

Brandon Chin

John L. Crow

REL1300

April 15, 2016

Militant Atheism: A Form of Religious Persecution

Conflict, revolving around the idea of religion, between believers and non-believers has stimulated much controversy. These conflicts vary in severity ranging from a simple disagreement, to extreme acts of violence initiated by radical believers. Among the many attributes each individual utilizes to perceive their belief uniquely, faith is the underlying similarity that both parties share because faith ultimately fuels their ideologies. In the presence of the unknown, many create their beliefs and cultivate it in their way of life. In doing so, opposition is generated and respective to the individual, it can stir contention indefinitely. Atheism, the belief that there are no Gods, has existed as long as many of the world religions. Recently, atheism has become quite prominent, and a new class of atheists, sometimes referred to as militant atheists, continue to aggressively argue there are no Gods and attempt to change the minds of religious believers. The actions of these militant atheist groups can be considered religious persecution with opposition that varies, from neutrality to aggressiveness, from the faithful religious groups.

Militant atheism isn't a new idea but rather it is an idea that has recently been coined. Grasping the idea of militant atheists requires an understanding of why there is such hostility towards religious groups and ideas. Firstly, militant atheists indiscriminately believe that religion is false and demonstrate an overall lack in the belief of Gods. Secondly, they believe that religion is harmful towards humanity thus harboring hatred that leads to hostility. Philip Kitcher, author

of Militant modern atheists shares that “In times when violence carried out in the name of religion abounds, when many groups of people seek to interfere with the private lives of others because those targeted are allegedly violating divine commands, and when important discoveries about the world in which we live are questioned, or even denied, because they are supposed to be incompatible with authentic messages from the deity, it is easy to think that things have gone too far” (Kitcher 1). It’s apparent that much of the ill feelings towards religion by militant atheists is a direct result of undesired exposure of the religion. Furthermore, there is a strong disdain towards the conflicting beliefs that militant atheist individuals feel are regressive towards society. Ultimately, militant atheists are a breed of atheists that have evolved into a mindset that aims to abolish all religion because its uncertain ideals lead to calamity for non-believers and create a ripple effect impacting bystanders as well. A great deal of militant atheists dismiss and actively combat religion due to a strict scientific background that lends to a rational and logical approach of understanding. Because religion is based on faith and there is no scientific evidence to propose a higher-being, religion is shunned and belittled by the purely scientific community. Richard Dawkins, a famous, accredited biologist, openly dismisses religion while deeming it as mere superstition. In his book *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins quotes Albert Einstein by sharing “What I see in nature is a magnificent structure that we can comprehend only very imperfectly, and that must fill a thinking person with a feeling of humility. This is a genuinely religious feeling that has nothing to do with mysticism” (Dawkins 36). Einstein’s beliefs were subject to continuous debate because of the unconventional usage of terms such as religion that he uses to describe his lack of belief in religion. Many religious apologists comprehend and argue that statements such as the one presented, are to be interpreted as evidence of his belief in God. Consequently, because Einstein is regarded as a reputable scientist, many new atheists

counter these arguments presented by the religious apologists, by asserting Einstein's role in science and any belief in a divine entity would contradict his ideology.

Scholarly militant atheists apply their knowledge and understanding of the world through science to defame the proposition of God. Furthermore, it is apparent that these conflicting views segregate the theists from the atheists which then evolves into condescension and mistreatment of the opposition strictly because of their beliefs. Religious persecution, or the mistreatment or harm of an individual or religious group because of their religious beliefs, has been present since the beginning of religion. Discrimination, banishment, abuse, and execution are all reoccurring atrocities that have been practiced as punishment for differing religious opinion. According to Wade Jacoby and Hakan Yavuz, "Europe's religious conservatives but also a group of "new atheists" such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens participated in the process of securitizing Muslim demands of recognition of identity and fairness. Islamophobia has become a dominant trend in the study of Muslim societies" (Jacoby, Yavuz 2). Some of the most renowned self-proclaiming, militant atheists such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens are in the forefront of this new atheist movement. Muslims are constantly scrutinized and consequently ostracized, in American society, due to the cruel acts performed by a portion of radical Muslims, and as a result, the religion gains a negative stigma that is not representative of the religion as a whole. Islamophobia is a term that is very relevant in American culture and society and it describes a population of individuals that exhibit legitimate fear for practicing Muslims. Much of this fear can develop and fester into hatred and discrimination that is be a direct result of the ignorance our culture conveys. To reiterate, Hatred, discrimination, mistreatment, and violence towards any religious individual or group because of

