

SAM HARRIS

THE BLOG

Dear Angry Lunatic: A Response to Chris Hedges

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(Photo by [H.koppdelaney](#))

Over at Truthdig, the celebrated journalist Chris Hedges has discovered that Christopher Hitchens and I are actually racists with a fondness for genocide. He has broken this story before—many times, in fact—but in his [most recent essay](#) he blames

“secular fundamentalists” like me and Hitch for the recent terrorist atrocities in Norway.

Very nice.

Hedges begins, measured as always:

The gravest threat we face from terrorism, as the killings in Norway by Anders Behring Breivik underscore, comes not from the Islamic world but the radical Christian right and the secular fundamentalists who propagate the bigoted, hateful caricatures of observant Muslims and those defined as our internal enemies. The caricature and fear are spread as diligently by the Christian right as they are by atheists such as Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens. Our religious and secular fundamentalists all peddle the same racist filth and intolerance that infected Breivik. This filth has poisoned and degraded our civil discourse. The looming economic and environmental collapse will provide sparks and tinder to transform this coarse language of fundamentalist hatred into, I fear, the murderous rampages experienced by Norway. I worry more about the Anders Breiviks than the Mohammed Attas.

The editors at Truthdig have invited me to respond to this phantasmagoria. There is, however, almost no charge worth answering in Hedges’ writing—there never is. Which is more absurd, the idea of “secular fundamentalism” or the notion that its edicts pose a greater threat of terrorism than the doctrine of Islam? Do such assertions even require *sentences* to refute?

However, Hedges’ latest attack is so vicious and gratuitous that some reply seemed necessary. To minimize the amount of time I would need to spend today cleaning this man’s vomit, I decided to adapt a few pieces I had already written. But then I just got angry...

I sent the following to Truthdig:

After my first book was published, the journalist Chris Hedges seemed to make a career out of misrepresenting its contents—asserting, among other calumnies, that somewhere in its pages I call for an immediate, nuclear first strike on the entire Muslim world. Hedges spread this lie so sedulously that I could have spent years writing letters to the editor. Even if I had been willing to squander my time in this way, such letters are generally pointless, as few people read them. In the end, I decided to create [a page on my website](#) addressing such controversies, so that I can then forget all about them. The result has been less than satisfying. Several years have passed, and I still meet people at public talks and in comment threads who believe that I support the outright murder of hundreds of millions of innocent people.

In an apparent attempt to become the most tedious person on Earth, Hedges has attacked me again on this point, and the editors at Truthdig have invited me to respond. I suppose it is worth a try. To begin, I’d like to simply cite the text that has been on my website for years, so that readers can appreciate just how unscrupulous and incorrigible Hedges is:

The journalist Chris Hedges has repeatedly claimed (in print, in public lectures, on the radio, and on television) that I advocate a nuclear first-strike on the Muslim world. His remarks, which have been recycled continuously in interviews and blog-posts, generally take the following form:

“I mean, Sam Harris, at the end of his first book, asks us to consider a nuclear first strike on the Arab world.” ([Q&A at Harvard Divinity School, March 20, 2008](#))

“Harris, echoing the blood lust of [Christopher] Hitchens, calls, in his book ‘The End of Faith,’ for a nuclear first strike against the Islamic world.” ([“The Dangerous Atheism of Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris,” AlterNet, March 22, 2008](#))

“And you have in Sam Harris’ book, ‘The End of Faith,’ a call for us to consider a nuclear first strike against the Arab world. This isn’t rational. This is insane.” (“The Tavis Smiley Show,” April 15, 2008)

“Sam Harris, in his book ‘The End of Faith,’ asks us to consider carrying out a nuclear first-strike on the Arab world. That’s not a rational option—that’s insanity.” (“A Conversation with Chris Hedges,” Free Inquiry, August/September 2008)

Wherever they appear, Hedges’ comments seem calculated to leave the impression that I want the U.S. government to start killing Muslims by the millions. Below I present the only passage I have ever written on the subject of preventative nuclear war and the only passage that Hedges could be referring to in my work (“The End of Faith,” pages 128-129). I have taken the liberty of emphasizing some of the words that Hedges chose to ignore:

*It should be of particular concern to us that the beliefs of Muslims pose a special problem for nuclear deterrence. There is little possibility of our having a cold war with an **Islamist regime armed with long-range nuclear weapons**. A cold war requires that the parties be mutually deterred by the threat of death. Notions of martyrdom and jihad run roughshod over the logic that allowed the United States and the Soviet Union to pass half a century perched, more or less stably, on the brink of Armageddon. What will we do **if an Islamist regime**, which grows dewy-eyed at the mere mention of paradise, **ever acquires long-range nuclear weaponry**? If history is any guide, we will not be sure about where the offending warheads are or what their state of readiness is, and so we will be unable to rely on targeted, conventional weapons to destroy them. In such a situation, the only thing likely to ensure our survival **may be** a nuclear first strike of our own. **Needless to say, this would be an unthinkable crime**—as it would kill tens of millions of innocent civilians in a single day—but it **may be** the only course of action available to us, given what **Islamists** believe. How would such an **unconscionable act** of self-defense be perceived by the rest of the Muslim world? It would likely be seen as the first incursion of a genocidal crusade. The horrible irony here is that seeing could make it so: this very perception could plunge us into a state of hot war with any Muslim state that had the **capacity to pose a nuclear threat** of its own. All of this is **perfectly insane**, of course: I have just described a plausible scenario in which much of the world’s population*

