

# **The New Atheism And Islam**

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**Muhammad Legenhausen**

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## Authors(s):

[Muhammad Legenhausen](#) [1]

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#### **Hajj Muhammad Legenhausen**

*Hajj Muhammad Legenhausen teaches at the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute in Qom, Iran. His blog can be accessed at:*

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What has been dubbed “the new atheism” came into the cultural spotlight in 2006. In that year, a conference was held at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in California called “Beyond Belief: Science, Religion, Reason and Survival”.

This conference, which attracted considerable media coverage, highlighted the views of atheists who contended that religion is not consistent with a scientific view of the world, including Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and the philosopher Daniel Dennett. It was also in 2006 that several books were published attacking religion: Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*, Harris’ *Letter to a Christian Nation*, and Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell*. These were followed the following year by Christopher Hitchens’ *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. The mere publication by atheists of books against religion is not new; what is new are the sales figures for such books. They are selling millions of copies. Dawkins is still #24 on the New York Times paperback nonfiction bestseller list. No atheists have ever before been able to win quite so much attention. Along with the book sales, there have been numerous television programs, magazine articles, and newspaper columns. Also to be noted on the bestseller list are rebuttals to the atheists, such as Timothy Keller’s *The Reason for God*. There have also been numerous conferences and academic discussions of the phenomenon of the new atheism.

What is new in the new atheism, however, is not merely success in selling books, winning media coverage, and catching the eye of academia. First, the new atheism, in contrast to much of modern atheism, is militant; that is, it takes the stand that faith in God is not only a mistaken worldview, but is oppressive and must be uprooted from human cultures. Modern atheism is largely a European phenomenon. Anti-religious sentiment that came to a head in the French Revolution found expression as philosophical atheism with Auguste Comte (d. 1857) and Ludwig Feuerbach (d. 1872) and became militant in the Communist movement. The movement towards militancy is strikingly captured in the shift from the comment by Voltaire (d. 1778) (who was a Deist rather than an atheist), “If God did not exist, it

would have been necessary to create Him,” to the words of the revolutionary anarchist Mikhail Bakunin (d. 1876): “If God did exist, it would be necessary to destroy Him!” The term “militant atheism” was introduced by Lenin in a speech of 1922. The new atheism is not politically leftist, but it takes up the urgency of Lenin’s call to stand up against religion.

This brings us to the second major innovation of the new atheism: its opposition to Islam. Atheism is a rejection of all religion, or at least of all theistic religion, and since Islam is usually considered a theistic religion, atheism is in principle opposed to it. However, as a phenomenon with its roots in Europe, atheism has concentrated its opposition to religion on Christianity. The new atheism, by contrast, emphasizes Islam as a particularly virulent form of religion that must be opposed. Often, the new atheists claim that because of the events of 9/11, they feel compelled to take a strong stand against religion in general and Islam in particular. Because of this, atheists who focus primarily on Islam, such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali, may also be considered to be a part of, or at least allied with, the new atheism.

Most of the answers and rebuttals to the new atheism have been made by Christians, who are not so much concerned to defend any and every religion, but primarily Christianity. Some take the position that the new atheists are only wrong to attack their religion, and attacks on other religions may not be off the mark.

Philosophically, the new atheists do not have anything new to offer. The new atheists tend to show no interest in professional philosophy, religion, or theology and target the mass market. The arguments against the existence of God are generally versions of scientism, the view that all of life’s problems may be solved by appeal to the natural sciences, and the moral argument against religion, that religion brings out the worst in people. Part of the discourse of the new atheism grows out of the debate between creationists and evolutionists, and it often seems to stay at the level of two competing fundamentalisms: belief in the literal truth of scripture on the one hand, and belief in the saving power of science on the other. The scientism of the new atheists is coupled with their moral outrage at religious fanaticism, which is taken as normative for religious belief, and is said to be caused by not basing one’s beliefs solely on evidence.

The positivistic strand of new atheist thought was thoroughly refuted in philosophical circles, because it was found that even the natural sciences rely upon assumptions that cannot be supported by scientific evidence. Often the principle of positivism was turned against itself: there is no scientific evidence to support the principle that one should accept only those beliefs for which there is scientific evidence. As for the moral outrage, many of the horrors of so-called religious conflicts have social and political causes rather than religious ones, and some of the worst offenses of the twentieth century by the likes of Stalin and Pol Pot were committed by avowed atheists.

As Muslims, we should try to defend our faith with candor, fairness, and reasonableness. The new atheists seek to provoke anger from those they attack in order to substantiate their own claim that the religious are fanatics. May Allah grant us the wisdom and strength of character to display the religion He

has given us as a guidance in its best light.

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