a crucifix. I know Christians who don't believe a virgin can give birth to a boy who is his own father who created the universe in six days.

...Why the different treatment for Islam?

"Certainly it's not perfect," writes Saif Rahman, another fellow secular Muslim who has posted a thought-provoking piece explaining what it means to be a "cultural" Muslim.

"I would much prefer the description 'secular agnostic utilitarian rationalist reductionist humanist with cultural Muslim influences', but that won't fit on my business card."

And that sums it up. Islam is a religion, and you cannot have an atheistic Islam. But many atheists from Muslim families and Muslim communities identify with the cultural aspects of their Muslim heritage and history, as do atheists with Christian or Jewish heritage.

Progressive Muslims, particularly in the West, may want to consider coalescing around a sense of community (which celebrates commonalities) rather than belief (which varies from person to person). With so many Muslim countries that punish apostasy (leaving the Islamic faith) with death, it is strategically beneficial to allow atheists from the Muslim community to adopt the Muslim label if they so choose. It is less confrontational, helps illustrate the important contrast between a monolithic ideology and a richly diverse people, and could, with time, potentially provide closeted atheists in the Muslim community a platform to come out and speak, adding another dimension to a dynamic internal dialogue that so far seems narrowly limited to the voices of fundamentalists or progressive/liberal apologists. This is our community too. Why shouldn't we also be allowed to speak for it?

"New atheists" like Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris have strong allies in many of us who identify as atheist Muslims, because their valid criticisms of Islam gain further legitimacy when supported and simultaneously voiced by those of us who have lived it, grew up in it, and actually learned about it before giving it up. This is a very powerful and much-needed reinforcement for the promising new atheist movement.

Similarly, progressive/liberal Muslims also have strong allies in atheist Muslims. Sure, our ideological differences can and should continue to be vigorously debated in universities and op-ed columns. However, these differences can be set aside from time to time to pursue our strong common purpose: opposing and eradicating the Islamist fundamentalism and terrorism that have devastated our shared community.

In closing, I leave you with a few more words from my fellow atheist Muslim, Re-Enlightenment:

Let us be clear why Christianity and Judaism, in the twenty-first century, generally lend themselves to a pick-and-mix treatment: it's because they have more or less been wrenched through a two-part grinder called 'Secularism and the Enlightenment'. That metaphor might be a violent one but what has emerged from the other end of the machine is far more peaceful and humane than what was fed in: religions which can be picked apart, consumed and discarded as an individual human sees fit.

And that is what is required of Islam, urgently.

How will we know when this job is done? Well, when we meet beer-loving, pork-eating, atheist Muslims who pray exactly no times a day and in no particular direction, and we don't consider that a contradiction, that will be a good start.

I must admit, I am still not a fan of most kinds of pork. But thank God for bacon.

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