*could be annihilated on account of religious ideas that belong on the same shelf with Batman, the philosopher's stone, and unicorns. That it would be a **horrible absurdity** for so many of us to die for the sake of myth does not mean, however, that it could not happen. Indeed, given the immunity to all reasonable intrusions that faith enjoys in our discourse, a catastrophe of this sort seems increasingly likely. We must come to terms with the possibility that **men who are every bit as zealous to die as the nineteen hijackers may one day get their hands on long-range nuclear weaponry**. The Muslim world in particular **must anticipate this possibility and find some way to prevent it**. Given the steady proliferation of technology, it is safe to say that time is not on our side.*

I will let the reader judge whether this award-winning journalist has represented my views fairly.

I hope Truthdig readers appreciate the irony here. In his latest [fever dream of an essay](#), Hedges declares that Christopher Hitchens and I (along with our pals on the Christian right) are incapable of “nuance.” Amazing. Nuance is really what one hopes Hedges would discover once in his life—if for no other reason than it would leave him with nothing left to say.

I don't think I have ever met anyone so determined to live as a Freudian case study: To read any page of Hedges' is to witness the full catastrophe of public self-deception. He rages (and rages) about the anger and intolerance of others; he accuses his opponents of being “immune to critiques based on reason, fact and logic” in prose so bloated with emotion and insult, and so barren of argument, that every essay reads like a hoax text meant to embarrass the humanities. A person with this little self-awareness should be given a mirror—or an intervention—never a blog.

An editorial (rather than psychoanalytic) note: Hedges claims that I “abrogate the right to exterminate all who do not conform” to my rigid view of the world. I'm afraid this is true. I do, as it turns out, abrogate that right. But Hedges surely means to say that I “arrogate” it. Advice for future skirmishes, Chris: When you are going to insult your opponents by calling them “ignoramuses” who “cannot afford complexity,” or disparage them for being incapable of “intellectual and scientific rigor,” it is best to know the meanings of the words you use. Not all the words, perhaps—just those you grope for when calling someone a genocidal maniac.

Leaving no canard unemployed, Hedges accuses me of being a racist—*again*. In truth, he has raised the ante somewhat: My criticism of Islam is now “racist filth.” It is tempting to own up to this charge just to see the uncomprehending look on his face: “You know, after a lot of additional study and soul-searching, I realized that you are right: My contention that the doctrines of martyrdom and jihad are integral to Islam, and dangerous, is really nothing more than racist filth. Sorry about that.”

However, the response I offered years ago still seems in order:

Some critics of my work have claimed that my critique of Islam is “racist.” This charge is almost too silly to merit a response. But, as prominent writers can sometimes be this silly, here goes:

My analysis of religion in general, and of Islam in particular, focuses on what I consider to be bad ideas, held for bad reasons, leading to bad behavior. My antipathy toward Islam—which is, in truth, difficult to exaggerate—applies to ideas, not to people, and certainly not to the color of a person’s skin. My criticism of the logical and behavioral consequences of certain ideas (e.g. martyrdom, jihad, honor, etc.) impugns white converts to Islam—like [Adam Gadahn](#)—every bit as much as Arabs like Ayman al-Zawahiri. I am also in the habit of making invidious comparisons between Islam and other religions, like Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism. Must I point out that most Hindus, Buddhists, and Jains are not white like me? One would hope there would be no such need—but the work of writers like [Chris Hedges](#) suggests that the need is pressing.

As I regularly emphasize when discussing Islam, no one is suffering under the doctrine of Islam more than Muslims are—particularly Muslim women. Those who object to any attack upon the religion of Islam as “racist” or as a symptom of “Islamophobia” display a nauseating insensitivity to the subjugation of women throughout the Muslim world. At this moment, millions of women and girls have been abandoned to illiteracy, forced marriage, and lives of slavery and abuse under the guise of “multiculturalism” and “religious sensitivity.” This is a crime to which every apologist for Islam is now an accomplice.

I have participated in many debates over the years and engaged many of my critics. In fact, I once debated Hedges at a benefit for Truthdig. You can watch our exchange [here](#). I am happy to say that these encounters are usually very pleasant—for even when they grow prickly on the stage, the exchange in the green room is generally quite warm. My meeting with Hedges was a notable exception. In fact, Hedges is the one person I have told event organizers that I will not appear with again for any reason—which is a pity, because his inability to present or follow an argument makes everything one says sound incisive. The man is not only wrong in his convictions, but dishonest—and determined to remain so. I trust this is a consequence of his most conspicuous quality as a person: sanctimony. There is a main vein of sanctimony in this universe, and it appears to run directly through the brain of Chris Hedges. He has staked his claim to it and will follow it wherever it leads. The results can be seen weekly on this page. And I’m sorry to say that this is why I stopped writing for Truthdig years ago.

[**Note 6/12/14:** It took a while, but now I’m not the only one aware of this man’s dishonesty: [The Troubling Case of Chris Hedges](#)]

Notes

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