their belief, is religious persecution. New atheists, are among many of these groups that publicly share their condemning nature towards Muslims and theists alike.

As previously mentioned, the concept of atheism has been in existence for as long as world religions have been. In strict ancient societies, bigotry was common and the individuals at the bottom of the hierarchal class system followed as the fear of being punished for their individuality, outweighed their unique religious expression. However, laws have been established and the right to religious expression is one of the freedoms Americans possess. Simply put, religious entities and groups cannot, or rather, are not supposed to discriminate individuals because of their religious background. However, we see today that many high powered sources are using religious background to determine the opportunities of individuals which consequently inhibits many, such as atheists, to participate. A prominent company that is currently under fire for their discrimination in the work-place is Chik Fil A. Chik Fil A is a very religious company that does extensive background checks on their potential franchisees and employees to ensure that they have an active Christian affiliation. The latter of the individuals attempting to find employment at their company are dismissed. Now, while every religious group and individual handle the actions of militant atheists respective to their values, there are some that are provoked and react in their own way, and some that don't react to disbelief at all. Robert L Platzner shares how the evolution of societies throughout history acted towards disbelief " In sum, the religiophylosophical tradition in Judaism, from antiquity through the middle ages, is devoted to the elucidation of God's nature and his relation to the world, rather than to a reasoned argument for or against his very existence" (Amarnath 11). There is a sense of prioritization within this notion of religious individuals' awareness of atheists. This is one of the many complex and controversial ways of reacting to atheists, one that is less combative. Sam

Harris depicts the importance of belief on an individual's life "Belief is a lever that, once pulled, moves almost everything else in a person's life... Your beliefs define your vision of the world; they dictate your behavior; they determine your emotional responses to other human beings" (Amarnath 101). The belief of a theist shapes their life in many ways, that in some circumstances, when an atheist blatantly infringes on everything they are, the reaction could create hostility. The extent to which a believer will respond is up to their values, however, it's been noted that throughout history, the response could range from violent to disregarding.

Militant atheists actively attempt to abolish and belittle religion because of their personal disbelief and their ideals that leads them to believe that religion is detrimental for society. Scholarly militant atheists such as Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris persistently argue from a scientific standpoint that God does not exist and further describes deities as mystical and superstitious due to the lack of evidence of their existence. Islamophobia, or the fear of Muslims, is a relevant example of the impact of religious persecution which can be described by discrimination or mistreatment of any theist. While some religious groups are completely neutral to the overwhelming presence of atheism, such as the Jews in the Middle Ages, some groups actively discriminate against any difference of opinion such as Chik Fil A. The response to specific acts of discrimination is dependent on the individual impacted. Ultimately, an individual's belief can be the fruit of their entire existence which raises the issue of conflict between the two – atheists and theists. The culmination of evidence strongly indicates that militant atheism is, indeed, religious persecution that is responded by varying positions of neutrality and aggressiveness.

Works Cited

Amarasingam, Amarnath. *Religion and the New Atheism: A Critical Appraisal*. Leiden: Brill,

2010. Web. 15 Apr. 2016.

Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion*. N.p.: n.p., n.d. Print.

Kitcher, Philip. "Militant Modern Atheism." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 28.1 (2011): 1-13.

Web.

Wade Jacoby & Hakan Yavuz (2008) Modernization, Identity and Integration: An Introduction to

the Special Issue on Islam in Europe, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 28:1, 1-6, DOI:

10.1080/13602000802080486