

# SAM HARRIS

## THE BLOG

### The Reality of Islam

[Atheism](#) | [Ethics](#) | [Religion](#) | [Islam](#) | [Terrorism](#) | February 8, 2006

In recent days, crowds of thousands have gathered throughout the Muslim world—burning European embassies, issuing threats, and even taking hostages—in protest over 12 cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad that were first published in a Danish newspaper last September. The problem is not merely that the cartoons were mildly derogatory. The furor primarily erupted over the fact that the Prophet had been depicted at all. Many Muslims consider any physical rendering of Muhammad to be an act of idolatry. And idolatry is punishable by death. Criticism of Muhammad or his teaching—which was also implicit in the cartoons—is considered blasphemy. As it turns out, blasphemy is also punishable by death. So pious Muslims have two reasons to “not accept less than a severing of the heads of those responsible,” as was recently elucidated by a preacher at the Al Omari mosque in Gaza.

The religious hysteria has not been confined to the “extremists” of the Muslim world. Seventeen Arab governments issued a joint statement of protest, calling for the punishment of those responsible. Pakistan’s parliament unanimously condemned the drawings as a “vicious, outrageous and provocative campaign” that has “hurt the faith and feelings of Muslims all over the world.” Turkey’s prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, while still seeking his nation’s entry into the European Union, nevertheless declared that the cartoons were an attack upon the “spiritual values” of Muslims everywhere. The leader of Lebanon’s governing Hezbollah faction observed that the whole episode could have been avoided if only the novelist Salman Rushdie had been properly slaughtered for writing “The Satanic Verses.”

Let us take stock of the moral intuitions now on display in the House of Islam: On Aug. 17, 2005, an Iraqi insurgent helped collect the injured survivors of a car bombing, rushed them to a hospital and then detonated his own bomb, murdering those who were already mortally wounded as well as the doctors and nurses struggling to save their lives. Where were the cries of outrage from the Muslim world? Religious sociopaths kill innocents by the hundreds in the capitols of Europe, blow up the offices of the U.N. and the Red Cross, purposefully annihilate crowds of children gathered to collect candy from U.S. soldiers on the streets of Baghdad, kidnap journalists, behead them, and the videos of their butchery become the most popular form of pornography in the Muslim world, and no one utters a word of protest because these atrocities have been perpetrated “in defense of Islam.” But draw a picture of the Prophet, and pious mobs convulse with pious rage. One could hardly ask for a better example of religious dogmatism and its pseudo-morality eclipsing basic, human goodness.

It is time we recognized—and obliged the Muslim world to recognize—that “Muslim extremism” is not extreme among Muslims. Mainstream Islam itself represents an extremist rejection of intellectual honesty, gender equality, secular politics and genuine pluralism. The truth about Islam is as politically incorrect as it is terrifying: Islam is all fringe and no center. In Islam, we confront a civilization with an arrested history. It is as though a portal in time has opened, and the Christians of

the 14th century are pouring into our world.

Islam is the fastest growing religion in Europe.<sup>1</sup> Throughout the E.U., Muslim immigrants often show little inclination to acquire the secular and civil values of their host countries, and yet exploit these values to the utmost—demanding tolerance for their backwardness, their misogyny, their anti-Semitism, and the genocidal hatred that is regularly preached in their mosques. Political correctness and fears of racism have rendered many secular Europeans incapable of opposing the terrifying religious commitments of the extremists in their midst. In an effort to appease the lunatic furor arising in the Muslim world in response to the publication of the Danish cartoons, many Western leaders have offered apologies for exercising the very freedoms that are constitutive of civil society in the 21st century. The U.S. and British governments have chastised Denmark and the other countries that published the cartoons for privileging freedom of speech over religious sensitivity. It is not often that one sees the most powerful countries on Earth achieve new depths of weakness, moral exhaustion and geopolitical stupidity with a single gesture. This was appeasement at its most abject.

The idea that Islam is a “peaceful religion hijacked by extremists” is a dangerous fantasy—and it is now a particularly dangerous fantasy for Muslims to indulge. It is not at all clear how we should proceed in our dialogue with the Muslim world, but deluding ourselves with euphemisms is not the answer. It now appears to be a truism in foreign policy circles that real reform in the Muslim world cannot be imposed from the outside. But it is important to recognize why this is so—it is so because the Muslim world is utterly deranged by its religious tribalism. In confronting the religious literalism and ignorance of the Muslim world, we must appreciate how terrifyingly isolated Muslims have become in intellectual terms. The problem is especially acute in the Arab world. Consider: According to the United Nations’ Arab Human Development Reports, less than 2% of Arabs have access to the Internet. Arabs represent 5% of the world’s population and yet produce only 1% of the world’s books, most of them religious. In fact, Spain translates more books into Spanish each year than the entire Arab world has translated into Arabic since the ninth century.

Our press should report on the terrifying state of discourse in the Arab press, exposing the degree to which it is a tissue of lies, conspiracy theories and exhortations to recapture the glories of the seventh century. All civilized nations must unite in condemnation of a theology that now threatens to destabilize much of the Earth. Muslim moderates, wherever they are, must be given every tool necessary to win a war of ideas with their coreligionists. Otherwise, we will have to win some very terrible wars in the future. It is time we realized that the endgame for civilization is not political correctness. It is not respect for the abject religious certainties of the mob. It is reason.

[Link to Article](#)

## Notes

1. The original version of this article (linked below) contains the following sentence at this point: “The demographic trends are ominous: Given current birthrates, France could be a majority Muslim country in 25 years, and that is if immigration were to stop tomorrow.” I am not a demographer, and this prediction did not originate with me. However, re-reading this article after nearly a decade, two things became apparent: 1) The forecast now seems [factually inaccurate](#); 2) I could not remember where I had read it (my original article contained no footnotes). In the interests of keeping my blog more reflective of my beliefs (and of reality), I have removed this sentence. However, please see my [general editorial policy](#) with respect to edits of this kind.--SH

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